

July 8

2 Kings 17

Today as we read 2 Kings 17 we come to the super sad ending of the northern kingdom.

In summary, Israel, who was ruled by Hoshea, was attacked by Shalmaneser, king of Assyria and became a vassal kingdom...in other words, a kingdom subordinate to Assyria. Hoshea, instead of being loyal to Assyria decided to go to Egypt for help. This clearly upset Shalmaneser and so he ordered that Hoshea be put in prison and for Samaria to be under siege.

Do you know what this looks like? An army surrounds a city. They choke off all of the trade. No more raw materials, no more weapons, no more finances, no more visits from relatives and most important - no more food. 3 years of almost-starvation makes you weak and crazy. After 3 years, Samaria was easily captured and Israelites were then exiled to various locations all over Assyrian Empire. Just like that, and the northern kingdom had ended.

So why did all this happen again? There was a paragraph in the middle of chapter 17:21 that said it all. "When he tore Israel away from the house of David, they made Jeroboam son of Nebat their king. Jeroboam enticed Israel away from following the Lord and caused them to commit a great sin. The Israelites persisted in all the sins of Jeroboam and did not turn away from them until the Lord removed them from his presence, as he had warned through all his servants the prophets. So the people of Israel were taken from their homeland into exile in Assyria, and they are still there."

Remember, it has been nearly 200 years of rebellion. 19 kings. Lots of chances. Multiple prophets, dynamic miracles. No results. They still followed false religions.

The specific sins recounted were the worship of other gods and the practices which were associated with those religions -- the worship of the calves Jeroboam set up, the practice of burning their own kids alive as a tribute to foreign Gods. Divination and sexual immorality. Cult prostitution and self-cutting. You name it, they did it. For all of these sins the anger of the Lord burned against a nation that would not listen and would not repent of their evil.

As for the Assyrians, they were the first nation to deport whole populations from one conquered nation to an entirely different part of the empire to repopulate another land which had been similarly decimated. The people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim who were settled in the land of Israel became known as Samaritans. Their syncretistic practices, mixing the pagan religions of their homelands with the religions of Israel became a huge stumbling block between them and the Jews who later returned to Judah from the 70 year captivity in Babylon. The Samaritans and Jews came to hate each other passionately and continued to do so through the New Testament period up to the final destruction of Judah by the Romans.

Interestingly, Jesus came to turn this all around. Do you remember the story of the 'good Samaritan?' In this story in Luke 10, Jesus makes a hero out of the outcast. The religious dudes won't help a man beaten bloody by the side of the road. But the half-breed idol-worshipper from the North would. A shocking story for his companions.

Or, did you notice the short phrase in John 4 - Jesus HAD to go through Samaria. Why? Because he had a divine appointment with a Samaritan woman - wrong gender, wrong race, wrong religion, and an outcast to boot. But Jesus HAD to meet her. And they spent three days together and Jesus brought a bunch of these half-breed idol worshippers into his spiritual family. What does that say about Jesus heart?

Or how about Acts 1:8, where Jesus tells people to take the Gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, SAMARIA and even to the ends of the earth. He is telling his disciples. "Don't avoid the hard places. Don't be racists. Don't avoid syncretists. The good news is good news for everybody. So before you take it to the ends of the earth, take it to the people next door."

Question for you today: Is there someone next door whom you have been avoiding to tell the gospel because they are too immoral? They are of a different race? They have a strange religious practice? They are modern day Samaritans? Jesus heart would be for you to reach out to them. Build a relationship. Love them. Tell them the best news ever.

That is the challenge in your backyard, but as for the Bible Story...Israel fell, but for a time Judah remained. The writers of both 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles devote a considerable amount of space to the reign of good king Hezekiah of Judah. Following his wicked father Ahaz, we might not have expected a good king, but Hezekiah "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord just as his father David had done."

In the next few days, watch for the dramatic contrast between Ahaz and Hezekiah. God has some instruction for you there!