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7 August 2022

The Poison Behind the Throne

2 Kings 8:16-29

Introduction

Do you ever feel that you've been misled by the title of a book, or a film, or a news article?

I had a friend at University who was interested in the care sector. One day we were walking down the road when he saw someone selling a magazine about social work. He was really interested, so went over to see about getting a copy. He came back empty handed though. Apparently there's a difference between a social worker and the Socialist Worker.

He had just misread the title, but sometimes we read the title correctly and the content doesn't seem to fit. It's beginning to look a bit like that with 2nd Kings. In a book that proclaims itself to be about the kings of Israel and Judah, we haven't seen much of them recently.

So far we've had:

- Elisha taking over from Elijah
- The widow's jar of oil that filled up many jars
- The Shunammite woman's son, whom Elisha raised to life after he was ill and died
- The poisoned stew restored
- Naaman healed of leprosy
- The floating axe head
- The Syrian army failing to capture Elisha as he prayed for God to blind them
- The besieging of Samaria, and God's rescue by making the Syrians flee
- Shunammite woman getting her land back
- Hazael killing his king to become king of Syria

Why? Well, God doesn't just deal with kings. He deals with people. In the same way he doesn't just deal with leaders in the church: he often speaks to people using leaders, but he also speaks to the hearts of individuals. And so we have God dealing with his prophet, the trainee prophets, a poor widow, a wealthy couple, a foreign soldier and a little girl. Whatever our position in life, it is no barrier to God. And he wants every one of us to know him, to hear him and to follow him.

Just Two Kings

But now we do return to look at some of the kings. 2 kings of Judah are mentioned here and at first it doesn't sound like they have very remarkable stories:

Jehoram was Jehoshaphat's son, and began to reign at age 32. He reigned for 8 years and during that time he had to deal with an Edomite rebellion, as well as one from the people of Libnah.

Ahaziah was Jehoram's son. He began to reign at 22 and reigned for just 1 year. He went to help out Joram, king of Israel, in a battle with the Syrians.

And that's about it for this passage. Shall we finish early and go home then?

Beneath The Surface

So far, so uninteresting. But let's scratch beneath the surface a little, and as we do so a few questions present themselves:

- . Why did both of them die so young?
- . Why are they recorded as doing evil in the sight of the Lord?
- . Why is the connection with Ahab mentioned for both of them?
- . Who was the next successor?

All these questions can be answered with reference to one person - Athaliah. We're going to see that she was a huge influence for evil in the court of Judah.

Sticky Ends

Let's start with their ends. This passage doesn't tell us anything at all but their stories are also recorded in 2 Chronicles 21 and 22. We'll tackle Jehoram first. Verse 4 of chapter 21 gives us a fairly brutal insight into his character:

When Jehoram established himself firmly over his father's kingdom, he put all his brothers to the sword along with some of the officials of Israel. [2 Chronicles 21 v 4]

And it was because of this and his other failures that he was given a similarly brutal word of prophecy from Elijah:

Jehoram received a letter from Elijah the prophet, which said:

"This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: 'You have not followed the ways of your father Jehoshaphat or of Asa king of Judah. But you have followed the ways of the kings of Israel, and you have led Judah and the people of Jerusalem to prostitute themselves, just as the house of Ahab did. You have also murdered your own brothers, members of your own family, men who were better than you. So now the Lord is about to strike your people, your sons, your wives and everything that is yours, with a heavy blow. You yourself will be very ill with a lingering disease of the bowels, until the disease causes your bowels to come out.'" [2 Chronicles 21 v 12-15]

And God wasn't slow in carrying out his word. He stirred up the Philistines and Arabs, who attacked Judah, invaded it and carried away the king's treasures, including his wives and sons. The only son left to him was his youngest - Ahaziah - which explains why he went on to be the next king. Jehoram was then afflicted with a horrible disease, which ended his life in great

pain. We learn also that he wasn't much liked by the people. They didn't make a funeral pyre for him, as they had for other kings. The chapter finishes with a sad indictment of his reign:

Jehoram was thirty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eight years. He passed away, to no one's regret, and was buried in the City of David, but not in the tombs of the kings. [2 Chronicles 21 v 20]

So what about Ahaziah? Was he any better? Why did he only reign for a year? Well, he was put on the throne by the people of Jerusalem, being Jehoram's only surviving son. However he was friendly with the king of the northern kingdom, Joram, who was his uncle, and when Joram went to fight with Hazael of Syria, Ahaziah went with him.

Through Ahaziah's visit to Joram, God brought about Ahaziah's downfall. [2 Chronicles 22 v 7]

Joram, the king of Israel, was wounded and retired to the town of Jezreel, and Ahaziah again went with him. One of the commanders of the Israelite army then came to kill both Joram and Ahaziah. We'll look more at this next week, as we delve into 2 Kings 9.

Evil Deeds

So both of these kings of Judah had sticky endings, And both are recorded as doing evil. As we read through the book of 1 Kings and then 2 Kings we see that each king is given a summary of how well they did before God. They're effectively given a thumbs up or a thumbs down. It had gone not too badly in Judah since the days of Rehoboam. Kings Abijah, Asa and Jehoshaphat all got a good rating. However there's a definite downturn for Jehoram and Ahaziah.

Jehoram *walked in the way of the kings of Israel, as the house of Ahab had done [2 Kings 8 v 18]*. Chronicles tells us a bit more:

Libnah revolted at the same time, because Jehoram had forsaken the Lord, the God of his ancestors. He had also built high places on the hills of Judah and had caused the people of Jerusalem to prostitute themselves and had led Judah astray. [2 Chronicles 21 v 10-11]

Ahaziah continued this trend as we read earlier: *He also walked in the way of the house of Ahab and did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, as the house of Ahab had done [2 Kings 8 v 27]*

So it was this turning away from God that led to their bad report and also to their downfalls. God has a high expectation of his kings, as the position they hold means that they often lead the people in the ways that they choose. So a king can be the means of the nation turning towards God, or turning away from God.

I listened to an environmentalist the other day, and he was saying that as an individual he can't do much to help the environment, but if he shares his advice with others he can have a big influence. So it is with our leaders and their walk with God. Whether it's a king, a politician or a pop singer, the life they lead has a major influence over those who regard them. Anyway, where did this sudden turn to evil come from?

A Parasite From Israel

If we imagine the nation of Israel as a tree with each section representing the reign of a king, we can see that it branches after Solomon. One branch is the northern kingdom, usually called Israel, and that branch is rotten to the core. Every report of a king of Israel gives them a thumbs down. Every one of them does evil in the sight of the Lord. And it's not surprising that a number of years later the Lord causes them to be invaded by the Assyrians and taken away from their land.

The Judah branch is healthy for a while, but then damaged by becoming entangled by the Israel branch for a number of years. It then regains some vigour but struggles later on. And eventually it too is taken by a foreign power. However the Babylonian captivity is only for a while, and the Jews return to Judah, without a king, but with that line of the kings still intact, which will eventually result in the Lord Jesus.

The Poison Takes Over

Athaliah is the cause of this entanglement. She is the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, and married Jehoram, possibly to seal a peace treaty between the two nations. And it seems her influence was powerful on the king. Let's read the whole of verse 18:

And he walked in the way of the kings of Israel, as the house of Ahab had done, for the daughter of Ahab was his wife. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. [2 Kings 8 v 18]

So Athaliah was a wicked influence on her husband. It was largely her doing that turned the king and nation away from God, and towards idol worship. But then she also pointed her son in the wrong direction. Of Ahaziah we read:

He also walked in the way of the house of Ahab and did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, as the house of Ahab had done, for he was son-in-law to the house of Ahab. [2 Kings 8 v 27]

Chronicles again has a bit more information on the influence the Queen Mother had over Ahaziah:

He too followed the ways of the house of Ahab, for his mother encouraged him to act wickedly. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, as the house of Ahab had done, for after his father's death they became his advisers, to his undoing. [2 Chronicles 22 v 3-4]

So not only does Athaliah influence her son, but she brings in her father's advisors to give him direction, and it's from following their advice that he goes to help out Joram of Israel, and goes to his death.

It's at this point that we see the full horror of Athaliah. When her son dies she takes over control of the country, and holds it for 6 years, attempting to kill off all possible heirs to the throne - her own grandchildren.

Now when Athaliah the mother of Ahaziah saw that her son was dead, she arose and destroyed all the royal family. But Jehosheba, the daughter of King Joram, sister of Ahaziah, took Joash the son of Ahaziah and stole him away from among the king's sons who were being put to death [2 Kings 11 v 1-2]

We'll be following this story in a few weeks, but it's worth noting the terrible state that Judah got into, through mingling with the northern kingdom, and the rot that can set in from mixing with those who have turned away from the Lord.

But God

If we see anything in this section it's the depravity of man, and how easily we can stray from the right path. These two men undid the work of their fathers in building up the nation of Judah as a place where God was honoured, worshipped and followed. God could easily be justified in getting rid of them, in the same way the northern kingdom was doomed. However what shines through in verse 19 is the mercy, the long-suffering and the faithfulness of God. Mercy because he withheld the punishment they were surely due. Long-suffering because he held off for years as they strayed from him. And faithfulness because he held to his promise to David over a hundred years earlier. Look at verse 19:

Yet the Lord was not willing to destroy Judah, for the sake of David his servant, since he promised to give a lamp to him and to his sons forever. [2 Kings 8 v 19]

He promised to maintain a lamp for David and his successors. They would be a light to the world. It would shine very dimly at times, but it would never go out, and would culminate in the Lord Jesus, the True Light that came into the world, around 800 years after this time.

That meant that Athaliah's plan to kill off all her grandchildren was doomed to failure. We'll see that in a later chapter. Although the branch of Judah looks sick and decayed, its core is still pure, and it is protected. Even later on when the kingship is taken from it, the line still continues, and it leads to Christ.

Lesson

What allowed this parasite to take hold? We need to look back to Jehoshaphat. Although he is mainly commended as a king, he made some bad decisions. He went to help out Ahab and Ahaziah (the king of Israel, not our one) and became close to them. Ahab's daughter married Jehoshaphat's son, and from there the rot started to set in.

What are the dangers for us as Christians?

- We live in the world but need to be wary of getting close to the world. We are here not to follow the world's ways, but to be a lamp. To be a light to the nations. Our work is to reveal truth. Our work is to show up sin, which hides in darkness. Our work is to show the way to the saviour.
- When we find influences from the world have entangled us, we need to cut them out. That means an examination of self. What are the things in our lives that lead us away from God? And don't be fooled: we might find something that looks attractive on the surface. But it is rotten to the core. Sometimes there needs to be a severe cutting. It can be painful. But it's how we can ensure a clean growth.

- Lastly, even when things look bad, remember that the Christian has a righteousness before God that is protected by the blood of Christ, and nothing can affect that. If we know the Lord, then we are safe in him.