



A NATION BANISHED: JERUSALEM IS TAKEN

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2 Kings 21-25
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How many people have watched TV, looked at the internet, or read a newspaper this week? How many people have seen something about Lance Armstrong? (Many hands raised.)

Lance Armstrong is all over the news this week. After winning a record number of Tour de France cycling races, this week he confessed to using performance enhancing drugs throughout his career. I think I may have seen more about this story in the past week than I saw about the election during the week of the Presidential election.

Why is this such a big story for us? I think it's because we are fascinated when a hero is disgraced. Lance Armstrong was a hero in so many ways. He won a record number of cycling races. He came back after beating cancer. He inspired thousands. But then he was accused of cheating. He was convicted of cheating. And this week, he admitted to cheating. For years, he was a golden boy. Then, all of a sudden, he was a villain.

Have you ever had someone you look up to disappoint you? Someone that you thought was untouchable do something that you just couldn't believe? This week we're going to be looking at an event like that in the history of Israel. We're going to see the failure of something that people thought could never ever fail.

Last week we began the story of two sons. The good son and the bad son. The bad son was the northern kingdom of Israel. They had strayed from the right path. Every king in the North was evil. Last week we saw the bad son judged by God.

The good son was the southern kingdom. In reality, the southern kingdom had a mix of good and bad kings, but I'm still calling them the good son because they were the original nation. They had the line of David. They had the temple. Last week we looked at King Hezekiah, one of the best kings that Israel ever had. He was saved through a miracle after pouring his heart out to God. The good son was delivered.

Last week was an inspirational story of deliverance. This week is a disappointment. This week, our hero falls. The good son ends up being not so good after all.

As most of you know, we are in the midst of a church

wide effort at PBC called *EPIC: The Astonishing Story of God and the World*. We've been tracing the biblical story from its beginning in creation to its conclusion in the new creation over the course of nine months. We've divided the story up into ten eras to help us keep track of where we are and this morning we find ourselves in the third week of the era that we've called *A Nation Banished*.

This is the story of the decline of God's people—the nation of Jews. The first week we saw how the kingdom gradually got worse and worse. Last week we saw the Assyrians come against the northern kingdom and conquer its capital: Samaria. Last week we also saw the Assyrians attack Jerusalem, but God saved them miraculously. This week Jerusalem is taken.

This comes as a surprise as we follow the story. What happened last week made sense: the northern kingdom should be judged. They should be conquered by a foreign power. They walked away from the line of David, from Jerusalem, from the temple. But this morning is shocking. This morning the unthinkable happens. Foreign armies invade the temple of the living God—the physical place on earth that symbolizes the infinite power of the creator of the universe—and they destroy it.

This morning everything goes dark. The hero will fall. And when a hero disappoints us, we have two choices. We can give up on heroes or we can look for one that won't disappoint. We can give up or we can look for a real hero.

The disappointment of Lance Armstrong will make a lot of people bitter and jaded. They will give up on heroes. When Jerusalem fell, a lot of people gave up on God. But others will look for a new kind of hero. A hero that won't disappoint.

This morning we will see the kind of hero that we really need. The failures, disappointment, and judgment of the holy city of Jerusalem will show us that God will stop at nothing to move toward his solution to the problems of the world. And we will learn about the king that God will send who will finally be a hero that doesn't disappoint.

Good kings don't last

Our story last week ended with King Hezekiah in the

southern kingdom. He was a young boy when he became king. He followed YHWH (Yahweh). He rehabilitated the temple, and he brought back the Passover feast to the Jews. He was a great king and he did a lot to bring the nation back to God.

But here's the biggest problem with a great king. He dies. And someone else becomes king in his place. In the case of Hezekiah, that was his son, Manasseh. King Hezekiah was one of Israel's best kings. Let's find out what kind of king his son was.

2 Kings 21:1-6:

¹Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-five years. His mother's name was Hephzibah. ²He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. ³He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he also erected altars to Baal and made an Asherah pole, as Ahab king of Israel had done. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshiped them. ⁴He built altars in the temple of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, "In Jerusalem I will put my Name." ⁵In both courts of the temple of the LORD, he built altars to all the starry hosts. ⁶He sacrificed his own son in the fire, practiced sorcery and divination, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the LORD, provoking him to anger.

Hezekiah worked really hard to clean things up for the people of Judah. His father was a terrible king, so he had a lot of work to do. But he did an incredible job and brought God back to the Jewish people. But eventually Hezekiah dies and his son Manasseh becomes king. And what happens? Everything that Hezekiah worked for—all the stuff he cleaned up—his son Manasseh brings back. If we read the account of Manasseh in 2 Chronicles, we learn that he eventually repented, but the damage had been done.

I think most of us know this feeling. I know I do. I'm most familiar with it in my kitchen. After dinner, there are dishes and pots and pans and plates. So you spend all this time cleaning up the kitchen. Plates in the dishwasher, wash the dishes in the sink, wipe down all the countertops. When you're done, it's a great feeling. The kitchen is clean. What was once a mess has now been put right.

The problem is that you have to eat again tomorrow. And all your hard work from cleaning the kitchen is gone. Plates are dirty once more, pots are full of food and mess

is everywhere.

Hezekiah was a great king. But great kings only last as long as great kings last. Someone comes after them. And no matter how hard you try, you can't be sure that the next generation is going to follow in your footsteps.

Throughout this EPIC series, we've seen lots of solutions that God has used to solve the problem that affects his creation. In Noah, God tried to start over and that didn't work. People still turned against God. With Moses, God led his people out slavery into freedom. That didn't work—people still turned against God. With Joshua, God gave his people rich, fruitful land. That didn't work—people still turned against God. With Samuel, God gave his people a wise judge to lead them. That didn't work—people still turned against God. With David, God gave his people a great king. That didn't work—even the king disobeyed God.

It's as if God is showing us all the ways that won't work for his creation to be restored to what it was meant to be. The solution that he eventually comes up with is pretty drastic. It's almost like he can't start with it. He has to show people over the course of many centuries that any other way won't work. There really is only one way to fix the problem of the world.

What we learn as we watch the kings in Jerusalem is that one great king won't do the trick. Because no great king lasts longer than his life. What the world needs, what God's people need, is not a great king, but an eternal king. That's what we learn from the transition between Hezekiah and Manasseh. A great king isn't enough because he doesn't last. The only way this world will be guaranteed peace and justice is when a good king sits on the throne forever. We need an eternal king.

This realization helps us to rethink what we spend our energy on. Kings are mortal. They are temporary. They don't last. When we see that, we are invited to look for something that does last in our own lives. We are invited to focus on the eternal. Focus on the eternal.

We spend a great deal of energy working toward goals that may be reversed by the next person that comes around. We fix up our houses. We take vacations. We buy cars and televisions and clothes and gifts. We have the great advantage of living in a world where we can make a lot of things better.

Our lives can become great. We can live in great homes and have a great marriage and a great family and a great job and a great church. But Manasseh reminds us that we need more than that. We need an eternal home and an eternal marriage and an eternal family and an eternal

job and an eternal church. What's the point of working so hard for something that is just going to pass away. Great kings can't ensure peace. Only eternal kings can do that.

As parents, we sometimes think that if we work hard enough, we can guarantee that our children will make good decisions in life. And of course, we are the ones who define what good decisions are. This can make parenting really stressful. I can't control the next generation. I can't determine how my children end up. If that's my goal, I'm setting myself up for a life of failure. That's not to say that I can't affect my children's lives. I can and I should. But ultimately, my focus has to be on something higher than the outcome of my children's lives.

Honestly, I worry sometimes that a lot of what we talk about in church is just focused on becoming a great king. We read the Bible and learn how to fix our marriages, how to find personal peace in life, how to be content in our jobs and how to develop a community of friends. These are all great things, but they are only great if we bring God into the picture.

When we give sermons, we usually try to be relevant. That's a word that preachers aim for a lot: relevance. But a lot of the time, focusing on God draws us away from the things that we can consider relevant. Our goal here this morning is to worship. To see God and to honor him. It's not all about our stuff here and now. It's about something bigger. It's about God. It's about the eternal.

One of our goals during this *EPIC* series has been for us to see our lives in light of this grand story. There is a bigger story that we are a part of. In this world, one king might pass his reign to another. But we believe in a world where there is an eternal kingdom. This is why the prophet Daniel encounters an ancient and forever king that he refers to as the "Ancient of Days." In Daniel 7:14 Daniel describes his rule as "an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."

We need an eternal king. We have an eternal king. But it's not Manasseh. Because he is such an evil king, God says that he has had enough. Through the prophet, God says this in Micah 3:11b-12, "they lean upon the LORD and say, 'Is not the LORD among us? No disaster will come upon us.'" Therefore because of you, Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets."

Jerusalem is going to be judged. God is tired of the cycle of good kings and bad kings. The unthinkable is about to happen. The holy city of Jerusalem, God's own dwelling place will become a heap of rubble. Not even Jerusalem is exempt from judgment.

The best king isn't good enough

But something else happens before that judgment happens. Manasseh's son only reigns two years, so we kind of skip over him. But then Manasseh's grandson, Josiah becomes king. Manasseh brought back the mess that his father cleaned up. Then Josiah becomes king and he cleans up the mess once again. Listen to what kind of king Josiah was.

2 Kings 22:1-2:

¹Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem thirty-one years. His mother's name was Jedidah daughter of Adaiah; she was from Bozkath. ²He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD and walked in all the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left.

So Josiah was another good king. He did what was right and he walked in the ways of his father David. But Josiah actually wasn't just any old good king. Just like his grandfather, Josiah threw a huge party for Passover. In fact, it was even bigger than the one that Hezekiah planned. It is described as the most incredible celebration of Passover that was ever celebrated in Israel. And Josiah himself is described as the best king that Israel ever had. I was surprised when I first read that. I always thought that David was the best king of Israel. But listen to how Josiah is described.

2 Kings 23:24-25:

²⁴Furthermore, Josiah got rid of the mediums and spiritists, the household gods, the idols and all the other detestable things seen in Judah and Jerusalem. This he did to fulfill the requirements of the law written in the book that Hilkiah the priest had discovered in the temple of the LORD. ²⁵Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses.

"Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did." That's an incredible thing to say. Josiah was the most faithful king of God's people who ever lived. God said something similar about Hezekiah, but this is just a bit stronger. Josiah was better than David. He was better than Hezekiah. Josiah was the best.

Josiah is as good as it gets. He's the best king you could possibly have. He did everything right. He was the perfect

hero. He was the perfect model. He was the best king. He didn't turn out to be a fraud. He didn't disappoint. But here's the thing. It still isn't enough. It still isn't enough to save Jerusalem, to save Judah from judgment.

2 Kings 23:26-27:

²⁶Nevertheless, the LORD did not turn away from the heat of his fierce anger, which burned against Judah because of all that Manasseh had done to provoke him to anger. ²⁷So the LORD said, "I will remove Judah also from my presence as I removed Israel, and I will reject Jerusalem, the city I chose, and this temple, about which I said, "There shall my Name be.""

Josiah was pretty much the perfect human king, but it wasn't enough. God had already told Manasseh that because of his evil deeds, Jerusalem would be judged. And even though Josiah fixed everything, it couldn't change the judgment that God had already pronounced.

So if Manasseh tells us that we need more than an earthly king because we need a kingdom that will last, Josiah tells us that we need more than what even the best king can bring us. We need something that is better than the best man has to offer.

When we realize that we need an eternal king, we are drawn to focus on the eternal. When we realize that we need a perfect king, something else happens. If the best that a human can offer isn't enough, then we are in trouble. We need mercy. We need grace. If our best isn't good enough, then our only hope is for mercy. So we look at God and receive the mercy he offers. Receive mercy.

Mercy can be humbling. If you're like me, you don't want to receive mercy. You want to work hard and receive what you deserve. We like to work hard because we like to be in control. I want to control what I get. I want to control how things go. When you receive mercy, you're no longer in control.

This whole mercy thing takes a while to really settle in for us. Every day our experience is based on our performance. Our education, our jobs, and sadly many of our relationships are based on how well we do. There are not a lot of places in this world that offer real mercy.

Last week I compared this story to the parable of the *Prodigal Son* that Jesus tells. In that story, it's the younger son that runs away and squanders his father's money. But he returns and asks for mercy. It's the older son—the good son—who at the end of the story seems unable to understand the mercy shown his brother. He is the real tragedy of the story. The Father can receive a wayward son

who repents. But what can a merciful God do if his son refuses to accept mercy. That's where the good son finds himself.

We have a lot of good sons in this community. I know that I resonate more with the good son than the bad son. Many people in this room are successful. You've worked hard. You try to obey God and you value faithfulness. But sometimes when we try so hard, we get to a place where we find it hard to receive mercy. We think that because we're trying as hard as we can, what more could God ask of us? Surely our best is good enough.

Yet we can try as hard as we can and still require mercy. Our relationship with God is not about performance. It's not about effort. Our relationship with God is about mercy shown to us because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. Can you let yourself receive mercy? Or is it all about how hard you're trying?

I wonder how Josiah felt when he found out that God was still going to destroy Jerusalem. It must have been a disappointment. He had worked hard to restore Jerusalem back into a place was focused on Yahweh. It must have been hard to know that God was going to allow it to be destroyed.

But in a strange way, the judgment on Jerusalem helped Josiah to learn about mercy. If God had been completely impressed with Josiah, he might have just thought that he really was amazing. He was so great that he made things OK again. But that would be a very Josiah centered solution. He was an incredible king, but God's people don't need an incredible king. They need a perfect king who shows mercy. They need a God centered solution. Receiving mercy opens us up to God.

Manasseh reminds us that we need an eternal king. Josiah reminds us that we need a perfect king.

Judgment but hope

And now we finally get to the last part of our story. Even the southern kingdom of Judah can't be good enough. Their good kings don't last and their bad kings are too bad. Last week we saw the bad brother judged and the good brother delivered. Now we see the unthinkable. Now we see the hero being exposed and judged. If people couldn't believe it when Lance Armstrong was disgraced, this is a hundred times more unbelievable. The temple of YHWH is destroyed.

2 Kings 25:1-7:

¹So in the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign, on the

tenth day of the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army. He encamped outside the city and built siege works all around it. ²The city was kept under siege until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. ³By the ninth day of the fourth month the famine in the city had become so severe that there was no food for the people to eat. ⁴Then the city wall was broken through, and the whole army fled at night through the gate between the two walls near the king's garden, though the Babylonians were surrounding the city. They fled toward the Arabah, ⁵but the Babylonian army pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho. All his soldiers were separated from him and scattered, ⁶and he was captured. He was taken to the king of Babylon at Riblah, where sentence was pronounced on him. ⁷They killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes. Then they put out his eyes, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon.

This is the last and final invasion of Jerusalem. There had already been two different times in the several years before this when the Israelites had been deported to Babylon. But Jerusalem had been left standing as a vassal state to Babylon. But this was the last straw. Zedekiah tried to stand against Babylon and they had had enough. Nebuchadnezzar's army lay siege to and eventually destroyed the city. Jerusalem had fallen.

I just don't think we can really understand how this feels. Few of us have ever lived in a country that has been conquered by enemy forces. Even less has that country been regarded with such significance as being the holy and chosen people of God Most High. The closest thing most of us come to this feeling is when our favorite sports team loses. If you look at the emotions of a losing team in a really important sports match, people can be filled with surprise, disappointment, and even despair.

It's kind of unfair to compare losing a game to the destruction of the temple of YHWH, but it starts to move us into the direction of what had just happened. Jerusalem was destroyed. The temple of God Almighty was sacked and plundered. How could this happen? It makes sense that the northern kingdom should fall. But how could God let Jerusalem fall into the hands of her enemies?

That's what Jeremiah, the author of Lamentations asks.

Lamentations 2:15-17:

¹⁵All who pass your way
clap their hands at you;

they scoff and shake their heads
at the Daughter of Jerusalem:
"Is this the city that was called
the perfection of beauty,
the joy of the whole earth?"

¹⁶All your enemies open their mouths
wide against you;
they scoff and gnash their teeth
and say, "We have swallowed her up.
This is the day we have waited for;
we have lived to see it."

¹⁷The LORD has done what he planned;
he has fulfilled his word,
which he decreed long ago.
He has overthrown you without pity,
he has let the enemy gloat over you,
he has exalted the horn of your foes.

This is a dark day for Jerusalem. It makes us ask God why he allows such dark days to occur. And the truth is that there are no good answers to that question. There are right answers. There are logical answers. There are theological answers that make sense of disaster in light of God's character and the nature of sin. There are answers that work in the classroom.

But there aren't really answers that work as you're being led away from the holy city as it burns to the ground. There aren't really answers that work as you lose your job or deal with cancer or attend your child's funeral. There aren't really answers that work to address the deepest hurt that we feel in this world.

But I'm convinced that when things like this happen, we don't need answers. When we realize that our life isn't going to look like we thought it was. When we realize that we will live with a certain hurt the rest of our lives. When we realize that even Jerusalem can fall and that could happen to us. We don't need answers. We need the God of the universe. God is not an answer. He is a person.

Jeremiah understood this better than almost anyone. Here are a few verses after his shock that Jerusalem could be destroyed.

Lamentations 3:20-24:

²⁰I well remember them,
and my soul is downcast within me.

²¹Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:

²²Because of the LORD's great love we are
not consumed,

for his compassions never fail.

**²³They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.**

**²⁴I say to myself, “The LORD is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him.”**

In the midst of this disaster, Jeremiah realizes that the only thing he has left is God. That’s all there is. That’s his only hope. So his conclusion is to wait for God.

As we learn about the city of God burning to the ground, that is all that we are left with too. Our epic story hands in the air. What will happen now that Jerusalem has burned? We know God is doing something. We just don’t know what. So we wait for God.

In the midst of pain, we have the opportunity to encounter God in a deep and intimate way. I’ll be honest. I wish this wasn’t the case. I wish that I could have the most intimate times with God when everything was perfect. I wish that I didn’t have to go through hard stuff in order to encounter God. And it’s not that this is the only time God shows up. But it is often some of the most powerful times.

And if knowing God really is the most important thing, then isn’t it worth it? What good is a city and a building and a temple if you don’t know the God who gave them? What good is being in a happy mood if you’re far away from the eternal God? What good are good things if they keep you away from the best thing?

And so God lets Jerusalem fall. He lets the temple be destroyed. He lets the enemies of God gloat over the smoking remains of the city. And as the faithful people of God are led away from the city, they wait for the morning that is to come. They wait for God.

Conclusion

This past week we saw a hero fall. Lance Armstrong finally admitted his guilt that he cheated to win a cycling race. But in the grand scheme of things, that’s a bike race. Perhaps it isn’t as important as we are making it out to be.

This morning we have seen a true hero fall. The original people of God. The throne of David. The temple of God. Jerusalem is taken.

The cycle of good and bad kings has taught us that we need an eternal king. The incredible king that wasn’t good enough has taught us that we need a perfect king. And the

sadness of Jerusalem falling has urged us to wait for God. All throughout this morning our focus has been drawn upward toward God in response to these events.

But there’s one more passage I want to end with. It’s right at the end of 2 Kings and it’s an odd way to end the book.

2 Kings 25:27-30:

²⁷In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin king of Judah, in the year Evil-Merodach became king of Babylon, he released Jehoiachin from prison on the twenty-seventh day of the twelfth month. ²⁸He spoke kindly to him and gave him a seat of honor higher than those of the other kings who were with him in Babylon. ²⁹So Jehoiachin put aside his prison clothes and for the rest of his life ate regularly at the king’s table. ³⁰Day by day the king gave Jehoiachin a regular allowance as long as he lived.

Jehoiachin was the first king to be deported to Babylon, before Zedekiah became king. After hearing about the terrible destruction of the city of Jerusalem, we find out that thirty years later, Jehoiachin gets out of prison and gets to eat well from then on. We might respond with, “Well, that’s great—good for him.”

But this little post-script means something more. It means that all is not lost. That even in the darkest times, there is something else about to happen. The darkness won’t last forever. This little story means that even when Jerusalem has been destroyed, there is hope. There is always hope.

All throughout the story our eyes have been drawn up toward God. And now at the end of the story our eyes are drawn forward. We are given a new vision of God and we are given some hope for the future. Even when the unthinkable happens, there is still hope for God’s people. God’s mercies are new every morning and the night won’t last forever.