

4. What happens when grace is rejected

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[0 : 00] Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at page 323 and 2 Kings 17, and we'll have a moment of prayer. God our Father, we pray that as the Lord Christ walk the road to Emmaus and open the Scripture to his disciples, that that same Christ, by his Spirit, will do the same to us, that he will cause our eyes to be opened, that he will cause our hearts to burn, and that he will lead us into the world with a greater conviction and a greater power in our lives.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. So, 2 Kings 17, 1-23, and I think you'll agree it is an extremely strange passage.

We're going to approach this passage by way of Narnia, which is a good way to approach anything. Some of you may know the voyage of the dawn treader.

I love the wonderful first sentence. There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrub, and he almost deserved it.

Eustace Clarence Scrub was an arrogant young man. He was a man whose own views meant so much to him, he would never listen to anyone else.

[1 : 34] Through the grace of Aslan, in later books, in *The Silver Chair* and in *The Last Battle*, he comes out fighting on the right side. But at one point in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, he gives his views on what a star is.

A star, he insists, is only a mass of gases and chemicals. And the wise reply to him is, even in your country, Eustace, that is not what a star is.

That is only what a star is made of. And that strikes me as being a wonderful basis to interpret the scriptures, particularly a passage like this.

It is not just what this passage is made of, it is what this passage is saying about God and about the Gospel. What is this passage made of? Well, verses 1 to 6 give us a rather brief summary account of ancient battles long ago, forgotten, and only of interest to ancient historians.

Verses 7 to 23 give us a list of sins of God's ancient people. And if you have been at the other parts of this series, you have heard them all before. You are getting tired of hearing of high places and Asherim and the worship of Baal and so on.

[2 : 52] But that is only what this passage is made of. What is this passage? This is a passage about God's goodness and grace which his people throw back in his face.

You see, it is a passage that sobers us as God's people and warns us not to go the same way as his ancient people did.

So what it is, it is a passage about God judging his people and why he judged his people. What's our authority for looking at scripture in this way?

Now, in 1 Corinthians 10, the Apostle Paul says this, These things took place as examples for us that we might not desire evil as they did.

And later on in that chapter, he says, God is faithful.

[4 : 05] So the one thing that stands firm through everything else is that God is faithful. That's why I'm calling this series on two kings, God's power in our weakness.

It's about the faithful God amidst the faithfulness of his people. The passage obviously falls into two parts. Reaping what was sown, I'm going to call verses 1 to 6.

Reaping what was sown, and in verses 7 to 23, God is not mocked. So let's look then at these verses, keeping in mind what Paul says.

These things were written for our example. In these few brief verses, the northern kingdom with its capital at Samaria comes to an end.

The people, the ten tribes, are deported to Assyria, never to return, taken away to Hala, Haba, the river of Gozan, the cities of the Medes, even further east.

[5 : 07] The reason I'm calling it reaping what was sown is that it's exactly what one of the prophets who warned them earlier on said would happen. You have sown the wind, he said, and you are about to reap the whirlwind.

So let's look a little bit more closely at these six verses. And there are a couple of things I want you to notice. First of all, there is the weakness of Israel's leaders.

There is a failure of leadership. Hoshiel, the son of Elah, began to reign. He reigned nine years.

Now there's a terrible irony here in this man's name.

The Bible gives us real people, real places, and real events. But very often it also gives us hints as to how these point to something much bigger than themselves.

The name Hosea, which is another form of Hosea the prophet, is also another form of Joshua, the saviour. This guy was no saviour.

[6 : 10] It's almost as if he's saying, look back at the beginning of your story. Look at the great story of Joshua, who saved you, led you from your enemies, led you into the promised land.

Look now how it's coming to an end. Hosea, Joshua, Hosea. He's no saviour. And he is given a kind of half-hearted commendation. He did what was evil, yet not as the kings of Israel who were before him.

Now, alert readers of two kings, of whom there are probably not enough in this world, but anyway, alert readers of two kings will remember that phrase is used back in 2 Kings 3 about Ahab's son Jehoram.

He wasn't as bad as those who were before him. But the point is, he wasn't nearly good enough, was he? If you pump raw sewage into the water system, it will go dreadfully bad.

The same will happen if you simply dump rubbish into it or simply neglect it. This is no saviour. And he's politically inept. He sent messengers to the pharaoh and he offered no tribute to the king of Assyria.

[7 : 21] He's a useless leader and he is no... And he's politically inept. So the weakness of Israel's leaders. Bad times and bad leaders.

But the other thing to notice is the terrifying power of Israel's enemies. Six times in six verses we read the king of Assyria.

He's the big player here. Israel are totally out of their league. It's like Man United coming to play Livingston. There isn't a contest. And that's what it appears here.

The Assyrian juggernaut is simply going to gobble them up. If any of you have been in the British Museum at the Assyrian rooms, you'll get some sense of the awesome power of this ancient empire.

Outside one of these rooms stands these colossal figures of bulls with human heads. Now these are intimidating enough in 21st century Britain in the sanitized surroundings of the museum.

[8 : 23] How terrifying this superpower must have been. And it takes the ten tribes far away. They're in charge. So they think.

Read the book of Isaiah. Read Isaiah chapter 10. What does Isaiah say about what's happening? Isaiah commenting on this very episode. The Lord says, Assyria wrought of my anger against the godless nation I sent him.

Assyria thinks they are the big player. They are not. But the Lord God is sending them to punish his people. So even when everything seems at its blackest, God is in control.

And look at the world scene. We can't just look at the world scene. We're not prophets and write off what's happening. But one thing we can certainly say is that God is in control. So that's the first thing.

They have sown the wind. They have sown the wind of unbelief, of idolatry, of evil behavior. And they've reaped the Assyrian whirlwind, which comes and sweeps them away from their own land.

[9 : 31] I want to look now a little more closely at verses 7 to 23. Assyria wrought of my anger. Why did this happen? And why in chapter 25, which we'll look at in due course, did Judah go away into exile as well at time to Babylon?

The reason is in verse 7. And this occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God. And once again, you may think we've read all this before, and it's just a random list of things.

It's nothing of the sort. There is a definite order in the way the writer is speaking here. The writer is showing that the very root of the problem, and this is so relevant to our present situation, not least in

the Church of Scotland, the very root of the problem was that they had rebelled against and rejected the grace of God.

That's the first thing to notice. Before ever they turned their back on God's commandments, they rejected God's grace. Look at the rest of verse 7.

They sinned against the Lord their God, who brought them up out of the land of Egypt, from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. You see the point there. They are despising grace.

[10:56] They're not despising law, first and foremost. They're despising grace. When do people begin to drift from God? When do people's lives take a downward turn?

Not primarily when they begin to disobey the laws of God. It's when they begin to despise the grace of God. And if you look back at the story of Israel in the Old Testament, or indeed the story of the Church in the New Testament, and the Church at Ephesus in Revelation chapter 2, I have something against you.

You have left your first love. Because what happens when we reject grace? The sense of wonder and gratitude goes. The sense of being rescued from slavery disappears.

And God is no longer loved. And because we no longer love God, we turn to godlets, as they had done. Amazing grace is greeted with overweening arrogance.

This is what happens. And why is it that everything goes wrong when we reject grace? It's because then we start relying on ourselves.

[12:06] When we start relying on ourselves, we're either going to become extremely arrogant, my own hand has saved me, or we're going to be so hag-ridden with guilt that we are incapable of effective living for God.

So remember, this is first of all a rejection of grace. It's a rejection of the love of God before they begin to reject the law of God.

And this is something, as I say, so significant in our own day. When people begin to think that they can achieve their own salvation, that they know better than God, then everything begins to drift.

Because rebellion against and rejection of grace is followed by full-scale idolatry. You get it in verses 8 to 13, and it's repeated again in verses 15 to 17.

Grace goes, and idolatry comes to fill the vacuum. Rebellion, not just of the kings, but of the people.

[13:18] That is the point. So far throughout the book of kings, the kings have been condemned, and rightly condemned for their bad leadership, condemned for their terrible example.

But the point that's made here, surely, is that the people followed this with enthusiasm. They're not just doing wrong, they are affirming it.

That is the problem. Remember what Paul says at the end of Romans chapter 1, not only did what was wrong, but approved of those who were doing it. Look around at the church today.

So often that happens. People will not particularly pursue a course of action themselves, but they'll affirm it. They'll say it's right. They'll say it's good.

The world's changed, so we have to change. You've heard all that. Behind all this is the rejection of grace, which leads to full-scale idolatry.

[14:16] We've commented on these various things before. The notorious high places, with their self-love and self-worship. They asherim, that's the kind of totem pole, symbol of the fertility goddess, sexual orgies.

And the nations did, whom the Lord carried away before them. This had been, Moses himself had warned of that. So there is rebellion against grace.

This is followed by full-scale idolatry. And thirdly, that's followed by wholesale rejection of the word of God. They rejected Moses, and they rejected all the prophets who followed.

Verse 12, The Lord has said, You shall not do this. Now, you shall not do this are the words, especially of Deuteronomy, where Moses had warned them not to do this when they entered the promised land.

And then, the Lord warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer. Some of them unnamed throughout the early chapters of one king.

[15:23] He heard about many unnamed men of God. But there's also the great ministries of Elijah and Elisha, which we looked at earlier. And also the prophets Amos and Hosea, who were just some years before, had warned Israel what was going to happen.

Amos had in effect said, You want Assyrian religion? Well, you'll have it. You can go to Assyria, and you can worship the Assyrian gods there. Hosea had warned them, and Hosea had pleaded with

them, but they had rejected every prophet and every seer.

Verse 14, They would not listen, but were stubborn. First of all, they simply didn't want to listen. Kind of passive thing, if you like.

But notice the progression, or rather the headlong slide. They despised. Verse 15, When someone despises the word of God, there's always another voice sounding in the background.

The voice that we first hear in Genesis 3, Did God really say? Isn't that what lies behind every departure from the word of God? Did God really say this?

[16:37] And that's what happens. He despised his statutes, and the covenant. Once again, not just despising the law, but despising the covenant. The gracious covenant. The marriage bond between themselves and Yahweh.

Then went after, still in verse 15, they went after, this is active disobedience, passive disobedience, first of all, despising. Then there's active disobedience.

They went after false idols, and became false. Now that's particularly significant. False idols, is the word that runs through the Old Testament.

And you get it in Ecclesiastes. Vanity, emptiness. What is an idol? It's a puff of wind. So what do they do? They go after a puff of wind, and what happens?

They become weightless, and themselves. They become like chaff, as Psalm 1 says, the one who walks in the way of the ungodly. It becomes like chaff, that's blown away.

[17:37] And one of the, I think it's Psalm 106 says, those who worship idols, become like them. They live in a world of unreality, a world of fantasy, and follow the nations that were around them, concerning whom the Lord commanded them.

And they abandoned all the commandments of the Lord their God. They gave up any pretense, in the long run, of having any kind of living faith.

And that's why I think, we don't just have a repetition of the idolatry here, because the author couldn't think of anything else to say. It's deliberately put in here, because how is all this expressed?

All this is expressed in a flurry of religious activity. They reject the grace of God, they turn their back on the prophets of the Lord, they disobey the word of the Lord, and they indulge in this frantic burst of religious activity.

It's often said, we become what we eat, and of course there is truth in that. But it's certainly true that we become what we worship. See, worshipping God, or worshipping the gods, is not like wearing different clothes.

[18:53] It's not even like changing a job, or moving to another area to live. It is something which fundamentally changes us. And if we worship fantasy and unreality, we end up in fantasy and unreality.

If we worship the living God, who speaks through his word, then we grow into his likeness. But if we worship idols, what's left is something that isn't even recognisable as the faith, as the gospel.

A mixture of good works, a mixture of superstition, a mixture of disobedience, they sold themselves, which is also said of Ahab.

So you see what's been happening here. They turn away from God, and the ruler said, sin, ruler describes sin as being curved in on ourselves.

That's what happens. We become the centre of our own world. We don't look up anymore. We look inwards, and find the meaning, significance in ourselves.

[20:02] Read the book of Ecclesiastes. When we do that, everything is meaningless. The good gifts of God, which are given for us to enjoy, which if they're accepted as the good gifts of God, are real blessings.

When we build our life on them, they become delusions, and disappear. Therefore, therefore, this is the tragedy of, therefore the Lord was angry with Israel, remove them out of his sight.

Now that's, and also he removed them from their land. Now, we mustn't misunderstand this. The earth is the Lord's, and everything that's in it.

Assyria and Babylonia belong to the Lord, as much as any other part of the world did. And that's the point books like Daniel and Ezekiel make, that Yahweh God of Israel is alive and well in Babylon.

But the point is this, God's covenant had centred on bringing them to that land where they would know his blessing, where they would serve him. So removing them from the land doesn't mean that they are outside of God's sphere.

[21 : 10] It means that they are outside the realm of God's blessing. That's the point that's being made. Notice the therefore. This is just.

So Amos and other of the prophets had said to them, You only have I known of all the peoples of the earth. Therefore I will punish you.

And the word no in Amos there is a covenant word. Not you're the only ones I've known about, or you're the only ones I'm in charge of. You're the only ones I've entered into this covenant relationship with.

So notice the words that are used. Removed, verse 18. Rejected, verse 20. Removed again, verse 23. And there's a kind of flashback and a flash forward.

The flashback, verse 21, they made Jeroboam the son of Nebat king. After the death of Solomon, the kingdom was torn into two. The northern kingdom, which has now just come to an end.

[22 : 13] Jeroboam took over that kingdom. And he is always called as Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who caused Israel to sin. He repeated the sin of the desert, made golden calves, and told people to worship them.

Limiting God to what you can see and touch. So, flashback to there. This has been, in other words, this is not just something that happened occasionally.

This was something that happened so often that it had become part of their DNA. Rebelliousness, idolatry, had deeply bit its way into this nation.

Then there's a flash forward. Verse 19. Judah also did not keep the commandments of the Lord their God, but walked in the customs that Israel had introduced.

And two of the Judean kings, one of whom we looked at a few weeks ago, King Ahaz, and one we will look at later, Manasseh, did and gloried in all these things that are mentioned here.

[23 : 23] All the warnings went unheeded. And remember Hebrews 12, verse 25. See that you do not refuse him who speaks from heaven.

You could write that over this chapter. See that you do not refuse him who speaks from heaven. Churchill, in one of his great speeches, said, I often wonder what would happen if God wearied of mankind.

And that's a terrifying thought. God does not weary of human beings, but human beings often turn their back on God. We love, don't we, the words of Romans 8, if God is for us, who can be against us?

Remember the dark mirror image of that. If God is against us, who can be for us? And that's what had happened here. He turned against them and became their enemy.

And so the prophet said. It's a sobering story. It does not have a happy ending. What are we going to say about this?

[24 : 32] And the first thing, I just want to say two things as we close. First of all, do not despise the grace of God. Because without grace, there is no hope for us.

Without grace, we are condemned, not to exile in Assyria or Babylon, but to egg banishment from God's presence for all eternity.

And secondly, thank God for grace. In ministry, we are going to sing Wesley's great words, Plenteous grace with you is found.

Grace to cover all my sin. So we thank God for grace. And we thank God that while I say it's not a happy ending, and it certainly isn't in this story, when we next take up the story, we are going to find that God has his man in place on the throne of Judah.

The great son of David, Hezekiah, who points to the even greater son of David, who is going to redeem the world, and who is going to open the kingdom of heaven to all who believe.

[25 : 44] That is what grace is about. And we praise God for his amazing grace. Amen. Let's pray. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see. Father, may that always be our song, not just of our lips, but the song of our hearts, as we praise you, in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.