

After Darkness Light

*the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light,
and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.
(Matthew 4:16 ESV)*

*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare
his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the
tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in
darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”
(Luke 1:76–79 ESV)*

Exile, Ruin And Death

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2 Kings 25:1-21

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to 2 Kings 25:1; that’s on page 332 in your pew Bibles. We are in the second week of a series called “After Darkness Light”. Matthew 4:16 says:

the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned. (Matthew 4:16 ESV)

Jesus comes as a ray of hope and light into a particular backstory of darkness, ruin and pain. You have to understand that story in order to appreciate the true meaning of Christmas. There is an old English expression: “hunger is the best sauce”; the same applies in the spiritual realm. You have to revisit the brokenness of the human condition in order to appreciate the healing that comes in Christ. That’s what we are doing over these couple of weeks before Christmas. We are remembering the dark so that we can celebrate the light.

Last week we read about the “TSN Turning Point” in the history of Israel. The story of the Queen of Sheba coming to visit Solomon is the high water mark in the Old Testament, but as we read last week in 1 Kings 11:1, shortly thereafter, things went downhill FAST. Solomon loved many foreign women and in his later years they turned his heart away from the Lord. Solomon actually began to worship Canaanite gods and he did horrible and abominable things. He set Israel on a trajectory and a course that finally led to their death and ruin as a nation. It is to that story that

we turn our attention now. I'll begin reading at 2 Kings 25:1 and we will read all the way through to verse 21. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

1 And in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came with all his army against Jerusalem and laid siege to it. And they built siegeworks all around it. 2 So the city was besieged till the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. 3 On the ninth day of the fourth month the famine was so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land. 4 Then a breach was made in the city, and all the men of war fled by night by the way of the gate between the two walls, by the king's garden, and the Chaldeans were around the city. And they went in the direction of the Arabah. 5 But the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho, and all his army was scattered from him. 6 Then they captured the king and brought him up to the king of Babylon at Riblah, and they passed sentence on him. 7 They slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah and bound him in chains and took him to Babylon. 8 In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month—that was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon—Nebuzaradan, the captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. 9 And he burned the house of the LORD and the king's house and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down. 10 And all the army of the Chaldeans, who were with the captain of the guard, broke down the walls around Jerusalem. 11 And the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had deserted to the king of Babylon, together with the rest of the multitude, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried into exile. 12 But the captain of the guard left some of the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and plowmen. 13 And the pillars of bronze that were in the house of the LORD, and the stands and the bronze sea that were in the house of the LORD, the Chaldeans broke in pieces and carried the bronze to Babylon. 14 And they took away the pots and the shovels and the snuffers and the dishes for incense and all the vessels of bronze used in the temple service, 15 the fire pans also and the bowls. What was of gold the captain of the guard took away as gold, and what was of silver, as silver. 16 As for the two pillars, the one sea, and the stands that Solomon had made for the house of the LORD, the bronze of all these vessels was beyond weight. 17 The height of the one pillar was eighteen cubits, and on it was a capital of bronze. The height of the capital was three cubits. A latticework and pomegranates, all of bronze, were all around the capital. And the second pillar had the same, with the latticework. 18 And the captain of the guard took Seraiah the chief priest and Zephaniah the second priest and the three keepers of the threshold; 19 and from the city he took an officer who had been in command of the men of war, and five men of the king's council who were found in the city; and the secretary of the commander of the army, who mustered the people of the land; and sixty men of the people of the land, who were found in the city. 20 And Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard took them and brought them to the king of Babylon at Riblah. 21 And the king of Babylon struck them down and put them to death at Riblah in the land of Hamath. So Judah was taken into exile out of its land. (2 Kings 25:1–21 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

I mentioned last week that we read these stories, generally speaking, to learn something about God, about ourselves and about how God has saved us through the person and work of Jesus and we will use that as our outline again today. Let's talk first about what this story teaches us about the nature and character of God.

What Does This Passage Teach Us About God?

The first thing I think we should notice is that:

1. God does not make idle threats

God was very clear about the consequences of sin and rebellion; way back at the beginning of this story he said to the people of Israel through the prophet Moses:

“See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: 27 the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today, 28 and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known.” (Deuteronomy 11:26–28 ESV)

Those are the two roads in the Bible. The road of obedience leads to blessing. The road of disobedience leads to cursing. That couldn't be more clear. God even specified what the end of this bad road would look like. He said if you will not obey my voice, here is what's going to go down:

“The LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You shall go out one way against them and flee seven ways before them. And you shall be a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. 26 And your dead body shall be food for all birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth, and there shall be no one to frighten them away.... Your sons and your daughters shall be given to another people, while your eyes look on and fail with longing for them all day long, but you shall be helpless.... “The LORD will bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone. 37 And you shall become a horror, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where the LORD will lead you away. (Deuteronomy 28:15–37 ESV)

God SAID that would happen way back in the time of Moses; almost a thousand years before it did happen – precisely that way – in the story that we read this morning. Every word of that threat came to pass. It wasn't figurative, it wasn't a symbol, it wasn't hyperbole.

God does not make idle threats. He gives plenty of time for people to repent, but in the end he does exactly what he said he would do.

Let that sink in for just a minute.

We live in a time when we have enjoyed God's blessings and God's mercies in this country for so long that we no longer believe in the wrath and the judgment of God. Even in the church belief in Divine Judgment is at an all time low. Pastors in our denomination speak about universal reconciliation – the idea that everybody goes to heaven in the end. But if that is true then why does the Bible describe the final judgment this way:

I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. 13 And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:12–15 ESV)

That doesn't sound like universal reconciliation! That doesn't sound like everyone goes to heaven in the end. It sounds like serious business. It sounds like it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God. It sounds like God does not make idle threats.

The second thing we learn about God in this story is that:

2. God will not join himself with wickedness

The plan of God from the beginning was to have a people who are called by his name, who rejoice in his word and who rule over all created things. That's why God makes Adam and Eve in his image and likeness. All humanity was supposed to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. A priest is a bridge. A priest holds on to God and lives in the world. Now, when humanity in general fell, God began to work specifically with Israel. Thus when he constituted them as a nation he said:

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; 6 and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' (Exodus 19:5–6 ESV)

God says to Israel: "I'll speak to you and you speak to everyone else. I will bless you and through you bless everyone else." That's what it means to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. That was the plan but this is the problem:

Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity (Habakkuk 1:13 KJV)

How is the plan going to work if God has to be face to face with human sin? That can't happen because God cannot join himself to sin.

That's the tension that animates the Old Testament story. That's the question that everyone is

asking: How can a sinful people live with a holy God? After Genesis 2 there are two constants in the Bible: God is holy and people are sinful – and how's that going to work? Well one thing we know for sure is that God is not going to change. The Bible doesn't say: "I will become sinful because you all are sinful." No, it says the opposite. It says:

"Be holy, for I am holy." (1 Peter 1:16 NKJV)

I'm not going to change – so you have to change. God gives the people of Israel plenty of time to change – but they don't. They go deeper and deeper into sin and so finally, in the end, they are cut off and sent away from God, into death and ruin.

That's what hell is, at the end of the day. Hell is where you go when you refuse to let go of your sin so as to be united to God. That's what C.S. Lewis was talking about in his book "The Great Divorce". In that book he imagines what it would be like if the people in hell were given a holiday in heaven – do you remember that? They take a bus through the cosmos from hell to heaven, but when they get there they don't like it because it requires them to let go of all the sin they have clung to in life and also in death. So they get back on the bus and they live forever in hell with what they love the most. They were not willing to let go of sin in order to take hold of God.

That's why we sing in the old Gospel songs: "Nothing in my hands I bring – simply to thy cross I cling." You have to let go of sin to be lifted up into God. That's why it says in the New Testament that:

without holiness no one will see the Lord. (Hebrews 12:14 NIV11)

This is non-negotiable reality, Old Testament and New. God will not – God cannot - God does not - join himself to sin.

This story also teaches us some very important things about ourselves.

What Does This Passage Teach Us About Human Beings?

The very first thing we see in the text is that:

1. People tend to go from bad to worse

The Bible says that generally speaking, the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children. We have a very hard time escaping the patterns, norms, values and habits that we inherit from our parents.

I remember learning this, very personally, back when we were doing fostering. My wife and I were foster parents for 16 children over the course of 9 years. Many of the children we dealt with had suffered unspeakable abuse and deprivation. We had one child with us who we were told by the police had endured some of the most horrific sexual abuse they had ever seen in the City of Hamilton. I used to get so mad when we wiped her little bum and we saw the scars on her tiny little body. I became so angry when because of the court system in Canada where people are innocent until proven guilty – we were required to pack this little girl into a taxi so that she could have supervised visits with the monster who abused her – all so that he could make himself look like a good dad in the eyes of the court. So Shauna Lee and I started saying that she was sick and she couldn't go to the visit today and we got a call, finally from a court worker who said that we had to put her in that car and I blasted her. I honestly wanted to kill this person – not the court worker, the man in question – and the court worker was very kind, very gracious and very understanding but then she said something that took the wind out of my sails. She said “it might help you to know that this man was also the victim of abuse. He was born with mental handicaps likely because of the alcohol and drug use of his parents and he was subject to horrific sexual assault basically from the moment he was born. He literally knows nothing else.”

That didn't make me feel any better about putting that little girl in the cab – it just made me feel worse about humanity as a whole. We have a very hard time escaping the things we are exposed to. We tend to go from bad to worse. We tend to repeat the mistakes of the past. We cannot escape the shadow and the influence of our broken environment. By and large, the sins of the fathers are visited upon and repeated by the children.

So it is in the narrative of Israel. Solomon got the ball rolling. He worshipped Yahweh AND the gods of the nations. But at least Solomon had the decency to keep those things separate – that's

not a good thing but its at least something. I mean if I could make an analogy, its one thing to have a mistress, its another thing to bring her to church – right? Solomon did his disgusting deeds – OVER THERE – but his grandchildren did them in the house of the Lord.

During Josiah’s attempted reformation we are told:

he broke down the houses of the male cult prostitutes who were **in the house of the LORD** (2 Kings 23:7 ESV)

What began in the shadows quickly went mainstream among the people of God and was actually brought INSIDE the temple of the Lord. That’s how quick human beings can go from bad to worse.

This is the spiral that the Apostle Paul describes in Romans 1. First you deny God, then you get on board with the cultural attitudes towards sexuality and morality and then before you know it you:

not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.
(Romans 1:32 NIV11)

One generation sins in the dark, the next generation throws a parade. That’s how fast people and nations go from bad to worse.

The second thing we learn about ourselves in this story is that:

2. Human beings do not have the power to save themselves

Israel abandoned God – Israel thought that they could do this on their own. They made alliances with Egypt – but that didn’t work out very well. They invested in the military, they carved a tunnel through solid rock to provide fresh water during a siege - but still it wasn’t enough. Look at verse 3 of 2 Kings 25:

On the ninth day of the fourth month the famine was so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land. (2 Kings 25:3 ESV)

If you've got water then you can survive a short siege but the Babylonians were terribly patient. They surrounded Jerusalem for 18 months. They starved them out. They broke them down and they ground them into dust. The city fell, the temple was burned, the people were enslaved and the king was mutilated and his line extinguished.

All of their plans and preparations came to nothing. Human beings do not have the power to save themselves.

That's where the Old Testament story goes if you read far enough. It ends with God's son in jail. Literally. Look at the last couple of verses in the chapter:

And in the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin king of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, Evil-merodach king of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, graciously freed Jehoiachin king of Judah from prison. 28 And he spoke kindly to him and gave him a seat above the seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon. (2 Kings 25:27–28 ESV)

Jehoiachin is Zedekiah's older brother. He disappeared from the narrative a couple of chapters back during an earlier conflict with Babylon. His younger brother Zedekiah became king in his place and it was his death and the death of his sons that we read about earlier in the chapter. But now Jehoiachin pops back into the story – he's the heir now – he is "God's son" and he's fresh out of jail and the hope is that maybe now he has come to the end of himself. God let his son spend some time in prison. He let him learn the limit of his wisdom. He let him experience the consequences of his actions. He let him reap what he sowed and that is the hope at the end of this story. Maybe now he is ready to be saved.

That leads us obviously to our final question:

How Then Shall We Be Saved?

We don't get the full answer to that question in this passage – there are still about 500 years of darkness before the birth of Jesus. What we do get in this story are some helpful pointers. I think the most obvious thing we learn is that:

- 1. We will need more than a country of our own**

The first half of the Old Testament is dedicated to the story of Israel's Exodus from Egypt and their conquest of the Promised Land. You kind of get the idea that if Israel could just have a country of their own then they could stretch their wings and find their way and become the people they were made to be. But it doesn't happen. It turns out that changing the environment and changing the political conditions without changing the heart leaves you with all the same problems in the end.

Hear that, my friends. Don't be so sure that the return of the Lord is at hand just because there is a political entity called Israel occupying parts of the Promised Land. We've seen that movie before. It takes more than land and freedom to become the people of God. It takes a new heart and a new spirit and until you see that you better keep your enthusiasm in check.

The same applies to the political process here in North America. The hope for this country is not the election of a Christian Prime Minister – the hope for this country is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

That leads us to our second observation:

2. We will need more than good human leaders

Israel had good human leaders – they good ones and bad ones. There were horrible kings like Ahab and Manasseh but there were good Kings like Asa and Josiah, but it was never enough. The good kings were never able to do much more than slow the descent of the people into ruin. They could never reverse the course entirely and their reforms were usually washed away very quickly under the next administration. We read this morning already about the reforms of Josiah – maybe the best king of Judah after David. But listen to what happens in the very next generation:

Jehoahaz was twenty-three years old when he began to reign, and he reigned three months in Jerusalem... And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his fathers had done. (2 Kings 23:31–32 ESV)

Josiah's reformation made no lasting impact – even on his son! His son went right back to the general trajectory of wickedness, death and ruin.

Don't put your trust in human leaders. The best of them are only able to slightly restrain our collective tendency toward wickedness, death and ruin. At the end of the day, human leaders are not the answer.

The third thing we learn in this story is that:

3. We will need more than the restraining influence of the law

The people of Israel had that too but it didn't do them any good. All of that stuff is OUTSIDE OF US and according to the Bible all of the problems are INSIDE OF US. So none of those things is going to work.

You can build up the fence of the law – we will jump over it. You can give us human leaders but we won't listen to them. You can give us a country of our own – but our children and our grandchildren will give it back to the devil. None of those things are going to work – we tried all that! We need something more!

We need a new heart, we need a new Spirit, we need a King from another world – WE NEED JESUS! Born of a Virgin in the City of David who is Christ the Lord.

This is the child in the manger – this is the meaning of Christmas, and this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God, let's pray together.