

## ‘WHEN THE LORD’S ANGER IS AROUSED’ 2 KINGS 17

**[St Mark’s Northbridge, Sunday May 2, 2021, All Services]**

What I’d like to do this morning/evening is in many respects the same as what we’ve done with the previous chapters of 2 Kings. That is, I’d like us to reflect together on the story of 2 Kings 17, I want us to think together about how it relates to the big story of the whole Bible, and ultimately I want us to consider how this chapter intersects with our story- what it says to us about who we are and what we need.

And as you can see on my outline, we’re going to do this under four headings. The political story- vv.1-6. The spiritual story- vv.7-23. The divine story- vv.24-41. And then finally- our story.

[Pray]

### **1. The Political Story (vv.1-6).**

So we begin with verses 1-6. And we notice that these verses tell a story about the politics of the late 8<sup>th</sup> century BC.

#### **- King Hoshea**

And the chapter starts by introducing us to King Hoshea- the next in a long line of the kings in Israel (as opposed to the kings in Judah). And verse 2 tells us that Hoshea was a bad king, although perhaps not quite as bad as some who’d gone before.

Last Saturday our family enjoyed a day on a friend’s boat. And up in Pittwater we did a bit of fishing off the back of the boat. And I came away from our adventure with one photo of Charlotte and a little fish she managed to catch, and another photo of me holding a fish I managed to reel in- maybe 25-30cms long. And I drove home last Saturday feeling pretty proud of our fishing efforts! But I hadn’t been home long when I saw on my Facebook feed a photo of an old school mate and the 95cm kingfish he’d caught that afternoon. It quickly put our fishing prowess into proper perspective. Because it’s all relative isn’t it?

And that’s what verse 2 is saying here. It’s all relative. When compared with the kings who preceded him, perhaps Hoshea wasn’t all that bad? But when compared with the standard of God’s own kingship, he was undoubtedly a very great disappointment. Hoshea did evil in the eyes of the LORD.

And part of the evidence these verses give for that conclusion is that rather than turning to God for his protection, Hoshea looked to the kings of the neighbouring nations to protect him- first Shalmaneser of Assyria, and then King So of Egypt. And in this way he reminds us of Ahaz who we read about last week and the alliance he pursued with TP3! In both cases, these alliances reflected a profound failure to trust in God.

## - the exile of Israel

And as a result of all this evil in the eyes of the LORD, Hoshea famously becomes the last king of Israel. Not because he was the worst. But because he was in a long line of evil kings, and, at some point, the LORD's patience has to run out. And Hoshea was the last king of Israel because the Assyrians were almost as sick of the Israelites as God was. And Shalmaneser brought his army down to Samaria and overran them. Hoshea was seized and imprisoned. There was a three year siege. And then Samaria fell. And the Israelites were exiled. Deported to Assyria. And from that point on, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was really no more. They don't come back from that. In the year 722 BC Israel's exile to Assyria was Israel's end.

## 2. The Spiritual Story (vv.7-23)

But, of course, as I've already intimated, this is not just a political story but also a spiritual one. This wasn't just Hoshea's fault, and there's not just a political explanation. Spiritually speaking, this is the result of a long history of the Israelites ignoring God. Their exile was not just the military project of an Assyrian king. It was the disciplining work of the LORD. And so, what we have in verses 7-23 is really a break in the narrative so that the spiritual explanation can be offered. Verse 7 begins: 'All this took place because . . .'. And that's what the author of 2 Kings is doing for us here. He's explaining the spiritual story that lies behind the political one. And it's a story in three parts: sin, wrath, and judgement.

## - sin

And the stress of these verses is on sin. All this took place because...? Because of sin. Because God's people turned their backs on him. And when they turn their backs on the LORD, they reject their rescuer and their redeemer. Verse 7.

[Read 17:7a-b]<sup>1</sup>

It's no small thing to turn your back on anyone. But to turn your back on someone who has shown you nothing but kindness is a special kind of folly. And the author goes on to spell out what this rejection of God involved. Verse 7 again.

[Read 17:7c-8]

Idolatry. And pagan practices. In actual fact those two phrases are like a summary of everything that follows.

They created places of worship and objects of worship all over the place. As verse 10 colourfully puts it, 'on every high hill and under every spreading tree'. And as verse 9 says they even did it 'secretly'- that is, I presume, with a guilty conscience, trying to prevent the all-knowing God from becoming aware of it. Is there anything more laughable? But this is what they did. They worshipped the gods of foreign nations, and gods of their own

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<sup>1</sup> See also verse 36 and verse 39.

creation. What they worshipped was worthless, and as verse 15 says, as a result they became worthless themselves. God's people gave themselves completely to idolatry. And as a result they also gave themselves to the pagan practices that were part and parcel of idolatrous religion in those days- things we would describe now as occult practices<sup>2</sup>. They even stooped so low as to sacrifice their sons and daughters in the fire-verse 17. Is it any wonder the LORD's patience ran out?

And of course, the other feature of the sin that 2 Kings 17 stresses, is the way the Israelites ignored God. Of course, you can't give yourself to idolatry and pagan practices like these unless you dispense with God's word. And that's certainly what the Israelites had done. Listen to how this is underlined from verse 12.

[Read 17:12-15]<sup>3</sup>

God's commands had been clear. But they ignored them. God sent prophets to call them back to his commands, and to warn them of their danger. But they would not listen<sup>4</sup>.

### - wrath

And so, what the law and the prophets said would happen, happened<sup>5</sup>. God's patience with their rebellion ran out. And his wrath was stirred. The way 2 Kings 17 describes it is that God's anger was aroused.

Verse 11: 'They did wicked things that aroused the LORD's anger'.

Verse 17: they 'sold themselves to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, arousing his anger.'

Verse 18: 'so the LORD was very angry with Israel.'

### - judgement

And because the LORD was angry, his judgement followed. And it's important to see both these things. Sometimes I think we carelessly talk about God's wrath and judgement as if they were the same thing. Of course, they usually go together! But they're not the same. When a father is angry with his child's disobedience, and that leads him to impose a punishment, his anger and his punishment are not the same thing. And it's helpful for the child to learn not only that disobedience leads to punishment, but also that disobedience affects their father emotionally. And the same is true with God. He does punish sin. But he punishes sin because it disturbs and distresses him. He punishes because he's angry. His judgement flows from his wrath.

And the judgement here is one of separation. Verse 18.

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<sup>2</sup> See verse 17.

<sup>3</sup> See also verse 23.

<sup>4</sup> As Davis says, with no small amount of irony, they were 'tenaciously faithful' to Jeroboam rather than the LORD (see Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Kings*, p.245).

<sup>5</sup> Note especially the way this description speaks of the covenant curses God had promised coming upon Israel- see Deuteronomy 28:49-68, 31:16ff).

[Read 17:18a]

And that expression is repeated in verse 20 and again in verse 23. It's referring to the exile. Because in banishing Israel from the land, like with Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, they are banished from the place where God chose for his presence to dwell with those he loves.

### 3. The Divine Story (vv.24-41).

Well, the explanation the author gives in the second section of our passage today/tonight comes to an end in verse 23. And from verse 24, he picks up the narrative again. And, in particular, he tells us about what happened in the land of Israel after the Israelites were exiled. And basically the king of Assyria did what any major power would have done in those days- he trucked in some of his own people to take over the land. In the quest for world domination this was a well-known strategy. Deport the locals and send in your own replacements.

But the problem in this particular circumstance is that the land into which these Assyrians moved did not just belong to the Israelites. It also belonged to their God. And that's why these verses end up telling us a story about him. The author of 2 Kings wants to tell us what God did when these foreigners moved in. Let me point out three things.

#### - unable to be deported

Firstly, we need to understand that strange part about the lions. Verse 25 tells us that because the new Assyrian residents did not worship the LORD, he sent lions amongst them and some people were killed. And I take it that what we're meant to see in this is the refusal of God to disappear off the scene. I think this is the point. You can deport God's people, but you can't deport him. You can replace the Israelites, but you can't replace their God. He's not going anywhere! And so he makes his presence known. And felt.

And in a fascinating turn of events, when the king of Assyrian hears about the lions, he finds an Israelite priest to go back to Samaria and teach the Assyrians about how God wanted to be worshipped. And we read here that the Assyrian people did make some kind of attempt to listen to the priest and do what he said<sup>6</sup>.

#### - unwilling to share his glory

But, of course, the hearts of the Assyrians are not really in the worship of Israel's God. And though they make some effort to do what the priest said, they fail to account for the fact that God is unwilling to share his glory. And this is my second observation about this section.

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<sup>6</sup> See verse 32. It would seem at this point that the Israelites have been 'replaced' (verse 24) in every sense. And this, of course, is a great tragedy.

Because even whilst they're attempting to worship the one true God, they set up all the apparatus needed to carry on worshipping the gods of their nation. And Israel ends up looking like a food-court of religious options. When we read verse 30 and 31 I think we're meant to see it as some kind of comic tragedy.

[Read 17:30-31]

Notice the repetition of the word 'make' in those verses. This is how worship operated in Assyria. You make a god and then you bow down. But the God of Israel is not made. He's the one who made them! And he won't tolerate this kind of worship free-for-all! He didn't like it then, and he doesn't like it now.

Any smart parent will tell you that one of the best ways to manage children is to give them two clear choices. I call it parenting by "either-or". Instead of saying to children: "what would you like to do next?"- a question likely to illicit a range of answers the parent would rather not hear- watch TV, play on the i-pad, sit here and do nothing; instead, the shrewd parent offers an "either-or". Would you like to have dinner and then a bath? Or would you like to have your bath first? You get the idea.

So it is when it comes with God. True worship is not a choose-your-own-adventure kind of thing. It's an either-or. You can worship the one true God and know his limitless blessing. Or you can choose to worship worthless things and become worthless yourself.

And nowhere in this passage makes that clearer than verses 33 and 34. Verse 33 describes what they thought they were doing.

[Read 17:33]

But verse 34 describes how God sees it.

[Read 17:34a]

Did you notice that? Verse 33 makes it sound like you can worship the LORD and other gods. But verse 34 teaches us that that's just not possible. If you're trying to do that then you're not actually worshipping the LORD at all. You're ignoring him.

Because God deserves all the glory. He is our maker. And he is our rescuer and redeemer. And he's a jealous God. Which means he will not share his glory with pretenders.

### **- unchanging in what he reveals**

And then the third thing to say here about God is that he's unchanging in what he reveals. Verse 35-39 are really important in this chapter. Their purpose is to state with crystal clarity what God has always said to his people. Right at the end of this sorry narrative, verse 35 takes us back to what God commanded his people at the very beginning of his covenant with them- long before they even had a king. Right at the start he called on them

to worship him alone- the God who had rescued and redeemed them. He called on them never to worship others, and to always obey his laws. He called on them to remember him and to always trust him for deliverance.

Of course, those words capture exactly what the Assyrians did not know. They capture what every king of Israel seemed to have forgotten. And they capture the way of life that the Israelites as a nation had foolishly rejected. And they serve as a reminder that the problem at the heart of Israel's history was not God. He never changed. What he revealed of himself and of his will for his people had always been the same. He was and always had been unmistakably clear.

And this too is as true now as it was then. God says the same to every creature under heaven in 2021. I am the one who sent my son to rescue and redeem. Worship me, and me alone. Listen to me. You will be blessed if you do what I say. Never forget me. And you can trust in me for everything you need. Unmistakeably clear!

#### 4. Our Story (cf. Hebrews 12:22-29).

And that's why these words in 2 Kings 17 mean something to us this morning/evening as well. Because they're a part of God's unchanging revelation. Because our story is part of the big story of the Bible, part of the story of God's revelation throughout history, these words here speak to us- about who we are and what we need. So let me finish with three thoughts about that. And I'm going to do that today/tonight with the help of Hebrews 12:22-29. It's a passage that I think helps us to see the significance of 2 Kings 17 really clearly.

##### - the new covenant

And the first comment I want to make is about the new covenant of which we're a part. As we read 2 Kings we're immersed in the old covenant. And it's a book which teaches us why a new covenant was so desperately needed. And this chapter plays an important role in that.

Because like so many other places in the Old Testament, our chapter this morning/evening reminds us of the old covenant pattern. The story this chapter tells is in many respects the story of the whole Old Testament. God loves and rescues his people. He makes it clear to them what it means to live as those he's redeemed. But his people ignore him and worship other gods instead. This arouses God's anger and it leads to them being punished.

Of course, on so many occasions in the Old Testament, God's grace reaches out to his people once more to rescue them. But the Israelites fall back into their sin again. And this cycle is repeated. Over and over.

And one of the questions a chapter like 2 Kings 17 leaves us asking is this. When will this cycle be over? How will this tragic pattern be broken? And of course, the answer is a new covenant. The terrible cycle of God's old covenant people, a cycle represented perfectly

by the failures of the kings, can only be broken by God doing something entirely new. Which he does.

I've been reading the book of Hebrews recently. And it's been deeply edifying for my soul to hear all the ways the author talks about the new thing God did when he sent Jesus. He gave us a better sacrifice than the old covenant sacrifices. A better priest than the old covenant priests. A better temple. Better promises. The list goes on.

And when we get to Hebrews 12, the author reminds us that this is what we've come to. Our story is not the story of 2 Kings, but the story of the new covenant. The cycle has been broken. We've come to a new Jerusalem, a church where every member has their name written in heaven. We've come to God who now makes people perfect because his Son Jesus cleanses and transforms them. This is what the people of Israel and the kings of Israel did not have. As Hebrews 12:29 puts it: you have come 'to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel'.

This is the fulfilment of 2 Kings 17:39 where God said again that he would deliver his people. And he has. From ourselves. From the terrible cycle we make for ourselves by our sin. And from the wrath and judgement of God. He's done this. In Christ this is our new reality.

### **- a word of warning**

But, of course, this also comes with a word of warning. Because God is still aroused to anger by those who don't worship him as he deserves. He still can't be ignored, and he still refuses to share his glory. So the wrath of God and the punishment of God are still clear and present dangers. And those who ought to fear his anger are those who, like the ancient Israelites, and like the ancient Assyrians, choose not to listen.

This is how the writer of Hebrews expresses it in Hebrews 12:25. He says, in fact, that this danger is now even greater.

[Read Hebrews 12:25]

That's Jesus. He's risen from the dead. He sits at God's right hand in heaven. He will one day return to judge every human life. And he warns us now from heaven. Don't ignore me. Don't ignore what I've done. Don't tune out my voice. I'm speaking to you! Don't refuse me.

And there may be some here this morning/evening who need to hear that warning.

### **- thankful worship**

But when you've heard that warning and decided to heed it, when you've chosen not to refuse Jesus but to listen to him, when you've resolved not to ignore what Jesus has done but to come to him to be cleansed by him and be transformed by him, then the life you live

is the life the end of 2 Kings 17 describes. It's the life where you worship the God who rescued and redeemed you. And where you worship only him.

And in the first place that's about our hearts- about who we most love, and who we're most grateful for, and who we most think about and aim to please.

But then it's also about what flows from our hearts- the way we express what God has done for us to others, the way we choose to behave, and speak, and relate to people. It's about how we spend our time and money. It's about what we work for, now and in the future. It's about what we teach our children. It's about repentance, and sacrifice, and self-control. All of that is worship. Humble, joyful, grateful worship.

And when we're in Christ, this is the life we live.

I'll finish with the words of Hebrews 12:28.

[Read Hebrews 12:28]