



A NATION BANISHED: ISRAEL IS CONQUERED

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One of the most famous stories that Jesus ever told is usually called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” It would be better to call that story, “The Parable of the Two Sons” though. As most interpreters point out, the story has as much to do with the son that stays behind as the son that runs away.

In it, Jesus speaks of a man who had two sons. There is the “bad son” and there is the “good son.” The bad son insults his father, essentially telling him he wishes he were dead. He runs away from the family. He spends his father’s hard earned money on women and booze. He disgraces himself. Eventually, he returns to the father asking for forgiveness. The good son stays home. He does everything right. He works hard. He is responsible.

One of the reasons that this story resonates with us is that this pattern is really common. I was listening to someone tell me about their family recently. He described himself as the good son and his brother as the bad son. He studied hard, did what was right and went to a good school. His brother got into trouble, got bad grades and struggled in life.

The good son and the bad son. You see it all over the place. Movies. TV. Our own families and the Scriptures. Today we’re going to see it play out with two kingdoms, centuries before Jesus tells his famous story. We’ll see the bad son making bad decisions and suffering the consequences of that. And we’ll see the good son turning to God and getting rewarded for it.

We are in the middle of a series at PBC that we’re calling *EPIC: The Astonishing Story of God and the World*. Over the course of nine months, we are telling the entire biblical story starting in Genesis with the creation of the world and ending in Revelation with the new creation of heaven and earth. To help us track along this long journey, we’ve created ten distinct eras that are guiding us through the story.

Today is the second week of the era that we have called *A Nation Banished*. This is the saddest of all the eras. We are seeing the chosen people of God—the promised nation living in the Promised Land, with a promised goal of blessing the world, slip from worldwide admiration and envy to being completely destroyed and forgotten.

For the next two weeks, we’re looking at the crucial part of that story: when the people of God were conquered. First the northern tribes are conquered by the Assyrians. Then the southern tribes are conquered by the Babylonians. This is the story of when the lights went out. When everything went black. This is tragedy.

So we begin today with the Northern Kingdom of Israel being conquered by the Assyrians. But the way this story plays out is very similar to the parable that Jesus tells about two sons. You might say that the Northern Kingdom was the bad son. Every single king in the North was labeled an evil king. After all, how could you follow God when the temple of God was in a different kingdom?

But the Southern Kingdom was the good son. There were some bad kings there too—we’ll talk more about that next week. But the South always seemed like the favorite. It was the original kingdom. It had Jerusalem. It had the temple. It had the line of David.

So this morning we’re going to look at two kings. King Hoshea in the North. King Hezekiah in the South. The bad son and the good son. King Hoshea was the last king of the Northern Kingdom. We’ll see his kingdom conquered. King Hezekiah was one of the best kings of Judah. We’re going to see his kingdom saved.

The way the author tells these stories, we are meant to notice the difference between these two kings. Do you know that feeling when you are reading a book or watching a movie and you want someone to win and someone to lose? I think the narrator of this story in the Bible leads us to want Hoshea to lose and cheer for Hezekiah to win. We want the bad son punished and the good son rewarded.

But the story of these two sons will continue next week. And just as in the story that Jesus tells, by the end of this story, we’ll be asking whether the bad son is all that bad and whether the good son is really all that good. Today, though, things are clear. The bad son is judged and the good son is delivered.

My hope is that we are able to find ourselves in each of these sons. Because the truth is that each of us have been the bad son. We’ve all made bad choices and suffered the consequences. I think we can learn something about the

judgment of God. But we also have the potential to be the good son. We can turn to God in times of crisis and doubt. And we can see God show up in amazing ways.

However, as in the story Jesus tells, when we get to the end of this story, I think we'll see that it might not even be about the sons at all.

The bad son is judged

We'll start where the story in 2 Kings starts: by looking at the bad son. This is King Hoshea—not to be confused with the prophet Hosea. Here's the account of him becoming king.

2 Kings 17:1-6:

¹In the twelfth year of Ahaz king of Judah, Hoshea son of Elah became king of Israel in Samaria, and he reigned nine years. ²He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, but not like the kings of Israel who preceded him.

³Shalmaneser king of Assyria came up to attack Hoshea, who had been Shalmaneser's vassal and had paid him tribute. ⁴But the king of Assyria discovered that Hoshea was a traitor, for he had sent envoys to So king of Egypt, and he no longer paid tribute to the king of Assyria, as he had done year by year. Therefore Shalmaneser seized him and put him in prison. ⁵The king of Assyria invaded the entire land, marched against Samaria and laid siege to it for three years. ⁶In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria and deported the Israelites to Assyria. He settled them in Halah, in Gozan on the Habor River and in the towns of the Medes.

Hoshea was a bad king, but not as bad as some. He “did evil in the eyes of the LORD,” but not like the kings before him. This account of his reign is interesting that it is so short. He was, after all, the last king to rule in Samaria. You'd think there might be more drama when the northern tribes of Israel were destroyed by the Assyrians. But there wasn't. It's just, Hoshea was king—he did evil—the king of Assyria put him in prison and carried off all his people. That's it.

There are two ways to explain why the Northern Kingdom was conquered. There are political reasons and there are theological reasons.

Politically, the nation was a mess. Lots of bad kings

means lots of unhappy people. On top of that, Assyria to their east was becoming a world power and devouring nations as they came closer and closer to Israel. Several kings before Hoshea finally had to sell out to Assyria and start paying money to avoid being conquered.

When Hoshea became king, he decided he wanted to stop doing that. He thought Egypt would come help him out. So he didn't write the check. But Egypt didn't come. Instead, angry Assyrians came. They lay siege to the capital city of Samaria, eventually conquered it, put Hoshea in prison, and carried off all of the people into foreign lands.

There are usually earthly explanations for why most things happen. But they aren't the only explanations. Don't forget about God. Ultimately, the Bible reveals that he is behind all these political and economic explanations. At the end of the day, Israel didn't fall for political reasons. It fell for theological reasons. Listen to the reason the Bible gives for why Israel was conquered. Listen to these excerpts.

2 Kings 17:7-8:

⁷All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of Egypt from under the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They worshiped other gods ⁸and followed the practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before them, as well as the practices that the kings of Israel had introduced.

2 Kings 17:13-17:

¹³The LORD warned Israel and Judah through all his prophets and seers: “Turn from your evil ways. Observe my commands and decrees, in accordance with the entire Law that I commanded your fathers to obey and that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets.”

¹⁴But they would not listen and were as stiff-necked as their fathers, who did not trust in the LORD their God. ¹⁵They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their fathers and the warnings he had given them. They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless. They imitated the nations around them although the LORD had ordered them, “Do not do as they do,” and they did the things the LORD had forbidden them to do.

¹⁶They forsook all the commands of the

LORD their God and made for themselves two idols cast in the shape of calves, and an Asherah pole. They bowed down to all the starry hosts, and they worshiped Baal. ¹⁷They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire. They practiced divination and sorcery and sold themselves to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, provoking him to anger.

The Assyrians conquered Israel because Israel had “sinned against the Lord their God.” That’s it. The reason why God judged the bad son is because he had walked away from God. That’s all. Step by step God’s people had walked away from him.

Now, I want you to stop and think about what it meant that God’s people had walked away from him. It wasn’t just a religious problem. They hadn’t just become bad Jews. They had become bad people. Just this week I saw a news article on an Indian woman in the UK who had murdered her son and burned his body because he failed to memorize some portions of the Koran. This woman was tried in court and sentenced to life in jail for the murder. That is a terrible thing.

This is what the Israelites were doing. This was their religious observance. The god they worshipped called Molech demanded the highest possible sacrifice that you could offer in that culture. The most valuable thing you possessed. What was that? Your oldest son. So to please Molech and guarantee good fortune, you would offer your child to a basin in a bronze statue that was filled with fire. Your child would burn to death. Your wives would watch. Your other children would watch. Can you even imagine?

Incidentally, if you enjoy fiction, I just read a book over break called *Gods and Kings* by Lynn Austin. It’s a historical fiction about King Hezekiah who we will look at next. The book opens with an account of Hezekiah watching his older brother being sacrificed to Molech. It’s a terrifying scene. It helped me to realize how real this is. It’s not just a list of sins in 2 Kings. It’s a terrible, unthinkable action that would be prosecuted with life in prison today.

The people in the North hadn’t always been this terrible. They got there step by step. For two hundred years, there had been spiritual decisions that brought these people further and further away from God. It started with making worship more convenient, then by covering all their bases and worshipping other gods, and then other steps. Finally, at the end, they were sacrificing their little boys and forcing their little girls into religious prostitution.

So what does God do when his people start acting like this? He judges them. The prophet Amos says this, “Look,

I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer” (Amos 7:9). 2 Kings 17:18 says, “So the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them from his presence.” God used the Assyrian armies to judge his people.

These are tough words to read. Doesn’t God love his people? Why would a loving God do these things? How could he judge his people so harshly? When we read about God’s judgment, for the most part it frightens us. We don’t like to think about a God that judges. We’d much rather think about God’s love. But when we think that way we forget one important thing. Judgment is part of love. You can’t love if you don’t judge. They go together. Judgment comes from love.

Let’s imagine two of my kids are playing baseball in the backyard. They have a baseball T and are putting whiffle balls on it and swinging away. Now let’s imagine that they decide it’s more fun to hit each other than the ball on the T. I look outside and I see each of them with a plastic baseball bat swinging away, aiming for each other’s heads. If I’m a good parent, if I’m a loving parent what do I do?

I go outside and I take their baseball bats and I say that they can’t play with these anymore today. I gave them something good and they were using it to hurt each other, so I took it away. I judge them and I take away the tools of their evil.

That’s what God did to his people. He gave them a bunch of great things. He gave them a job to do and the resources to do it. But they took their land and their money and they hurt each other with it. They oppressed each other. They sacrificed their kids. So he took those things away. He destroyed the high places. He ruined the sanctuaries. They abused the land he had given, so he said they couldn’t live there anymore. He did all of this through the hands of the Assyrians.

Talking about God’s judgment makes us scared. But I want to suggest to us that we should be far more afraid of God’s apathy than his judgment. We want a God that cares enough to watch what we’re doing and not let us go too far astray. What’s worse is a God that doesn’t care. A God that lets his people do whatever they want to do. A God that is too busy to notice his kids beating each other with baseball bats. Or a God that doesn’t exist at all.

We should be thankful that we have a God who judges. But we also have a God who is patient. He could have wiped out the Northern Kingdom two centuries earlier. Instead, he kept giving them chances. He sent prophets. He called them back. Finally, he steps in and judges them.

Later in the story, God finds an incredible way to combine judgment with mercy. We wouldn't want a God who didn't judge sin—we've already talked about that. But we're also quite fond of mercy. So God decides to turn his judgment on his own son. His only son. His innocent son. God judges Jesus as the perfect way to love us. Judgment and mercy come together to bring us salvation.

But that's getting ahead of ourselves. We've just seen the conclusion of the Northern Kingdom. Israel is conquered not with a bang, but a whimper, as the saying goes. God's people in the North had been walking away from him more and more, so he let them go. He took away their king and sent them away from their land. God judges the bad son.

The good son is delivered

Immediately after the description of why God allowed the Assyrians to conquer the northern kingdom comes the description of the reign of Hezekiah in Judah, the Southern Kingdom. We are meant to notice the contrast. As bad as Hoshea was, Hezekiah was just that good. The description of his reign is one of the longest during this time period. Parts of his story are duplicated in the book of Isaiah. Hezekiah was a hero.

2 Kings 18:1-7:

¹In the third year of Hoshea son of Elah king of Israel, Hezekiah son of Ahaz king of Judah began to reign. ²He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years. His mother's name was Abijah daughter of Zechariah. ³He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father David had done. ⁴He removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. (It was called Nehushtan.)

⁵Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. ⁶He held fast to the LORD and did not cease to follow him; he kept the commands the LORD had given Moses. ⁷And the LORD was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook.

This is a pretty good account of a king. "There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him." I wouldn't mind being described that way. Next week we'll see one more king who is worthy

of similar words of praise: King Josiah. But Hezekiah was one of the best.

So Hezekiah was a great king. Notice how his greatness is described. First, "he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD." That was the foundation. Hezekiah understood that the people of God had to start with being true to God. Nothing he could accomplish politically or economically or through military mattered if the relationship with God wasn't grounded. After saying that he was right with God, the passage goes on to explain that he had success everywhere he went. He defeated the Philistines and stood up to the king of Assyria.

The people in the North hadn't just become bad Jews, they had become bad people. Now, in the South, under Hezekiah's leadership, the people in the South weren't just becoming good Jews, they were becoming good people. When Baal worship is removed, there is justice. When the high places are taken away there is fairness among people. When the Asherah poles are burned down, there is no more sexual exploitation and forced prostitution. When the Philistines are defeated, there is social and economic stability.

Hezekiah did what was right in the eyes of the LORD and because of that, the kingdom of Judah became a better place to live. There was justice and mercy and safety and peace.

But the crowning moment of Hezekiah's kingship and the incident that really contrasts with the downfall of King Hoshea was when the Assyrians attacked Jerusalem. Just like in the North, Hezekiah's father had agreed to pay tribute to the Assyrians. And just like in the North, Hezekiah decided he wanted to stop giving his nation's money away. And just like in the North, the Assyrians weren't happy and attacked Jerusalem.

But the story in the South turns out differently. It's an incredible story. The Assyrians have laid a siege against Jerusalem. The general of the Assyrian army decides that he wants to demoralize the people within the city. He starts yelling to them that Hezekiah can't save them. That their God isn't going to be able to withhold the power of the Assyrian army. Listen to some of this speech.

2 Kings 18:19-25:

¹⁹The field commander said to them, "Tell Hezekiah:

"This is what the great king, the king of Assyria, says: On what are you basing this confidence of yours? ²⁰You say you have strategy

and military strength—but you speak only empty words. On whom are you depending, that you rebel against me? ²¹Look now, you are depending on Egypt, that splintered reed of a staff, which pierces a man’s hand and wounds him if he leans on it! Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who depend on him. ²²And if you say to me, “We are depending on the LORD our God”—isn’t he the one whose high places and altars Hezekiah removed, saying to Judah and Jerusalem, “You must worship before this altar in Jerusalem”?

²³“Come now, make a bargain with my master, the king of Assyria: I will give you two thousand horses—if you can put riders on them! ²⁴How can you repulse one officer of the least of my master’s officials, even though you are depending on Egypt for chariots and horsemen? ²⁵Furthermore, have I come to attack and destroy this place without word from the LORD? The LORD himself told me to march against this country and destroy it.”

This is ancient near east trash talk at its best. Who do you think your God is? Is he any different from any of the other gods that we destroyed? Take your best shot. Your God can’t do anything to save you.

I find this story really powerful because I think it hits home. We live in a pretty “nice” culture that doesn’t really make fun of people too much. I haven’t experienced people mocking my faith in Christ like this. It’s far too direct for our culture. But I think what we experience in our culture is closer to this than we realize.

Last week after one of the football playoff games, there was an interview with Ray Lewis from the Baltimore Ravens. He had just completed his last home game after an incredible career and had returned after a difficult injury. The interviewer was asking how he felt about his accomplishment. And the only thing Ray Lewis wanted to talk about was God. He was grateful to God, he was convinced of God’s plan for his career, and he gave all the glory to God.

But you could tell the interviewer wasn’t interested in that. She wanted him to talk about football and hard work and his teammates, not God. She kept asking questions trying to get him to talk about something else and he just kept talking about God.

These are the types of interactions that we have in our culture. It’s not like the army general of Assyria making fun of our God. It’s more subtle. But in reality, the message

is the same. Our culture tells us that faith in Jesus Christ isn’t wrong, it’s just unimportant. It’s not even worth talking about. If Ray Lewis had said something offensive about the team they had just played or made a racial slur or insulted someone, the interviewer would have been interested in that—because it would matter. But talking about God just doesn’t matter. So you don’t argue with it, you don’t acknowledge it, you just ignore it. You ignore things that don’t matter.

And that’s the challenge that is so prevalent in our culture. Very few people openly mock faith in Christ, but everywhere we get the message that faith in Christ doesn’t matter. Believe if you want, don’t believe if you don’t want—it makes no difference.

And in essence, that is exactly what this Assyrian general was saying in a more explicit way. He said that faith in YHWH isn’t any different than faith in any of the other gods that couldn’t save their people. Believing in YHWH is just like believing in Baal or Molech or Asherah or anyone else. And in the face of the might of Assyria, believing in YHWH doesn’t matter.

When I have doubts, this is what I struggle with. I don’t get hung up on scientific contradictions. I don’t worry about whether God exists. I hardly ever wonder whether Christianity is true. But sometimes I wonder whether it matters. Sometimes I get confused by the message of our culture that faith in Christ isn’t wrong, it’s just unimportant.

That’s why I love the story of Hezekiah. He is shaken by this trash talk. He is worried. So he goes to God. He pours out his heart and he asks God to show up and deliver him. He falls on his knees and he asks God to show these Assyrians that YHWH is different from other Gods. Show the world that YHWH matters.

And God does. Big time.

2 Kings 19:35:

³⁵That night the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning—there were all the dead bodies!

God proves himself. He is real. He is powerful. He is different from other Gods. Belief in him matters. And ultimately, he will not be mocked. Here’s what we learn from Hezekiah’s story: Our God can’t be mocked.

Our God will not be mocked. This isn’t the first time

we've seen this to be the case. We've seen it repeatedly throughout the story we've been telling this year. When Pharaoh refused to release God's people from slavery, God showed up. He proved himself and humiliated the Egyptian gods who couldn't stand against him. When Goliath mocked God, David said, "Who are you to challenge the armies of the living God?" And Goliath was defeated. When the northern tribes mocked the prophets of YHWH and replaced them with prophets of Baal, God judged them and sent them into exile.

And here, a general of the Assyrian army mocks God and loses most of his army. Later on in our story, God will be mocked again. The son of God, who is God become man, will hang on a tree. He will be laughed at. He will be spit upon. They will yell at him, "If you really are the son of God, then save yourself. Come down from that cross." And he won't respond.

I always find that incredible. Sometimes I think I can understand Jesus enduring the pain, but not the humiliation. How could he let himself be mocked?

I think the answer is that he knew it wasn't true. I'm a pretty sensitive guy. There are lots of things that you could say to me that would hurt my feelings. But imagine you come up to me after this service and say "Paul, you are so short. You're a shorty-shorty short. You're so short!" You wouldn't hurt my feelings. Because it's just not true. I've got plenty of insecurities. But I'm not insecure about being short because I know it isn't true.

That's how Jesus endured being mocked. He knew it wasn't true. Even though it seemed like it might be true. That's called faith. That's what I need more of. That's what we need more of. We need to know that our God can't be mocked. Then it won't bother us when the people around us tell us that faith in Christ doesn't matter. Because we'll be convinced that it does.

God humiliated Pharaoh and saved his people from Egypt. David defeated Goliath. The northern tribes were judged for walking away from God. The Assyrian army at Jerusalem's door was wiped out. And Jesus rose from the dead. Our God is different. He is real. He is powerful. Following him matters.

Conclusion

These two nations have played out the story of two sons.

Hoshea watches the Northern Kingdom get destroyed. The bad son is judged. Hezekiah prays to God and is saved from destruction. The good son is delivered. We'll see this story continue next week and we'll find out something surprising about the so-called good son.

But really, this story isn't about these two sons at all. We are meant to contrast them: to see how different they are. But underneath all that, we are meant to see the same God treating each of them the same way: with love.

God judges Hoshea and removes them from the land because they are hurting each other and need a time-out. God judges because of love. God delivers Hezekiah and destroys his enemy because his people have turned back to him. God saves because of love.

We started off thinking about the story Jesus told about two sons. But that story isn't really about the sons either. It's really about the father. One father who loves both sons equally. That's what this story is about. It's a difficult story, but behind it is a God who loves his people. That's why he judges. That's why he saves.

But what about when God doesn't judge? What about when people get away with stuff? And what about when he doesn't save? What about when terrible things happen to people who cry out to God asking for deliverance?

This is where the *EPIC* comes in. Our lives are lived as part of a larger picture. We can't see how everything connects. God was merciful for many years before he judged. And God allowed some really hard things to happen before he saved. We don't have the perspective to see it all. But the story helps us to know what is happening in the big picture when we are trapped by the limited perspective of our individual lives.

So even when we don't see it, we can know that we worship a God who judges and a God who saves. We worship a God that is strong. A God that is powerful. A God that steps in. We worship a God who loves us: good and bad sons alike.