

1. Week 15: The Decline of the Kingdom

2. Recap & Preparing for CG:

Daily Reading for Week:

- 1 Kings 11-13, Psalm 97
- 1 Kings 14-16, Psalm 98
- 1 Kings 17-19, Psalm 99
- 1 Kings 20-22, Psalm 100
- 2 Kings 1-3, Psalm 101
- 2 Kings 4-7, Psalm 102
- 2 Kings 8-11, Psalm 103

Resources for Week:

- Read: 1 Kings 11-12; 16:29-18:2; 18:16-45

3. Focus of time together:

To study a few key chapters in Israel's downfall in order to: 1) Understand the narrative significance of its decline and 2) Begin considering the crucial role of the prophets in Israel's story.

Note: This week's material intentionally has lots of questions in order to help us dive into both of these crucial topics before moving on in the story. So plan your time accordingly.

4. Weekly ground rule / goal / value:

Ground rule: please remember to be slow to speak and eager to listen to one another.

5. Connection and Unity Exercise (Mutual Invitation, 15 minutes):

Share the group a favorite podcast or something else you enjoy listening to.

6. Opening Prayer:

Read Psalm 75 aloud as a prayer.

7. Intro to Discussion:

This week, we take an even deeper dive into Israel's troubled history. The 400 years or so between first entering the Promised Land and the good reign of King David was ugly and disturbing. If you recall, the book of Judges ended with the horribly grotesque stories of a fatal gang rape and a bloody call to civil war, followed by the premeditated kidnapping of 400 young women. The book concluded with the line, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit." (Judges 21:25). The project of living as a free and holy nation that serves as a light of justice and righteousness to the rest of the world hadn't panned out well so far. Overall, Israel had failed its God-given vocation. The conclusion to Judges begged the question, "Will things turn around if Israel can just have kings to lead them?"

Samuel's warning that we discussed last week foreshadowed a sad answer to that question. So as we read about the "Golden Age" of prosperity and faithfulness under David and Solomon, we were rightly a bit reluctant and suspicious. Specifically, last week we left off with the celebratory lines of 1 Kings 10 describing the height of Solomon's splendor. In the very next verse, though, we see a tragic conjunction: The word "however." "King Solomon, *however*, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter - Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites" (1 Kings 11:1). After about 400 years of slavery and then about 400 years as a troubled theocratic nation, Israel experienced a few short decades of the kind of blessing promised long ago to Abraham. But then the forewarned downward spiral begins. Solomon turns away to worship other gods and the nation begins to crumble as a consequence. From this point on, the rest of 1 and 2 Kings describes Israel's continued sin and failure for hundreds of years, with just a few brief eras of partial faithfulness. Since the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12, there are a total of 30 chapters of Scripture (2 Samuel 5 - 1 Kings 10) given to chronicling Israel's period of faithfulness and the resulting blessing. The rest is a long, repetitious story of waywardness, evil, and systemic injustice.

The questions that the book of Kings ask us to chew on as we continue reading are: How long will the Lord withhold His anger and punishment from Israel? Will He be patient with them forever, or might He eventually revoke His covenant and start the project over with another people?

It was the role of Israel's many prophets to help steer the people and their leaders to return to faithfulness to God and obedience to the Sinai covenant. The nation's often violent response toward these prophets is just one further step in their decline. Not only had they gone astray, but they persecuted those God sent to rescue them. As generations of faithless kings and courageous prophets passed and the same stubborn idolatry and injustice persisted, those scary questions about exhausting God's patience grew even more important. Eventually, as Israel and Judah further unraveled, prophets like Isaiah were sent to warn them of an impending judgment. Next week, we'll see where the spiral leads God's people. But this week, try to wrap your mind and heart around the sudden fall from prosperity, the nature of Israel's stubbornness, and the narrative tension building throughout 1 and 2 Kings.

8. Questions for Large Group Discussion:

Part 1: Read 1 Kings 11 and 12:1-24

Questions for Basic Understanding:

These questions are to help us interpret and understand the text as it was intended to be interpreted and understood.

1. What is happening here?
2. Why, according to the author(s) of the book of Kings, did the kingdom of Israel split in two?
3. What significance does this split have in the story of God's intention to bless the world through Israel?

Questions for Listening to Scripture:

These questions are to help us be affected by Scripture in the way it was intended to affect us.

1. Does it surprise you to see how short Israel's "Golden Age" of prosperity is? How quickly, within one generation, they go from "Golden Age" to a civil war that divides the kingdom in two?
2. Zooming out and considering the 1,000+ years that have passed since God first promised His blessing to Abraham (and putting yourself in the shoes of an Israelite), how tragic would these events have felt and why?

Part 2: Read 1 Kings 16:29-18:2

Questions for Basic Understanding:

These questions are to help us interpret and understand the text as it was intended to be interpreted and understood.

What is Elijah's role and purpose as a prophet in confronting King Ahab and the prophets of Baal? In other words, what did God send him to accomplish?

Questions for Listening to Scripture:

These questions are to help us be affected by Scripture in the way it was intended to affect us.

1. How does the story of God sending Elijah to the Widow of Zarephath, a foreigner in the neighboring nation of Sidon, shed light on God's ultimate redemptive plan for the world?
2. How do you think an Israelite would have responded to this man Elijah who claimed to be sent by Yahweh, Israel's God, and yet was blessing foreigners and condemning Israel and its leaders?

Questions for Interacting with Scripture:

These questions are to help us slow down to taste and notice Scripture, savor its richness, and meditate on its complexity of meaning.

1. Read Luke 4:16-30 and consider why Jesus referenced these two stories from 1 and 2 Kings, comparing himself to Elijah (and Elijah's disciple Elisha) in this way.
2. How was Jesus' ministry similar to that of Elijah's?
3. How was Israel's response to Jesus similar to their response to Elijah nearly a millennium earlier?

9. Questions for Small Group Discussion (20 minutes):**Questions for Self-Examination:**

These questions are to help us look at ourselves, be aware and honest about who we are in light of our interaction with Scripture, and consider any appropriate action.

1. Where do you find yourself in the many stories covered tonight? Which character or experience do you identify with? (For example: Do you feel like King Ahab, having your sin called out and confronted? Or do you feel like the widow who has seen God work unexpected miracles in her life and now trusts in Yahweh?)

2. What is it about your life at this moment that leads you to identify with this character or experience?

10. Closing:

Pray for a few minutes together, sharing whatever thoughts, feelings, or calls-to-action this time has stirred up in you. Listen silently for any directions or invitations that the Holy Spirit might have for you or for someone else in your small group.