



A NATION BANISHED: THE SLOW DECLINE

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Happy New Year!

It's been an interesting last several weeks. I just returned yesterday from being on vacation for most of the last two weeks. I was spending time with my family and enjoying being in the snow up near Lake Tahoe. Christmas was a great time of remembering the birth of Christ and celebrating as a church family. Lots of good stuff.

But it has also been a difficult time. We witnessed one of the worst school shootings in our country's history. We endured (and are still enduring) one of the most contentious political standoffs in recent history. We talked about whether the world was going to end because of an ancient Native American calendar.

After all of this, it's a little difficult to figure out how to feel going into a new year. Should we be optimistic? Or should we expect more senseless violence and political frustration?

At the start of a new year, a lot of us ask a simple question: where are things headed? There's great pain and there's great joy. Are things getting better or worse? Will good or evil win in this country? Will good or evil win in my life? Where are things headed?

We are in the middle of a nine month series that we are calling *EPIC: The Astonishing Story of God and the World*. Our goal has been to trace the entire story that the Bible tells from Genesis to Revelation over the course of nine months. We began in September and we'll finish up at the end of May.

Along the way we have broken up the story into sections that help us to grasp the entire story and see it in its parts. We started with the era of creation and saw God fashion a world that eventually turned against him in rebellion. He began the process of solving the problem of that rebellion through a man named Abraham. God promised to bless Abraham's family and through them to bless the world. That family grew into a nation and God gave them a land to settle and call their own. In the course of time, they decided that they wanted to look like the nations around them and be governed by a king. So that began an era of the glory days of Israel when the nation was ruled by a

king who knew God. Saul was a practice round, David got it right, and things started to fall apart with Solomon.

In our last sermon in the EPIC, which was a few weeks ago, we saw what I consider the second worst thing that happened in the Bible. The worst thing was Eve disobeying God in the beginning of the story. But the next worse thing was when the kingdom of God's people erupted into civil war and divided into two warring factions that to this day—three thousand years later—haven't made peace with each other. The people of God split from one nation into two; Israel in the North and Judah in the South.

That brings us to the era that we begin today: *A Nation Banished*. The stage has been set for some dark times. Over the course of the next four weeks we will watch the downward spiral of the nation of Israel. The glory days of King David are behind us. The nation is split, the nation falls away from God, and eventually the nation is judged and sent into exile. The title of this week's sermon is *The Slow Decline*. Along with the time of the judges, this period contains some of the darkest parts of the Bible. Some of the worst things that happen take place here. It's not exactly the happiest set of sermons to kick off the new year.

But that's not all there is. There are also some incredibly beautiful moments—times when God shows up and punctuates the darkness with powerful miracles. Times of hope and encouragement. In the midst of a lot of bad stuff, we are going to see God at work. There is meaning behind these events. There is purpose.

And that's important to us because it means that there is meaning in the events of our lives. There is something else happening in the midst of political frustration, violence, financial uncertainty, and international confusion. God is at work.

This morning we will see this play out as we look at four different individuals. They are all from the northern kingdom of Israel. Two kings and two prophets. Two bad guys and two good guys. I'm going to call them the jerk, the loner, the fake, and the light. We'll see some really bad stuff, but we will see God at work. And hopefully we will realize that God is at work in our world as well.

The Jerk

Let's start with the jerk. This is King Ahab. To get a feel for his life, we'll read from 1 Kings 16:29-33. This passage describes him when he became king, and it gives a good summary of what kind of king he was.

1 Kings 16:29-33:

²⁹In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel, and he reigned in Samaria over Israel twenty-two years. ³⁰Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him. ³¹He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. ³²He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. ³³Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him.

Ahab was a really bad guy. Our passage points out that Ahab did more evil than any of the kings before him. He made God angrier than any of the kings before him. That's a pretty remarkable thing to say. There were a whole lot of really evil kings in the Old Testament. Ahab was among the worst. He was married to Jezebel, who is probably one of the most corrupt women in the Bible. She shows up again in Revelation as the personification of evil women.

This is why I'm labeling Ahab, "the jerk." He was basically pure evil. His wife was pure evil. And when an evil person is on the throne, the nation suffers. One time Ahab was sad because he wanted some land that belonged to someone else, but that person wouldn't sell it to him. So his wife said, "no problem." She had that person killed and then took the land. Easy solution. He was an evil king and life under an evil king is terrible. You never know what he's going to do. There's no justice, no mercy, no hope.

A lot of people in our world are hesitant to talk about evil. We talk about bad things happening. We might talk about evil men far away in other countries. But there is something that prevents us from recognizing that evil is real. We want to see the good in everything.

A few hours after the shooting in Connecticut, I was watching a TV broadcast with coverage on the event. They had a psychiatrist on the show who was quick to say that the young man who killed 27 people was "ill." Now, I don't have any special information on this particular individual.

I don't know anything about him. I'm sure he was ill. But it struck me that our culture finds it much easier to talk about illness than to talk about evil. Illness can be cured. But what do you do with evil?

Ahab might have been ill. He was definitely weak and ended up being manipulated by his wife. But he was also evil. And he helps us to realize that evil is real. There is evil in this world. There are people who act selfishly, without thinking of others and the consequences that result. People are greedy and competitive and lustful and violent.

It's important to say that evil is real because when we get honest, most of us know about evil. Some of us have been victims of evil. Sexual abuse. Adultery. Physical abuse. Betrayal. Slander. Gossip. Theft. Assault. Some of us have witnessed evil or walked alongside of someone who has been a victim of evil.

And when we are really honest, we admit that we have not only been the victims of evil, but we have perpetrated evil. Some of us have abused others. Betrayed people we love. Stolen. Attacked the reputation of someone we didn't like. We may not be someone like Ahab. But we have participated in evil in some way.

Evil is real. The revelation of God makes that clear. Our experience in this world makes that clear. And our own hearts show us the same thing. Evil is real.

And sometimes evil is in charge. That's the case with King Ahab. So that raises a difficult question: where is God when the power in this world is evil? Where is God when the king is a God-hater? Where is God when the devil sits on the throne?

The Loner

In reality, this has often been the case in history. The powers of this world have often been bent on their own evil purposes. One of God's most common responses to this is to work through individuals to call out that evil. Those people were prophets. During the reign of King Ahab, God called a man named Elijah to be his prophet.

It's hard to overstate the importance of the prophet Elijah. Moses was the first big prophet of God. Elijah followed in the footsteps of Moses. And Jesus followed in his. When Jesus goes up on the mountain to meet with God, He is joined by Moses and Elijah. When Jews celebrate the Passover, it's customary to leave an empty chair in case Elijah comes back to join them. Elijah is a big deal.

Elijah was tormented by the question that we just asked: where is God when the devil is king? Elijah knew that God was more powerful, but he didn't understand why no one else knew that.

In one of Elijah's most powerful moments, he challenges the prophets of Baal to a contest. They would see once and for all whose God is more powerful. The prophets of Baal built an altar and put a sacrifice on it. Elijah did the same. The Baal prophets prayed for their god to strike their sacrifice with fire. Nothing happened. Elijah did the same. But first, he soaked the animal and the wood in water so deep that he had to build a moat around it. He wanted to highlight God's power. And God showed up. Fire came down from heaven and consumed the sacrifice and the altar. The God of Israel had proven himself.

But right after that scene, Elijah runs away. He is afraid that even though his God has proven himself, he himself is in danger. Ahab's wife Jezebel, in particular, has vowed to kill him. So Elijah runs and he hides from God. But hiding from God never works out too well. God finds him and speaks to him. Here's how that conversation plays out.

1 Kings 19:10:

¹⁰[Elijah] replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

Elijah tells God that he is alone. He thinks he is the only faithful follower left. No one else has been true to God. Notice that he's not questioning God right now. God has just proved himself. He has just completely humiliated the prophets of Baal. But Elijah feels completely alone. This is why I call Elijah "the loner." He was faithful to God, but he constantly battled this feeling that he was the only one. He fought loneliness his whole life.

God's answer is beautiful. Listen to how it plays out.

1 Kings 11-13:

¹¹The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."

¹²Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but

the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

God gives Elijah some instructions and then says this to him in verse 18:

¹⁸Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him."

Elijah felt like he was the only one. The powerful people in his world were evil. Ahab, Jezebel, the prophets of Baal. The powerful thing in Elijah's world were evil, so God speaks through the weak. The voice of God wasn't in the great wind. The voice of God wasn't in the earthquake. The voice of God wasn't in the fire. The voice of God came in a gentle whisper. When power is evil, God speaks through weakness.

And in that gentle whisper, God tells Elijah that he is not alone. You are not the only one. It may feel that way, but it's not true. There are others that are faithful to me. In fact there are thousands. You are not alone.

We can sometimes feel like we are alone too. It is a different thing to live as a follower of Christ. Following God means that we have different values from a lot of the people around us. We think that there is more to life than this world. That makes everything different for us. The way we think about money, the way we think about relationships, the way we think about sex, the way we think about our rights and experiences and joy and pain. And sometimes that can be a very lonely place.

I remember feeling this way in high school over the issue of sexual choices. I distinctly remember thinking that if I didn't want to have sex before I got married, would it be possible at all to find someone else who thought the same way. Would I be the only virgin in my entire school? Would I be the only one in the world?

It is so important for us to know that we are not alone. It's part of the reason why we gather every week to worship. It's part of the reason why in the Old Testament God asked his people to all come together in Jerusalem several times a year for the major festivals. We need to know that we are not alone. We need to know that there are others who are faithful to God. Following God can be a lonely road. We need to do it together.

The Fake

So King Ahab—the jerk—is in power. Evil is real. But God calls the prophet Elijah—the loner—to testify to God's reality. God reminds Elijah that there are those who are faithful to God even in times of darkness. Now we get to King Jehu. He starts off by giving us some hope. He begins his reign by deciding to rid Israel of everything that Ahab stood for. He wanted to completely get rid of idol worship in Israel.

So this is what he did.

2 Kings 10:18-19:

¹⁸Then Jehu brought all the people together and said to them, "Ahab served Baal a little; Jehu will serve him much. ¹⁹Now summon all the prophets of Baal, all his ministers and all his priests. See that no one is missing, because I am going to hold a great sacrifice for Baal. Anyone who fails to come will no longer live." But Jehu was acting deceptively in order to destroy the ministers of Baal.

So Jehu gathers all of the prophets of Baal together in one place and locks the doors.

2 Kings 10:25-28:

²⁵As soon as Jehu had finished making the burnt offering, he ordered the guards and officers: "Go in and kill them; let no one escape." So they cut them down with the sword. The guards and officers threw the bodies out and then entered the inner shrine of the temple of Baal. ²⁶They brought the sacred stone out of the temple of Baal and burned it. ²⁷They demolished the sacred stone of Baal and tore down the temple of Baal, and people have used it for a latrine to this day.

²⁸So Jehu destroyed Baal worship in Israel.

We can be sympathetic with Jehu's motivations. He wanted Israel to stop worshipping false idols. He wanted to rid the land of idolatry. But this is a massacre. This is terrible. It's manipulative and deceptive. God does not approve of what Jehu has done. In fact, Jehu's line is eventually cut short because of what becomes known as the massacre at Jezreel. On top of that, he doesn't even follow through with bringing people back to God. He kills the prophets of Baal, but he doesn't return to God.

Jehu is religious on the outside, but there is nothing on the inside. He says his motivations are to purify the land from evil, but he does so by committing a thoroughly evil act of his own. If Ahab was evil, Jehu is a fake. Jehu is "the fake."

Unfortunately, we know a lot about people who are fake. We know a lot about people who claim to be religious on the outside, but don't have anything underneath. It's one of the most common reasons that people give for why they don't come to church.

Unfortunately, religion doesn't always help. Religion can sometimes be a smokescreen for your own selfish purposes and goals. Religion can be faked. We know this because we've seen people who are fake. And often we ourselves are fake.

This is the kind of king that Jehu was. At first, he seemed like he was going to make things better, but he turned out to be fake. This is what leads the prophet Amos to say this during this time in Israel's history in Amos 5:21-24,

²¹"I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies.

²²Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them.

²³Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.

²⁴But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

God is tired of the people like Jehu who call everyone together for a huge religious celebration, but don't care a thing about him or other people. He wishes his people would call off the hypocritical feasts and bring about justice. "Let justice roll on." God wants authentic faith that changes people's lives and orients them to the needs of others. Jehu was nothing like that.

And if it's hard to see God in a world where the king is a God-hater, it might actually be harder to see God when the king is a God-faker. It's one thing that there are evil people in the world. Dictators and murderers and rapists and those that care nothing for other people. But what do you do when the people who claim to be on God's side turn out to be just as bad?

What do you do when the priest turns out to be a child molester? When the pastor has an affair? When the Bible study leader gossips about the people in the group? Where is God when those who claim to know him are liars and

hypocrites?

The light

At this point, things are pretty dark. We don't really have an answer to the question that we started with: where are things headed? King Ahab the jerk showed us that evil is real. Elijah the loner showed us that there are those people who are faithful to God. But then King Jehu the fake showed us that even religion can be faked. So where is God in all of this?

The last person we're going to look at helps us find God amidst all this confusion. He is the prophet who followed Elijah, his disciple Elisha. Elijah is better known, but there is actually more recorded about Elisha. He does some incredible miracles.

We don't have nearly enough time to look at everything that Elisha did, so we're just going to look at one little scene. It's recorded in 2 Kings 4:1-7 and is one of the more well-known miracles that God accomplished through Elisha. It's the story of the widow's oil.

2 Kings 4:1-7:

¹The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that he revered the LORD. But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves."

²Elisha replied to her, "How can I help you? Tell me, what do you have in your house?"

"Your servant has nothing there at all," she said, "except a little oil."

³Elisha said, "Go around and ask all your neighbors for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few. ⁴Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side."

⁵She left him and afterward shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her and she kept pouring. ⁶When all the jars were full, she said to her son, "Bring me another one." But he replied, "There is not a jar left." Then the oil stopped flowing.

⁷She went and told the man of God, and he said, "Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You

and your sons can live on what is left."

There is a lot going on in this little story. On one level, it is simply a story of God helping someone in need through one of his prophets. This happens all the time when God uses people like Elisha or you and me to help those who are in need. This is the kind of God we believe in: a God who takes care of those with needs.

But on a deeper level, this story and the ones like it are saying something really significant. When kings are evil, it's the vulnerable that suffer. The Bible refers to them as widows and orphans. But one of the clearest signs of God's kingdom is that the vulnerable are protected and cared for.

Later in the New Testament the apostle James will say that true religion happens when you take care of orphans and widows – the vulnerable of the world. That's how you find the real kingdom of God. Not when the prophets of Baal are killed, but when the widows are provided for.

This is a bit of a side note, but it is something that has struck me as I've studied this. Jehu was defined by being against the prophets of Baal. Most of Elisha's miracles were performed on behalf of the vulnerable people in his world. People sometimes think their faith in God is about who they are against, but real faith is about who you are for, not who you are against.

This widow is taken care of because the kingdom of God is at work. Even in the midst of an evil king, good can thrive. Even when the system fails, God is at work. God's kingdom produces fruit even in a field of thorns. God overcomes darkness.

The story of Elisha reveals something that we need to know. God's kingdom thrives even in the darkest places. An evil king can't destroy it. Loneliness can't obscure it. Hypocritical leaders can't invalidate it. Even in the darkest places, widows are taken care of and God's kingdom grows. It doesn't just get by. It grows and prospers.

What we need then are eyes to see God's kingdom amidst the stuff that is so prevalent around us. We want to hear the stories of miracles like Elisha taking care of the widow. We want to know how God is moving in places like India and China even though government opposition to the gospel is growing. We want to hear how individuals are being healed and transformed even as our community seems to be breaking apart from the pressure of living in this culture.

This is why I call Elisha "the light." This is what the prophets often do. They help God's people to see the

kingdom of God in everyday circumstances. They testify to the reality of God in a world where God seems absent.

At one point, Elisha gives one of his servant's eyes to see this kind of stuff. They were under attack from the king of Syria and Elisha's servant was really scared.

2 Kings 6:15-17:

¹⁵When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" the servant asked.

¹⁶"Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

¹⁷And Elisha prayed, "O LORD, open his eyes so he may see." Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

Elisha could see something that his servant could not. He could see that even though everything looked lost, God's kingdom was still in place. So he prayed for God to open the eyes of his servant. And when his eyes were opened, he saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire. His servant could see what normally goes unseen: the kingdom of God thriving, even in the worst of conditions.

These are the eyes that we need. We need to see God in a world of darkness. And this is the role that we can play in the world. We can help others to see God in places where God seems absent. We believe that the kingdom of God thrives even in dark places. And we can testify to its reality to a world that denies that truth.

Conclusion

As we enter this new era of the EPIC, we see some difficult stuff happening. We see the nation of Israel getting worse and worse. We see real evil.

When we look at our own world, we might come to the same conclusion. 2013 might not be better than 2012. It might actually be worse. Things might get worse in our

world. Things might get worse in our country. Things might get worse in our lives.

But this morning as we've seen evil and hypocrisy, we've seen something else as well. God reminds Elijah that he is not alone in his faithfulness and we are reminded of the same thing. Elisha prays for his servant's eyes to be open to see the power of the kingdom of God even in the midst of the evil power of the kingdom of his world. And we are given the same eyes to see the kingdom of God.

This is what we need to know. We need to know that whatever happens in our world, there is a purpose. There is meaning. There is purpose and meaning because there is a God who is behind it all and whose hand is on his creation. Not evil nor hypocrisy nor loneliness nor injustice can stand in the way of this God and his plan.

And as we've been learning through the Epic, His plan starts somewhere and it will end somewhere. Everything is moving forward to a day when God will claim the ultimate victory. Evil and hypocrisy will not be allowed to exist forever. While all this was happening in Israel, the prophet Hosea spoke these words.

Hosea 2:21-23:

²¹"In that day I will respond," declares the LORD—

"I will respond to the skies, and they will respond to the earth;

²²and the earth will respond to the grain, the new wine and oil, and they will respond to Jezreel.

²³I will plant her for myself in the land; I will show my love to the one I called 'Not my loved one.'

"I will say to those called 'Not my people,' 'You are my people'; and they will say, 'You are my God.'"

The day is coming when God will respond. The day is coming when God will act. The day is coming when God will say to us "you are my people" and we will say to him "you are my God." May we have eyes to see the kingdom on earth now as we wait for that day to come.