

How Far Is Too Far?

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

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This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the book of 2 Kings 17. Now as you're opening to 2 Kings 17, I know there's many guests and visitors with us today and you may be wondering why this particular passage? Well, we are simply as a family of faith, we are walking through the Scriptures typically about one to two chapters a day and we find ourselves now in a season in the Scriptures that oftentimes is unfamiliar to us but the more time you spend in it, you realize how much more it relates even to the lives that you and I are living. In fact, historically speaking when we find ourselves in 2 Kings 17, their world looked a whole lot like our world. They found themselves in chaos, dissension and division. Oh, there had been a king by the name of Saul who, shall we say, bequeathed the throne to a man by the name of David who had a son by the name of Solomon, well, it was after Solomon's death that Rehoboam and Jeroboam and the family couldn't get along and by the time we get to chapter 17, for 200 years they have been divided on ideology, they've been divided on opinion and perspective, they've warred with each other, they've turned their backs on each other, and for 200 years God has sent prophets, he has sent seers, he has sent priests, he has sent preachers to say, "If you do not turn to me, there's going to come a time where the consequences and judgment will fall."

What did they do? The same thing that we're guilty of almost each and every day of our lives. We ask ourselves this question: how far is too far? Will it be in this generation? Will it be in the next? Will it be this month or next month? This year or next year? How many times do we ask ourselves, "Can I get away with it one more time? Is it a possibility that the consequences will never befall me for whatever it may be?" What they did not realize at least for the northern kingdom of Israel, the southern kingdom of Judah would happen sometime later, is that what we're about to read takes us to the very last time period, the last generation, the last ruler. It will be this rebellious time that will be the proverbial final straw.

They realized that they had gone too far but what I want you to notice today is the way in which the Lord presented it versus the way they saw it. Beginning in verse 1 of chapter 17, it says,

1 In the twelfth year of Ahaz king of Judah began Hoshea the son of Elah to reign in Samaria over Israel nine years.

I want you to notice what verse 2 says.

2 And he did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD, but not as the kings of Israel that were before him.

Fast forward to verse 8,

8 [They] walked in the statutes of the heathen, whom the LORD cast out from before the children of Israel, and of the kings of Israel, which they had made. 9 And the children of Israel did secretly those things that were not right against the LORD their God, and they built them high places in all their cities, from the tower of the watchmen to the fenced city. 10 And they set them up images and groves in every high hill, and under every green tree: 11 And there they burnt incense in all the high places, as did the heathen whom the LORD carried away before them; and wrought wicked things to provoke the LORD to anger: 12 For they served idols, whereof the LORD had said unto them, Ye shall not do this thing.

Push pause. Remember what verse 2 said? They had not done as bad as previous folks. Look in verse 13,

13 Yet the LORD testified against Israel, and against Judah, by all the prophets, and by all the seers, saying, Turn ye from your evil ways, and keep my commandments and my statutes, according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets. 14 Notwithstanding they would not hear, but hardened their necks, like to the neck of their fathers, that did not believe in the LORD their God. 15 And they rejected his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their fathers, and his testimonies which he testified against them; and they followed vanity, and became vain, and went after the heathen that were round about them, concerning whom the LORD had charged them, that they should not do like them. 16 And they left all the commandments of the LORD their God, and made them molten images, even two calves, and made a grove, and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served Baal. 17 And they caused their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire, and used divination and enchantments, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke him to anger. 18 Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of his sight: there was none left but the tribe of Judah only.

What verse 18 is describing is what happened in the year 722 BC when the Assyrians came to the northern kingdom and took them all captive. You read those last couple of verses and you say they deserved it. When you read verses 14 through 17, you say

absolutely, that's exactly what the Lord should have done. But I want to take you back to verse 13, what does it say in verse 13? It says, "the LORD testified against Israel," and what you and I need to see today is that his frustration with, shall we say, his opinion and judgment on them was not just exclusively reserved for verses 14 through 17, it was rightfully due for verses 8 through 12.

And one of the problems that we have is we always think, "I can go a little bit further. It's not that big a deal." In fact, I think one of the things we have to address in this passage is humanity's natural reasoning. We have this sense about that we reason within ourselves that somehow, some way, whatever we're doing is not as bad as it could be or at least it's not as bad as what others are doing or, in some cases, it's better than what others are doing. In fact, there's two ways that we tend to reason among ourselves. We tend to do it by quantity and by quality. Allow me to illustrate. When it comes to quantity, so many times when we read passages like this or Israel's confronted with this, or you and I are confronted with it, we tend to say, "Well, but if you take everything and you lay it out, the things that I've done that are helpful, the things that I've done that are beneficial, the things that I've done that are altruistic, they're charitable, they're selfless, they far outweigh the selfish bad deeds of my life." You know, it's kind of like walking through a photo album whether that be digital or the old school photo albums, when you're looking back at the pictures, you always remember the good times, do you not? You always remember the fun times. It's the story between the pictures that often is the valley of life and one of the things that we have a tendency to do is to remember all the good we've done but we easily forget the opposite in our life and so what do we do? We say, "Well, surely my life isn't near as bad as it could be. In fact, if you put it on my scale, it looks pretty good."

That's quantity, let's talk quality for just a moment. What did they do? "At least we weren't as bad as those guys." How many times have you gotten caught up in what we call comparative theology where someone or maybe the Lord calls you on something and you say, "But at least I'm not doing this. At least I haven't done that. Have you seen what So-and-so has done or participated in?" And we always throw other people under the bus because it makes us feel better about ourselves. And what did they say? "We're not as bad as the other kings."

You know, several weeks ago, I was watching one of those programs where maybe you've seen these where somebody who's in the media will go to some very urban place or maybe even a college campus and they will survey people of their opinion in regards to a certain matter and such, and sometimes they're serious, sometimes they're frivolous, but one that caught my attention, there was an individual who went to a college campus and he had a set of pictures that he laid out on a table and he asked the students to rank them by the best person to the worst person. What was interesting are the personalities that were selected for this research project. There was Barack Obama, Donald Trump, Joseph Stalin and Adolph Hitler, and I'm here to report that as much as you think what the order should or might look like with a twist or there, you would be shocked about the amount of random order that people would put those people in from good to bad.

I'll come back to that circle in just a moment but how many times have you read something in Scripture, how many times has somebody confronted you about a decision in your life and you say, "Well, at least I'm not Hitler. I didn't kill millions of people. I didn't do this. I didn't take the world to war." I'm just saying who I would put at the bottom of the list but being said, how many times do we pick the bottom of the barrel and say, "I'm not them"?

That's exactly what Israel was doing. They're saying, "God, there's a whole lot worse that have lived and died, there's a whole lot of things that people have done that if you look at it right are completely worse than anything I've even thought of. Why are you so upset with us?" And what happened is that this reasoning produced what I would call a rationalization. It's what we're good at as humanity. Whether it's the garden of Eden, whether it's David and Bathsheba, or whether it's Israel about to go into captivity, we have a way of rationalizing which leads to justifying why we do what we do, think the way we think and say what we say, and as you begin in verse 8 of this passage, you'll notice that there is a list of things that compared to the latter list doesn't seem that bad. There's no children passing through the fire. There's no divination. There's no worship of the stars. There's no Baal being present. They're simply walking with the heathen, doing secret things, setting up images, burning incense and serving idols. In fact, if we were to put the picture of this first set versus the second set, I think all of us would know the order that we would put them in.

But notice verse 13, it says, "Yet the LORD testified against them." I want to walk through these five things that are happening here, the way that they're defending themselves, the way that they're rationalizing that it's really not as bad as you think, God.

The first one in verse 8, it says they do as the heathen do. It's the rationalization of culture. The heathen in the Old Testament were not necessarily idol worshipers, they weren't necessarily what we would call pagans, worshipers of false gods, essentially the heathen meant those who had no religious or spiritual connection at all. They didn't care about the things of God. They didn't care about the things of Scripture and here you've got a bunch of Jewish people who claimed to be the children of God saying, "We're gonna do it just like the world does."

You know, back in 1 Samuel 8, the Lord had been leading the Israelites in a very effective means but what did they say? "We want a king." Remember what God said? He said, "If you have a king, he's gonna take your daughters, he's gonna take your sons, he's gonna take your finances. It's not gonna go as well as you hope." And here's what they said in verse 6 of 1 Samuel 8, "We want a king just like the other nations." We are just as guilty. How many times do we say, "Well, that's just our culture today"? How many times do we say, "Well, that's just the world, we've changed, we've evolved, we've progressed"? How many times do we defend our rebellion by saying, "That's just the world we live in today"?

So what do we do? We advocate, we celebrate, we promote that which is not of God and completely of the lost heathen world and yet what does God say? "I testify against you."

Sometimes we rationalize, "Well, this is just the culture we live in. It's not that big a deal."

Then we move to verse 9. It says they did it secretly. We go to concealment. We say, "Well, it's not that big a deal because nobody saw it. Nobody heard it. I mean, it couldn't have impacted too many lives. I was all alone. We were all alone. There's no residual effect." Please allow me to beg to differ. There is a character in the Old Testament by the name of Samson. We know him as the mighty man of strength who took down the pillars of the Philistine false god temple in his final act, and yet he always pushed the envelope, did he not? In fact, this phrase isn't in the book of Judges but it might be, "How far is too far?" He went and got a wife from the Philistines, that was pushing the envelope. And on the way there, walking through a vineyard which, by the way, was pushing the envelope. Why? Because as a Nazirite, no alcoholic beverages, no food out of a dead animal, and don't cut your hair, that was his vow for his life. He walks through a vineyard, he's kind of pushing the envelope, is he not? He has met with a lion. He destroys, he tears, he defeats the lion with his own bare hands. He goes, he finds his bride. On his way back, there is honey bees who set up shop in the carcass and he decides, "Ah, it's a good time to get dessert." He reaches down and he eats from the dead animal, a clear violation against what God called him to be. He even took it and gave it to his parents and the Bible says they knew not that which he did.

How many times do we get caught up saying, "Well, it's not that big a deal. Nobody saw it. It's not that big a deal. Nobody knows about it." You know, the Bible says in Matthew 4:19 there's coming a time where every secret thing will be made open. In fact, in Hebrews 4:13 it says all of us are completely exposed. It's as if we are naked before God. How many times do we say, "It's not that big a deal. Everybody's doing it. It's a part of our culture. In fact, nobody even saw it. Why are you making such a big fuss?"

Go to the next verse, verse 10, it says they set up the images in the groves. Now this is very particular because later on it says they actually made the images. Back in 1 Kings 12, they actually took the gold and they made these famous golden calves. Back in the book of Exodus, you remember the story where there is Aaron and he's at the bottom of the hill and Moses has been up on Mount Sinai for 40 days eventually to receive what you and I know as the famous 10 Commandments. He begins to hear the noise, he begins to hear the rustling down below. The Lord sends him down and what's happening? Every conceivable thing you can imagine is taking place at the bottom of that hill. You don't believe me, just read the 10 Commandments. Everything that the Lord said, "Thou shalt not," they were. When he gets down there, he sees this golden calf, Baal worship, and everybody is singing and honoring it. Then he asked his brother, he says, "Where did this come from?" In one of the worst pieces of rationalization in all the world, he said, "I don't know. I just threw the gold and it just popped off a calf, here it came."

But let me begin in Genesis. When Adam was confronted with his sin, he said, "Don't blame me. How about the woman you gave me?" When Aaron was confronted with the golden calf he said, "Don't blame me. Blame the gold." What did they say here? "Don't shoot the messenger." That's what they're saying. "It's not our fault that we have ancestors

that have gone before us that have messed up. It's not our fault we have all this excess gold. It's not our fault this." One of the things that amazes me and we see this in our culture so many times, is when called on the carpet, how many times will you ever see somebody say, "That's right. My fault." It's my parents' fault. It's the teacher's fault. It's the coach's fault. It's this fault. It's that fault. This is what they're saying, they say, "Hey, all we did was set it up. Don't blame us because the gold happened to be available. Don't blame us." In other words, in our culture today, "Why are you upset with me, God, for that which already existed before I showed up? Don't get upset with me for participating in something that somebody else came up with." It's the rationalization of creation. "I didn't create this. I'm just participating in it."

Go down to verse 11 and it says that they burned the incense in the high places, they did as the heathen. It's a simple heathen worship service, so to speak, but it's the rationalization of casualties. Now maybe as adults you don't say this as frequently as you used to as a young person, but how many times when somebody has asked you about a certain behavior or decision, you say, "Well, but nobody died. Nobody got hurt. Nobody went to the ER." You know, the amazing thing is I cannot tell you how many times as a young person, and even as an adult, I use that rationalization for ill choices and behavior. "Nobody died." Well, if that's the litmus test, good night. Nobody died.

You see, in the second set there were people that actually died. In the second set there were people who actually lost their lives. And we see it in the court of law, we see it in the court of life, when the word of the Lord confronts our decisions and our behavior we say, "God, why are you so upset with this? Nobody died. It's not that big a deal."

Last but not least, verse 12 it says they served the idols. It's the rationalization of comfort. You do a survey of idol worship in your Bible both Old and New Testament, you know what you'll discover? It's a very lucrative field. Very lucrative. In fact, you get to the book of Acts 19 and what we know as the church of Ephesus in the city of Ephesus was a town that was surrounded by idolatry, in particular this one particular god that they worshiped, and when the Gospel came and when Jesus was preached, the town got upset because their economy was hindered by the Gospel. How many times do we rationalize our behavior by saying, "If it was that big a deal to God, then why are we doing so well financially? If it was that big a deal to God, why am I doing so well in my health? If it's that big a deal, I mean, we are enjoying a life of comfort?"

Can I take this to the bigger culture and not just your individual lives? Are these not the excuses of our society today? "It's just the culture today. What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas. We didn't come up with this, we've been doing this years. People aren't dying. Come on, it's not that big a deal." Last but not least, "Look how prosperous we are. This life, this decision actually profits us." It's interesting that when we begin to reason, that we're actually okay doing the things against the Lord because of how we compare to others, that all of a sudden we rationalize it because of the world around us and our success therein.

So what's God's response? Verse 13, we've already looked at it, "Yet the LORD testified against them." The Lord did not come and say, "You know what, Israel? You're right. It's not that bad yet." What was he saying? "You've gone too far." Allow me to go full circle back to our reasoning. How do you and I as humanity, how do we reason with the Lord or against the Lord? We do it by quantity and we do it by quality, do we not? Let's talk about quantity for just a moment. How many times have we said, "But God, if you take my good and you compare it to my bad, I think everything's gonna be okay." Therein lies the heart of the problem because you say, "Well, I haven't gone far enough. I haven't gone too far because the bad's not outweighing the good." But the problem is the book of James 2:10 says this, "If you've broken one of the laws," it says, "it's as if you've broken all of them."

Let me lay this out very simply. The famous what we know as the 10 Commandments says, "Do not have any other gods before you." Many of you say, "Oh, I've never done that. I'm good." 2. "Do not make a graven image to a false god." You say, "I've got none of those in my house. I've never bowed down. I'm good." "Do not take the Lord's name in vain." Woo, so far, so good. This one's gonna get us all, are you ready? "Honor your mother and your father." If you have passed through puberty, you broke that one. How about, "Do not defraud one another or do not lie"? If you've ever filled out a tax form, you've broken that one. Don't think you haven't. "Do not covet your neighbor's," and there's a whole list. You say, "Well, I don't think I've done that." If that weren't the case, then why would companies spend millions of dollars on commercials? They're getting you to want what you don't have and somebody else does.

James 2:10, "If you've broken one of them, you've broken all of them." You say, "Well, I've never made a molten calf. I've never taken the Lord's name in vain." Yes, but the problem is because you've done one of them, according to the Bible it says you've done all of them.

Let me give you God's perspective rather than man's. Little white lie. Little lust. Little covet. Little disrespect. No big deal, right? You do realize that in God's perspective, it is no different than, "Thou shalt not kill." You see, most of us don't look in the mirror and say, "I'm guilty of first degree murder." You don't. "I'm just guilty of this. It's not that big a deal. I'm just guilty of that. It's not that big a deal." Here's the problem: it is to God even if it isn't to you and it was to God even if it wasn't a big deal to Israel and what did they say? "We've been doing this for hundreds of years." But the real question is how far is too far?

That's quantitatively, let's talk quality for just a moment. Two verses I want to call to your attention. The first one is found in Romans 14:13, it says, "Anything that is not of faith is sin." That means anything that we participate in, anything that we say, anything that we think that does not honor the Lord, it is sin. It means we have violated the principles and the precepts of God. End of story. And lest you think somehow you could pass through that test, James 4:17 says, "If you've ever known to do good and you didn't do it, to you it is sin." You see, the problem is we think that somehow, some way just because I haven't done this or because I haven't participated in that, it makes me okay.

Let me go back to that illustration with the four, shall we say, political personalities: Barack Obama, Donald Trump, Joseph Stalin, Adolph Hitler. It doesn't matter what order you put them in. It doesn't matter because no amount of your perceived goodness or badness of those characters puts them in any different category than one who has sinned against God. Now that may not settle well with you because in our world we say, "Well, at least I'm not Hitler." You know what God says? "Yes, you are. You're no different than him." "I didn't kill millions of people. I didn't try to exterminate." That's right, you didn't, but there was that time you didn't honor your mother and your father. There was that time you coveted your neighbor's whatever. There was that time you did this, that time you did that. And what's our reasoning and our rationale? "Surely it's not that big a deal."

Can I be honest with you, church? It's that big a deal. To God it's that big a deal individually and it's that big a deal to us as a corporate body. And in our individual lives and in our corporate lives and our cultural lives, how much longer are we gonna say, "How far is too far?" How much longer will you say, "I can just push the envelope. It's not gonna happen to us"? Do you know what the sad thing is in this story? Verse 18, we read it: but Judah wasn't spared. About 150 years later, Judah having seen what happened to their neighbors to the north, Israel, did not learn their lesson. How many more individuals do we have to watch? How many more cultures do we have to watch? How many more societies do we have to watch before you and I finally realize that there is a day of reckoning with the Lord and you and I are best served to do exactly what we read in James 4, humble ourselves before him and he will lift us up.