

Dr. John Oswalt, Kings, Session 13

1 Kings 16

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We're continuing our study of the books of Kings.

Let's begin with prayer.

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for your presence with us in all things. We thank you that you are present with us in difficulties. We thank you for being present with us in joy. We thank you in particular for being present with us in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Thank you that you have made it possible through your cross that you might take up residence in us. Thank you that all of this is made clear to us through your word. And we pray that once again you will inspire us, inspire me, the teacher, inspire all those who listen and participate.

Grant, Father, that because we spend this time together, we are better enabled to live for you and through you and in you. Thank you. In your name, we pray. Amen.

Today, we're looking at 1 Kings chapters 15 and 16. We're continuing to cover the intervening period between Solomon's death, about 930 BC, and Ahab's crowning, about 874 BC.

So, something like 55 years is covered in these chapters 13, 14, 15, and 16. During this time, Asa was the king of Judah primarily. There had been Rehoboam and also his son Abijah.

But that was a relatively short time. For most of the period, Asa was king of Judah. During his 41-year reign, Asa was able to establish the kingdom of Judah on a solid footing.

During that same period of time, Israel, the northern kingdom, went through the rise and fall of four different dynasties. Four different ruling families. One after another, they were killed and replaced by another dynasty.

Finally, with the fourth dynasty inaugurated by Omri, dating from about 885 to 874, some order and stability seems to have been brought to the northern kingdom. In chapter 17 the story of Elijah slash Elisha begins. Now I do that on purpose.

I don't say Elijah and Elisha, but Elijah/Elisha. Because, really, it's one prophetic ministry that has been around for 85 years, but it's in two different voices.

The voice of Elijah and the voice of Elisha. But it's basically one prophetic ministry. It extends from 1st Kings 17 all the way to 2nd Kings 13.

And that period of time is what we're leading up to in our studies today. Two things are said about King Basha in chapter 15, verse 24. I'm sorry, 34.

He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and he walked in the way of Jeroboam, and in his sin, he made Israel sin. That's 15:34-Two things.

He did evil in the sight of the Lord, and he walked in the way of Jeroboam and in his sin, which he made Israel to sin. Now, notice, is there a difference between those two statements? Is there a difference between saying he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and he walked in the way of Jeroboam and in his sin, which he made Israel sin? Well, I think they're really synonymous. They're really saying two similar things and approaching the issue from two sides.

On the one hand, what Jeroboam had done primarily to make golden bulls and put them in Bethel in the south and Dan in the north, that is, to commit idolatry, was certainly evil in the sight of the Lord and by the same token to alter the sacred calendar, pushing the festivals back a month, inaugurating priests who were not of the line of Aaron. Surely those things were evil in the sight of the Lord. But I think we're saying two things.

Why are these things that Jeroboam did wrong? They're wrong because the Lord says they're wrong. This is the fundamental issue in the Bible. God, the ruler of the universe, has the right to say, this is right, this is good, that is wrong, that is evil.

Now, what's right and wrong? What's good and evil? Right is whatever conforms to God's creation purposes, the way he made the world. Wrong is what does not conform to his creation purposes, to the way he made the world. So that the issue is not, is there some eternal standard of right and wrong to which God conforms? No.

No. Right and wrong conform to Yahweh. So, what Jeroboam did was evil because it was evil in the sight of Yahweh.

And we can take that into account in our own lives. The question is not just, am I doing right or am I doing wrong? The question is, am I pleasing Yahweh? Am I doing what my creator made me to do? Am I living according to his standards, which he built into the nature of reality? So yes, Jeroboam did wrong in making idols, but they were wrong because they were evil in the sight of Yahweh. So the issue is not, I say again, am I a good man? Am I doing the right thing? No, the question is, am I pleasing my savior? Am I pleasing my creator? Am I functioning according to the way he wants me to function? So, underneath all of morality is relationship.

So often, in our society, we have tried to separate those. We've tried to say, well, there's right and there's wrong. But notice what has happened among us.

Right and wrong are continually being eroded. Well, you say it's right. I don't think that's right.

You say that's wrong. I don't think that's wrong. Who can say what's right and wrong? Nobody.

Why? Because we have lost the relationship with our creator. He determines what's right and wrong, not you and me. So that statement, we've seen it already in the life of Nadab, Jeroboam's son, and we're going to see it now with every succeeding king of Israel.

18 of them. Every one of them is going to be said. They did evil in the sight of the Lord.

And they walked in the way of Jeroboam. Oh, my. I've said this before, but I want to say it again.

What a terrible, terrible road. Jeroboam was designed for all his successors. All of them followed that pattern.

And they did not vary from it. Now, with Baasha, we have, for the first time, a king of some substance. Ruling 24 years, we're told.

He had created problems for Asa in his administration, in his strength of rule in the north. That's in chapter 15, verses 16 to 21. But that rule of 24 years is dismissed in very few words.

And that will be true of several more significant kings, not the least of which is Omri, that we're going to close with. Now the question is, is this fair? I mean, shouldn't he deserve more discussion than he's given if he ruled for 24 years and was apparently a pretty significant and substantial king? Well, the question is, on what basis is a king being judged in the books of Kings? Is he being judged on the basis of his rule, on the basis of his government, on the basis of his military accomplishments? And the answer is no. No.

What are these kings being judged on? They're being judged on, number one, whether they were loyal to Yahweh above everything else. Number two, did they make idols of Yahweh or any other god? Number three, did they keep the covenant, particularly the covenant implications for the way they treated those who were helpless? That's the basis for judgment. And on that basis, Baasha's 24 years were a

stunning failure. We don't know; it's not said precisely whether he was disloyal to Yahweh or not, but we know for sure that he made idols.

That's what Jeroboam had done, and that's the pathway in which Basha had walked. Now, why is making idols such a sin? We've talked about it before, and we'll talk about it again. To make God a part of this world is to make him utterly helpless.

This world came from nowhere and is going nowhere if you take it on its own basis alone. This world cannot save itself. This world is without purpose.

This world is without meaning. That's what has happened to our culture. As we have driven Yahweh out of it, we have condemned ourselves to meaninglessness and purposelessness.

Make Yahweh an idol, and he is no longer the transcendent God who stands outside of this world, who made it on purpose, who is guiding it to its destined end, who calls us into a relationship with him. So idolatry is of deadly importance. And on that basis, Basha has failed.

Now, we might ask ourselves, is that fair? Is it fair that a guy who has ruled for 24 years, who has apparently done some important and significant things, should be judged on this basis? Well, number one, who decides what's fair? You, me, Basha? No, God does. And God says all those other significant things he might have done pale to insignificance because he has failed at this most crucial point. So, friends, what about your life? What about my life? Am I succeeding in what is most important? Or am I succeeding at a hundred other things that the world might call important but that, in the end, when they close the casket lid, don't count for much? What shall a man give for his own soul, said Jesus? That's really the question that's being asked already here in Kings.

Now notice, as we go on with our glance at Basha here, provoking me to anger with their sins. That's verse 2 of chapter 16. This is the message that comes from this prophet.

We don't see him any other time. Jehu, the son of Anani. And he gives a message from God to Basha.

I exalted you out of the dust and made you leader over my people Israel. You have walked in the way of Jeroboam and made my people Israel sin, provoking me to anger with their sins. That phrase will occur frequently in the rest of the story. And notice, they made Israel, my people, sin.

So, it's not merely that Basha has sinned, but he's made Israel to sin, and that has made God angry. Now, what theological truths come out of that statement? Well, number one, God is a person. He is a person who can be hurt and angered.

A second thing that emerges here is that sin is a deviation from God's purposes. And as such, it provokes him. But notice that word provoke.

God is not angry. God is love. But God can be provoked to anger.

We can do things to God. God is not merely the unmoved mover who simply, in total impassibility, sits in heaven and says, oh, they've done it again. He's a person.

He's a person who is moved by what we do, by how we destroy our own lives. From this, we can understand the context of other passages. It's not because God has been offended so much as that he is jealous for us.

He's not jealous for his own reputation. He's jealous for what we are doing to our lives. These kings have made God's people do things that God has specifically told them not to do.

And the result is, he is very angry. As you and I look in the mirror, what do we see there? Like Jeroboam's son, Nadab, Basha's son, Elah, was destined to reign a very short time. The text says he reigned two years and then says he was inaugurated in Asa's 26th year and he died in Asa's 27th year.

We said, oh, wait a minute, wait a minute. That's a year, not two years. What's going on? What's going on is he reigned over two calendar years, which were Asa's 26th and Asa's 27th year.

So that's what's going on. This is an example of what you see again and again. It'll say he reigned so long, and then when you count up, well, what year of the other king did he start reigning, and what king did he end reigning? It doesn't work right.

But that's what's going on. It's counting across years and the two kingdoms, Judah and Israel, had separate calendars. So, when you actually take all these things into account, the numbers in Kings are remarkably accurate.

Indicating again, we do not have people sitting down making up nice stories. They're working with sources that they have at their hands. So, he reigned a very short time.

Why? Well, we might say on the basis of Exodus 34, verse 7, the sins of the fathers. Elah is being punished because of his father's sins. But it's not quite that simple.

Look at verses 9 and 13 of chapter 16. When he was at Tirzah drinking himself drunk in the house of Arza, who was over the household in Tirzah, Zimri came in and struck him down. Elah seems to have been a very self-serving kind of person.

And then you go on to verse 13. For all the sins of Basha and the sins of Elah his son, which they sinned and which they made Israel to sin, provoking the Lord God of Israel to anger with their idols. Yes.

Is Elah being punished because of Basha's sins? Yes. Yes. But is Elah being punished because of his own sins? Yes.

And here again, we see the interplay. You and I have an influence on those who follow us. Why is Elah a sinner? Because his father was a sinner.

Now, praise God, that's not absolute. That's not lockstep. Thank God for those who do not follow the influence of their parents.

But the fact is, sin has consequences. And those consequences will play themselves out across generations. Not that God sits in heaven and says, if you sin, I'm going to get your kids.

No. But he is saying, don't sin. Your sins have consequences.

In terms of their influence on succeeding generations, in terms of how succeeding generations will receive what you have done. So, Jeroboam was succeeded by Nadab. Nadab killed by Baasha.

Baasha was succeeded by Elah. And now, Elah is to be killed. What are we saying? We are saying that you and I have choices.

We don't have to follow the paths that our predecessors have chosen if those paths are bad. We can choose, praise God, not to follow them. Oh, there will be impacts.

There will be effects, but we can choose to go in a different direction. Elah did not choose to go in a different direction than his father.

And Basha did not choose to go in a different direction than his grandfather, Jeroboam, had first set out. Choose your path very carefully. We turn now to the third dynasty that ruled in the Northern Kingdom during the reign of Asa.

It is, I believe, the shortest dynasty of all. It's the dynasty of Zimri. We read the verse earlier.

Elah was at Tirza. Tirzah is the capital of the Northern Kingdom. Drinking himself drunk in the house of Arza, who was over the household in Tirzah, Zimri came in and struck him down and killed him in the 27th year of Asa, king of Judah, and reigned in his place.

Now, Zimri, we are told, is, in verse 9, is the commander of half of the chariots. That makes him a colonel. He's in charge of half of Elah's chariot force.

But who is the general? The general, according to chapter 16, verses, verse 16, is Omri, the commander of the army. That makes him a general. So, a colonel has produced a coup d'etat and has killed the king.

The army is away. And when the news reaches them that Colonel Zimri has killed the king, what do they do? Verse 16, Therefore all Israel made Omri the commander of the army, king over Israel that day in the camp. They're not going to have a colonel ruling the country.

And the general is certainly not going to obey the colonel. So, again, we see in the Bible these interesting narrative devices used to draw us in and point us to the story. Now, we need to know a little geography here to be clear in our own thinking.

This is the Mediterranean out here. And here is the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan and the Dead Sea. The border, more or less, between Israel and Judah is something like that.

Up here is Shechem with Mount Ebal on one side and Mount Gerizim on the other. There is a steep canyon here going north from Shechem and Tirza is at the bottom of that canyon. Jeroboam chose Tirza as his capital largely because it's easily defensible from the south.

Down here, and let's talk about the border of the Philistines. Down here is the city of Gibethon. This is sort of the border city between Israel to the north and the Philistines to the south.

The name shows up twice in the book of Joshua in terms of on the border of various tribal territories. It shows up in chapter 15 of Kings because this is where Nadab is fighting when Baasha kills him. So, here is Zimri up here killing Elah at Tirza and down here is Omri with presumably the other half of the chariots and the rest of the army.

So, the news comes that, guess what? Colonel Zimri has revolted. He has conspired against the king and killed him. So, what happens? As I said, the army says we're not going to be ruled by Colonel Zimri.

If we're going to be ruled by somebody, we're going to be ruled by King Omri. And so, the army crowns Omri there on the field as king. Now, let me mention to you again that we've had this phrase all Israel.

And pretty clearly, that's referring to the northern kingdom. Judah is the other. And we've had numerous occasions, and we'll have more, Judah and all Israel.

And we tend to say, wait a minute, isn't Judah part of Israel? Well, yes, originally. However, geographically, the two are rather different regions, and in the book of Joshua, you have references to Judah and all of Israel. So here, we're told all Israel crowned Omri king.

Well, not really. It's the army of all Israel. But you're talking about representatives of the northern kingdom who have done this.

Then it's fascinating to think that we're told a few verses later that Zimri ruled seven days. And Omri besieged Tirza. I hope there are instant replays in heaven.

I want to see this. That is, they moved the whole army up there in a week. About 40 miles.

And Tirza, excuse me, Zimri, all these Z's in here. Zimri saw the handwriting on the wall. It's over.

So, what did he do? He went into the palace, probably got himself drunk, set the palace on fire, and died. Now, I'd like to ask you, from these descriptions of Zimri, what sort of a person do you think he was? He found Elah drunk in the palace. And so, in verse 10, Zimri came in and struck him down and killed him.

Bingo. Now, then, he's made himself king. Seven days later, the army surrounded the city.

And Zimri, when he saw the city was taken, went into the citadel of the king's house, burned the king's house over him with fire, and died. I see Zimri as a kind of impulsive person. I'm not at all sure that he planned to kill Elah, but he walked into the palace.

There he is, drunk, helpless. Zimri says, bingo, kill him. I'm going to be king.

Does he think? No. I've said it before, sin makes you dumb. He hasn't thought of the implications here.

Is the army going to follow me? Will Amri really be subject to me? And now, when it's all over, well, burn the place down and die. I say all that to say God has made all of us different. We have different personality types.

We have different approaches to life, and that's all good. But the question is, what can God do with your personality? Because that's the great good news. God can use every one of us.

But we need to know who we are, and know how God could work with me. How could he temper that impulsiveness? Or how could he build a fire under those of us who are more bovine? But there's the issue. And this is the beauty of the Bible.

We see all this. And we see what might have been, and we see what is. Now, notice what happens next.

Verses 21 and 22. Then the people of Israel were divided into two parts. Half of the people followed Tibni, the son of Ginath, to make him king, and half followed Omri.

But the people who followed Amri overcame the people who followed Tibni, the son of Ginath. So Tibni died, and Amri became king. Hmm.

So, what happened? Well, pretty clearly, what happened was that in this terrific upheaval, Elah has only ruled a year, and it doesn't look as if he's been much of a king, drunk in the palace. Zimri has killed him. Zimri lasts a week.

Amri's the king now. It's pretty clear that there are people who are saying, yeah, the army crowned Amri, but I'm not sure I want a general for my king. I want Tibni.

And again, we know nothing about Tibni. We don't know who he was. We don't know why he was; I presume he was a high official in the court.

Maybe he had priestly connections. I don't know. But again, it's a picture of the chaos that is occurring in this nation, which has rejected its roots, which has rejected its religious foundations, and has said we can make it up as we go.

Once again, we think of the Psalm. Blessed is the nation which has Yahweh as its God. When we reject God's ways, we should not be at all surprised if chaos follows.

Now, whether Tibni was assassinated by his own people, whether he was defeated in battle, and how long this division went, we do not know. The text says that Amri ruled in Tirza for six years. After that, he himself bought the hill of Shemar and the town that he established became called Samaria.

Samaria is out facing the coast and it is a lovely conical hill. The city is on the top of it, right at the head of this broad valley that leads down to the coast and down there is the great international highway that leads to Egypt. This is a little bit like what David did.

David captured this city right on the border of Judah and Benjamin, a city named Jerusalem, and made it his capital. There's a sense in which that city didn't belong to either tribe. It belonged to David.

In the same sense, Amri has bought this hilltop and built a city there. It belongs to Amri. Amri is clearly saying Israel has entered a new phase.

No longer do we need to hide down this canyon to protect ourselves. Now, we can sit right out here facing the world and taking part in all that the world may offer us. It's a new day, and that's exactly what happened with Amri.

Once again, we do not know very much about Amri's rule. He ruled for 11, 11 and a half, 12 years. Six of them are at Tirzah, and six of them are at Samaria.

But a hundred years later, the Assyrians are referring to Israel as the house of Amri. Amri's dynasty is long gone by that point. So evidently, he was again a significant man.

But once again, the Bible dismisses his rule, and it says something frightening. Verse 26, He walked in all the way of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, and in the sins that he made Israel to sin, provoking the Lord, the God of Israel to anger by their idols. But look at verse 25.

Amri did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and did more evil than all who were before him. Hmm. What does that mean? We don't know.

But I've got a guess, and I'll share it with you. My guess is he's not only opening Israel to the commerce of the world, he's also opening Israel to the gods of the world. I suspect, knowing what his son did, I suspect that Amri is leading them to say, Hey, hey, there are lots of ways to heaven.

Yes, yes, our ancient traditional God Yahweh, yes, he's one good way. But oh, there are so many other ways. You know, the world's a big place.

Look at all these other religions. We've got to be more inclusive. I wonder.

I wonder. We turn then to Amri's son, King Ahab—verse 29 of chapter 16.

In the 38th year of Asa, king of Judah. Oh, my goodness. How many kings of Israel has Asa seen? Jeroboam, Nadab, Basha, Elah, Zimri, Amri, Ahab.

Seven kings during Asa's reign. So, I say again, I don't think we can overestimate how important Asa's reign was for Judah. I think some things were nailed down during those 41 years when everything was coming loose up in the north.

And so we have now in the north, things are finally getting, quote, nailed down. Israel was always the richer, the wealthier, the more cosmopolitan of the two kingdoms. Judah tended to be isolated down here on the ridge, running from Beersheba up to Jerusalem.

The southern border of Judah was always in a bit of contest between Edom and Judah. But Israel had more cultivatable land. It was in connection with that great international highway.

It was also in connection with the other great international highway that ran from the Gulf of Aqaba on the Red Sea up to Damascus. So, wealth, power, fertility, all of these things were available there. And now they're coming together with Amri beginning to sort of, as I say, nail things down.

Ahab is his successor. And things look good from a human point of view—verse 30.

And Ahab, the son of Amri, did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him. Ay yi yi. Amri surpassed his ancestors.

And now Ahab surpasses his father in sin. How? Verse 31. As if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, he took for his wife Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshipped him.

Now, if I'm right on Amri, Amri is saying, yes, Yahweh's our God, but we're going to recognize all these others. Now, Ahab is saying, and I'm going to worship Baal. I think he said, I'm going to worship Yahweh and Baal alongside each other.

His wife Jezebel pretty clearly didn't go there. I'm not going to worship any Yahweh. I'm going to worship my God Baal that I've always worshipped.

Now, it's interesting to wonder, why did Ahab marry Jezebel? And many people believe that in fact it's Amri who engineered this. That one of the things that Amri did was to make no longer war on his neighbors. There was a war between Rehoboam and Jeroboam.

There was war between Asa and Basha. No longer. So, it is thought that one of the things Amri did was to make peace with his neighbors.

Well, how do you do that? You marry your sons and daughters to your neighbor's sons and daughters in an alliance. So, it's, I think, likely that it wasn't just Ahab who said, I think I'll marry Jezebel. I think it's Amri who said to Ethbaal, hey, I want to make an alliance with you folks here.

How about if I marry my son Ahab to your daughter Jezebel? Don't know if that's how it happened, but I think that's probable. So, what do we see here? Once again, we see this drift. Years ago, I saw it.

I think I've said it to you before. Years ago, I saw the little epigram. Loss of faith is rarely a blowout.

It's usually a slow leak. And that's what we've got in Israel, a slow leak. Well, we'll keep worshiping Yahweh, but we'll make some idols of Him.

Well, we'll keep worshiping Yahweh, but we'll recognize that there are lots of other valid ways of worshiping. Yes, yes, we'll keep worshiping Yahweh, but we will also worship another God. We will get rid of this stupid Yahweh, inch by inch by inch.

And so, I say to you, as I say to myself, have I deviated from the exclusive worship of Yahweh? Have I begun to inch away from Him? Stop it. Stop it. It didn't happen with Jeroboam.

It didn't happen with Basha. It didn't happen with Omri. It didn't happen with Ahab.

In fact, each of them inched farther and farther away. One day, you wake up thinking maybe you have a need for your old faith, and you discover it's gone. It's gone.

It's not there. Ahab, the son of Omri, did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him. And as if it had been a light thing for him, he took for his wife Jezebel and went and served Baal and worshiped him.

So, we see then, this tragic downward path that comes to its nadir, its lowest point here with Ahab. And it's then that Elijah and Elisha come on the scene. God is not going to stand idly by and see what he had poured his life into in the covenant simply erased.

Praise God, he does not give up easily. And so, he brings these men to pass. One indication of this, I think, is to be found in the very last verse of chapter 16.

In his days, Ahab's days, Hiel of Bethel built Jericho. He laid its foundation at the cost of Abiram, his firstborn, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son, Segub, according to the word of the Lord, which he spoke by Joshua, the son of Nun. Hmm, what's that about? Well, let's go back and look at Joshua, chapter 6, verse 26.

Jericho has fallen. What's the significance of Jericho? Oh, Jericho is the inauguration of the promised land. And when it has fallen, verse 26, Joshua laid an oath on them at that time saying, Cursed before the Lord be the man who rises up and rebuilds this city, Jericho.

At the cost of his firstborn shall he lay its foundation. At the cost of his youngest son shall he set up its gates. Now, what's that about? A process has begun.

God is giving this promised land to his people. And here, in this moment, not rebuilt. If anybody should rebuild it, they will sacrifice their firstborn to dedicate the walls.

And they sacrifice their secondborn to dedicate the gates. So, the years have passed. They're in the land.

And yet, they are disobeying the owner of the land. Joshua 6.26. Joshua 6.26. They possess the land as a gift. A gift from the owner.

But in fact, they are no longer in a good relationship with the owner of the land. How long are they going to continue to possess it? And here, now, is Jericho rebuilt. In real sense, this moment says, hey, you are on warning.

You could lose this land. I gave it to you. And this unrebuilt city was the evidence that I've given it to you.

Now, now, the city has been rebuilt. And what does that say? That says you're on warning. So, as we look at this story from Jeroboam to Ahab and from Rehoboam to Asa in chapters 13, 14, 15, and 16, we see, on the one hand, Judah being held together by this man Asa whose heart was perfect toward the Lord.

Not a perfect performance. He didn't do everything right. And in fact, the end of his story is not a happy one.

But nevertheless, he is, in fact, sold out to God. No idols, no other gods, nothing else. But in the north, down and down and down until we read these words that we have read.

He went and served Baal and worshipped him. He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal which he built in Samaria. Temple for Baal right in the capital city.

And Ahab made an Asherah, a fertility goddess. Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him. So, it's at this point.

Judah, looking good. Israel, looking very, very bad. What's going to happen next? Stay tuned.

Let's pray.

Oh, Father. Oh, Father. Don't let us go there. Help us every day, in every way, to be certain that our hearts, by your grace, are wholly yours. Don't let anything else into the throne room.

Don't let anything else into the holy of holies. Let us be all yours without a rival, without a limit. In your name we pray. Amen.