

With Man This Is Impossible

2 Kings 23:31-24:20

"A great many things keep happening, some of them good, some of them bad."

That's the beginning of a 6th century book of history by a guy called Gregory of Tours. I heard it on a history podcast recently and they described it as possibly the best beginning to any book of history ever.¹ It also struck me as a pretty decent description for the books of 1 and 2 Kings.

We started working through these books in 2018 believe it or not. And over that time: *A great many things kept happening to Israel, some of them good, some of them bad.* Or most of them bad if we're honest!

That may be a pretty good description of what 1 and 2 Kings is, but a far more interesting question is *what is it **for***. Why did the Holy Spirit inspire the author of this book to write all this history down?

Well, if you were reading this book as an Israelite in exile, it seems that 1 and 2 Kings is seeking to answer one fundamental question: *is there any hope?* Is there hope of restoration, and of return, and of renewal. Is there hope that despite Israel's sin, God might preserve a people for himself.

And this question stretches beyond the national concern of Israel. For God had promised that blessing would come to all people *through* Abraham's descendants. And so we might ask: is there hope for the world? Is there hope of blessing and not curse, of real reconciliation with God, that we can really experience in our lives now?

¹ *The Rest Is History.*

And 1 and 2 Kings says, YES. There IS hope.

One commentator says this:

*Through the course of 1-2 Kings, Yahweh's people, especially those of the Davidic dynasty, are never without hope. **But** [and this is what we're going to think about today] the focus of their hope is progressively refined, chastened, and sifted.*

1 and 2 Kings ought to inspire in us confident hope. A hope for the future that transforms our present. But first, the writer of this history undermines every place of false hope. It shows us how we must abandon any confidence in our own wisdom or wealth, words or works, and throw ourselves fully upon the power and promises of God. With man this is impossible, Jesus says, but with God *all* things are possible. So that's where we're going today.

We're going to zoom out and consider how these two books as a whole sift our certainties.

We'll consider how these chapters before us today are like the final fizzle of frail human effort.

Then we'll explore how we can have hope today, in all things. Not because of us but because of the Lord.

1 and 2 Kings: Sifting Our Certainties

So firstly, 1 and 2 Kings is like a giant sieve that strains out our foolish certainty in all human striving.

So consider from the outset of 1 Kings the reign of Solomon. What is Solomon known for? Of course his great wisdom and incredible wealth. But then consider his adultery and idolatry. Consider his marrying of many wives and his worship of many gods. Solomon's wisdom is world-famous, but after his reign we never hear of wisdom again. Even this wisest of all Kings cannot turn back the tide of Israel's sin and bring them out from under the judgement of God.

Now **there** is a caution for us who find ourselves in one of the most highly educated and wealthy parts of the world, not just now but *ever*.

I read an article a couple of weeks ago about the New Atheists who burst on the scene maybe 15 years ago. You know Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris and others. They were champions of rationality. If we would just put our trust in human reason, they said, then we would open up the path to progress. But, the writer of the article reflected:

Fast-forward to the present: What a grift that was! Many of the most prominent New Atheists turned out to be nothing more than self-aggrandising, dogmatic, irascible, censorious, morally compromised people who, at every opportunity, have propped up the powerful over the powerless, the privileged over the marginalised. This may sound hyperbolic, but it's not when, well, you look at the evidence.

Human wisdom and human reason, which by the way is *always* a precious gift from God, simply cannot bear the weight of our expectation. And this was what Solomon was like too isn't it? A morally

compromised King whose kingdom quickly dissolved into disorder and division.

And of course this happens in the church too. How foolish we can be to trust in our own strategies for success, our own plans and programs, *our* ministry and *our* money. Yes, God gives us these things and they all have their place. But when they become the centre how quickly we can compromise, propping up our own power over the powerless, pursuing our own privilege and failing to serve those on the margins.

And you see the very end of this trajectory played out generations later in 2 Kings 23 and 24. In Solomon's reign the nations came to give tributes and receive wisdom. But here they come to impose taxes and take all that is precious away.

Is there hope? 1 and 2 Kings says that with human wisdom this is impossible.

And so too with **human words**. And here we see that even the prophetic speech and powerful acts of Elijah and Elisha are not able to turn back the tide of Israel's sin and bring them out from under the judgement of God. Elijah and Elisha spoke against wickedness and sin, they provided for the poor and raised the dead. They powerfully demonstrated the reality of God's power and the need for real repentance.

And yet, generations later, what do we read in 2 Kings 23 and 24 about every single King: "he did evil in the eyes of the Lord, just as his predecessors had done."

Powerful prophets, sent by God with God's words to speak. But their words fell on deaf ears, or were quickly forgotten and so little changed.

As the apostle Paul famously says in 1 Corinthians 13: even if we speak in the tongues of men and of angels; even if we have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge; if that's all we have, we have nothing. In fact it's worse than nothing.

And perhaps no one ought to take more notice of this than me. For I'm the one standing up here and speaking.

Is there any hope? With human words this is impossible.

And the same then is true with **human works**. And this is maybe the most disappointing news of all.

You could not imagine a more whole-hearted obedience to the Law than what we saw last week from Israel's most righteous King. There was real repentance and real change. The temple was rebuilt and the covenant renewed. But even the righteous obedience to the Law could not turn back the tide of Israel's sin and bring them out from under the judgement of God. The story of Josiah and the teaching of Paul are in perfect harmony.

Paul preaches in Acts 13 justification could not be obtained through the law of Moses. He writes to the Romans that the law was powerless to set us free.

And so it proves. We hear nothing of the law in these chapters here. We hear nothing of deep change in the heart of God's people. We only have wicked kings. And even the temple that Josiah rebuilt is stripped bare and in chapter 25 will finally be destroyed.

Is there any hope? Shockingly, even with human obedience this is impossible.

2 Kings 23-24: The Final Fizzle

Things keep happening, some of them good and some of them bad. And as we've seen, the details in the chapters before us today show us that even the very best things in Israel's history have completely unraveled. Human wisdom, human wealth, human words and even works of righteousness cannot halt the seemingly inevitable slide into exile.

And as we narrow the focus onto 2 Kings 23 and 24, it's like we're reading about the final fizzle human effort. It's like these last kings of Judah are firing a water pistol at the oncoming blaze of the Babylonians and the fire of God's judgement.

And the features of the passage serve to drive this message home. We read about four Kings in this passage, and the parallels are striking.

So did you notice the **fleeting reigns** of the first and third kings. Jehoahaz at the end of chapter 23 reigns for three months. Jehoiachin reigns for three months we're told in 24 verse 8. In Jehoahaz's reign the Egyptians take him away, install another king whose name is changed. Jehoiachin is taken away by the Babylonians and another king is installed whose name is also changed.

And what's more, the Egyptians impose a tax on the land, taking Judah's silver and gold. And later the Babylonians take away all of the temples sacred items, as well as the best and the brightest of Israel's people.

The three month reigns of these kings is kind of pathetic isn't it? They are passively acted upon by the powerful nations around them. They dramatically reflect the utter powerlessness of Judah to do anything about it's own plight.

But then we read about the second and fourth kings and things are not much better. These kings, installed by Egypt and Babylon, both reign for eleven years and so they have more time to get their act together. But their attempts at rebellion are utterly futile, and just as pathetic as the passivity of their predecessors.

At the start of chapter 24 Jehoiakim rebels and is quickly overwhelmed by bands of raiders. At the end of chapter 24 Zedekiah rebels, and stick around next week to see what happens there. SPOILER ALERT: it doesn't end very well.

And you can see the utter ridiculousness of this final rebellion from the first half of verse 20. Zedekiah rebels *after* the final verdict has been delivered:

*It was because of the LORD'S anger that all this happened to Jerusalem and Judah, and in the end **he thrust them from his presence.***

These fleeting reigns and futile rebellions drive home the point. Of 1 and 2 Kings. Human effort cannot save the people of God. Their problem is far too deep for that. *Our* problem is far too deep.

The problem for Judah was not they had sinned and so needed to do better. The problem was not that they were bad and needed to improve.

The problem was that they were dead and so they needed a resurrection.

1 and 2 Kings, like the gospel itself is the great CLOSED sign placed on the shop of human striving. It shows in the clear light of God's glory the folly of our own attempts to improve the unimprovable. It sifts all of our false certainties so that we might seek something solid and firm.

In the end, 1 and 2 Kings takes us by the hand, leads us away from our own wisdom and wealth and words and works to the one who “who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.” (Romans 4:17)

Is there any hope? With man this is impossible. But with God *all things* are possible. And so ultimately, 1 & 2 Kings is pointing us to Jesus.

For the hope of Israel is not in a King who has wisdom *from* God. But a King who is the very wisdom of God. The wisdom by which the world was made.

The hope of the nations is not prophets with words from God, but the Word of God coming down – not to dwell in a building made by human hands but to take on human flesh and making his dwelling among us.

And hope for us is not in our own obedience to the Law, or the quality of our repentance. Our hope is that at just the right time God would send his Son. To come under the Law. To fulfil the Law and to redeem us from the Law. To do what the Law of Moses could not do and provide for us forgiveness of sin and freedom from condemnation.

Hope does not come from our feeble and futile human effort to fight back against the consequences of our sin. We need God to enter into our struggle and fight *for* us. And to share his victory *with* us.

And that’s the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He often appeared feeble in his life, and his death looked like the most futile end. As he was hung in weakness on a cross it looked like the unraveling of everything he said and did. But by his death he was doing what we cannot do. **He** was turning back the tide of human sin and bringing us out from the judgement of God.

Jesus took upon himself the end of all our false hopes. The temple of his body was beaten and stripped bare. As the true King Israel he was taken captive and led out of Jerusalem. And on the cross he too was thrust from the gracious presence of the Lord. But death was not the end! In his resurrection Jesus pioneered a path through death into life, so that we too could return from exile and be reconciled with God. So that we too can be raised from the dead.

Here is the message of 1 and 2 Kings from Ephesians 2:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

But here is the gospel:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved ... For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.

Things keep happening, some good some bad. But staked in the middle of human history is the decisive action of God in Christ.

Is there hope?

And so there is hope for us today in all the happenings of our lives today. There is real hope for real sinners like us because of the real Jesus. And so to finish today I thought we could unpack how this hope plays out in our lives today in four areas:

There is hope for us in salvation, sanctification, suffering and sharing the gospel.

So firstly there is hope for us in our salvation. Because as we have already seen our salvation is by grace, and not by works. So we really can have assurance that our sins are forgiven, because salvation comes from God and not from ourselves.

At Christianity explored this Thursday we did the session on grace and it never fails to blow me away. We listened to the story of the rich young ruler who comes to Jesus with all of his works and all of his wealth. But in the end he goes away sad – he takes himself away from the presence of Jesus into an exile of his own making because he refuses to let go. He won't die to his own performance and his own portfolio. Of course the disciples are shocked that this good man cannot earn eternal life and they ask Jesus that question of questions: "who then can be saved?"

We've already heard the answer Jesus gives: "With Man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

There will be some people here in this room who need to hear Jesus' invitation to let go. Let go of trusting in yourself. Bring all of your sin, and all of your wearisome striving under his blood shed on the cross and receive from him what you can never earn for yourself, and what nothing else in this world can offer: Peace with God, now and forever.

And there will be some here today who need to hear again and take to heart Jesus' assurance. No matter how you have failed in the past. And even beyond how you feel in the present. If you trust him, you are forgiven and free. Fully and forever. With man this is impossible! But with God all things are possible!

And then secondly there is hope that we can walk in this freedom *now*. We really can grow, we can make real *progress* in the Christian life. This is what is often referred to as sanctification. And I reckon we can get ourselves into trouble here. I reckon deep down I can often approach the Christian life as if I'm saved through Jesus but day by day, moment by moment I'm basically on my own. I'm a Christian by God's grace but in the trenches of everyday life it's up to me. Do you feel like that? Well God wants so much more for us. In Galatians 3:3 Paul jolts us out of our wearying self-dependance:

Are you so foolish! After beginning by means of the Spirit are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?

But there's a better way. Paul tells the Galatians in chapter 2:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ lives in me. This life I now live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

Like salvation, our growth in the faith only possible because of the finished work of Christ, received by faith. I've been greatly helped by a theologian called Francis Schæffer on this point. he says:

The only difference [between our salvation and sanctification] is that one is once and for all and the other is moment by moment. ... If we try to live the Christian life in our own strength, we will have sorrow; but if we live in this way, we will not only serve the

*Lord, but in the place of sorrow He will be our song. That is the difference. The **how of the Christian life is the power of the crucified and risen Lord, through the agency of the indwelling Holy Spirit, moment by moment.***

Don't you want that? With man it's impossible, but with God all things are possible.

Thirdly, then, there is hope for us in suffering. There are all sorts of trials people are facing in our church family. There's the acute pain of relationships breaking down, and there's the long toil of ill-health. There is grief and sadness of various kinds. And it might be possible to read the end of 2 Kings and wonder if your suffering is the same as Israel. You could conclude that your own trials are a sign that you too have been thrust from the presence of the Lord.

If that is you today, can I say this with absolute clarity. Your suffering is not the suffering of exile. Your trials are not punishments from God. On the cross Jesus Christ paid the punishment for your sin once and for all. He experienced the horrors of exile so that there would never be a time when you are cast from God's presence. Israel's relationship with God was ruined beyond repair. Your relationship with God has been restored in Christ to a peace that can never be broken.

We read in Romans 5:

...we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance,

character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

God does not promise to always deliver us *from* suffering. But he does promise to be with us in the suffering, and to carry us through the suffering, even through death and into resurrection life with him.

Then finally there is hope for us in our efforts to share the gospel. For these chapters throw before us again the *need* for us to speak about Jesus. As we look around at all the wisdom and the wealth around us, God's word gives us the eyes to see the reality of spiritual poverty. Like the Israelites on the brink of exile, our neighbours don't just need some self-improvement or a top up of religion in their lives. They're dead! They need resurrection! They are without God and without hope in the world.

And so is there hope for us? Is there hope that we can speak the good news of Jesus and see new life come to Northbridge and those in our networks?

I think one of the things that holds us back from evangelism is that we really do think that we need to be wise, that we need the right words at the right time. Deep down we can believe that evangelism is our work. So no wonder it often feels like a fearful and hopeless task!

I have had several conversations with people at church recently that have been such an encouragement to me. I have been encouraged by the heart that these brothers and sisters have for the lost. For family members and old friends and for colleagues and even for people they have never met but connect with online.

But even more so they have encouraged me in my own longing for family and friends to know Jesus by reminding me that conversion is God's work and not mine. God is the one who is in the business of resurrection and not me. And so yes I must seek to be wise, and to speak words of grace. I need to work hard at real relationships of genuine love. But ultimately I need to wrestle in prayer. I need to run to the one who raises the dead, For only God can save my friends.

After all, this has always been Jesus' answer to those who follow him.

With man this is impossible. But with God, *all things* are possible.