

For David's Sake

1 Kings 15-16

Near the end of each Rocky movie comes the moment we have all been waiting for: the training montage, a series of clips set to music that show Rocky training hard and hitting his stride as he prepares for the big fight to come. When you get to *Rocky IV*, the training montage is a little different. Instead of showing clips of just Rocky training, it shows clips of Rocky training mixed in with clips of his opponent, the Russian fighter Ivan Drago. Drago trains in a state-of-the-art, air-conditioned facility, with all kinds of weights, machines, equipment, performance-enhancing drugs, and a team of doctors watching over every aspect of his physical health and ability. Meanwhile, Rocky trains at an isolated cabin in the Russian countryside. He has no weights or sophisticated machines, so he uses big rocks, and farming tools. He chops wood, carries a tree trunk through deep snow, pulls his brother-in-law Paulie on a sled. And then at the end of the montage, we see Drago running as hard as he can on a treadmill that inclines until he is running at about a 45-degree angle. Rocky, on the other hand, runs outdoors in the snow, all the way to the top of a mountain. When you see the clips of these two fighters training, engaging in very similar activities, and yet in very different settings, you get the message that in many ways Rocky and Drago are similar, and yet at a deeper level they are profoundly different. I get the same impression reading chapters 15-16 of 1 Kings. Here we have here fairly short accounts of some kings of the southern kingdom of Judah side-by-side with some accounts of kings of the northern kingdom of Israel. At a surface level, they are very similar. But look closely, and you can see a profound difference between them that carries a theological punch that I am eager to share with you. We will get there in due time.

After going on for 11 chapters about the reign of King Solomon, the author has told about how the kingdom of Israel split into two kingdoms when the ten northern tribes broke away from the reign of David's house. This happened after the death of Solomon, when Solomon's son Rehoboam had become king. After the split, Rehoboam continued to rule in the southern kingdom over the tribe of Judah, but the northern tribes became their own kingdom, and they chose Jeroboam as their first king. Both Jeroboam and Rehoboam were wicked kings, and we are going to see in the rest of the book of 1-2 Kings that in both kingdoms, idolatry will continue, spiral, escalate, and finally end in the judgment of exile from the land for both kingdoms. When we looked at chapter 14, I believe the author's main point was to show us how vile and destructive sin is. Certainly, that theme continues here into chapters 15-16, but the author also shows in various ways that sin, as vile and destructive as it is, will never have the last word. God will.

May that be truth be nourishment to our faith. Sometimes we may gaze at the sinful state of the world in which we live and lose hope in God's plan. What is called the "problem of evil" in philosophy is a question that has wrecked the faith of many professing believers through the centuries: if God is all-good and all-powerful, why is there so much evil and suffering in this world? How can a good God tolerate it? But sometimes we turn our gaze to ourselves, and when we are enabled to see clearly the wretchedness of our own sin, we can be shaken in faith in a different way, losing hope that God would ever accept us. Whether your hope is shaken by what you see in the world or by what you see in yourself, the good news this morning is that this passage addresses both of those issues. Sin will not have the last word.

So let's dive in to see how the author makes that point. These two chapters divide into two sections: one an account of kings of Judah in 15:1-24, and the other an account of kings of Israel in 15:25-16:34. I want to start with the second one today and then work back to the first. So let's take a look first at

1. The Northern Kingdom of Israel: Corruption and Chaos (15:25-16:34)

I hope you read this passage in advance, and if you didn't, take an opportunity today to sit down and read it all at once. It is a rapid-fire account of six kings who ruled the northern kingdom of Israel after its first king, Jeroboam. It is said of all six of these kings that they did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, which means they engaged in and promoted false worship in Israel.

The first king mentioned here is Nadab, son of Jeroboam, in 15:25-32. He ruled a grand total of two years, and his biggest claim to fame is that he was assassinated. Note 15:27-30: "Baasha the son of Ahijah, of the house of Issachar, conspired against him. And Baasha struck him down at Gibbethon, which belonged to the Philistines, for Nadab and all Israel were laying siege to Gibbethon. So Baasha killed him in the third year of Asa king of Judah and reigned in his place. And as soon as he was king, he killed all the house of Jeroboam. He left to the house of Jeroboam not one that breathed, until he had destroyed it, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by his servant Ahijah the Shilonite. It was for the sins of Jeroboam that he sinned and that he made Israel to sin, and because of the anger to which he provoked the Lord, the God of Israel." In chapter 14, when Jeroboam's wife went to the prophet Ahijah, he told her that every male offspring of the house of her husband would be put to death, and none would have a proper burial (see 14:11). Now that prophetic word has come to pass through Baasha. Jeroboam's house has been ended, precisely as the Lord foretold it through his prophet.

So now we come to the next king in line, Baasha the assassin. Look at 15:33-34: "In the third year of Asa king of Judah, Baasha the son of Ahijah began to reign over all Israel at Tirzah, and he reigned twenty-four years. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and walked in the way of Jeroboam and in his sin which he made Israel to sin." Here is the new king, who had annihilated the house of Jeroboam, so that...he could rule Israel the same way Jeroboam had ruled Israel. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Jeroboam had established golden calves at new worship sites in the northern region of his kingdom at Dan and in the southern region at Bethel, and he had created a religion around these golden calves to rival the worship at Solomon's temple in Jerusalem. Baasha was the Lord's agent in bringing down Jeroboam's house over this, and yet he continued worshiping at Golden Calf Community Church. Why? It's because he subordinated worship to politics. Power has a tendency to corrupt, and the kings of the northern kingdom were corrupted by it deeply. Remember that Jeroboam first set up these golden calves so that his subjects would not cross the border into Judah to worship at Jerusalem. He feared losing his power if the people ever felt drawn back to David's house as a result of worshiping God the way he commanded them to. Baasha would have had the same fear. He didn't eliminate the house of Jeroboam because he loved the Lord and wanted to purify Israel's worship. He wanted to seize power, and once he had it, he wanted to keep it. So he kept the same golden calf policy in place, thinking it was key to holding on to power over the kingdom. And oh, how wrong he was.

Just as God had given a prophetic word to Jeroboam, so he does again to King Baasha, in 16:1-4: "And the word of the Lord came to Jehu the son of Hanani against Baasha, saying, 'Since

I exalted you out of the dust and made you leader over my people Israel, and you have walked in the way of Jeroboam and have made my people Israel to sin, provoking me to anger with their sins, behold, I will utterly sweep away Baasha and his house, and I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat. Anyone belonging to Baasha who dies in the city the dogs shall eat, and anyone of his who dies in the field the birds of the heavens shall eat.” As Yogi Berra would say, “It’s déjà vu all over again!” Jeroboam’s replacement is just like Jeroboam, and his house will meet the same fate that he imposed on Jeroboam’s house. But then notice a theological nuclear bomb that is sitting right there just a few verses later, in verse 7: “Moreover, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Jehu the son of Hanani against Baasha and his house, both because of all the evil that he did in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger with the work of his hands, in being like the house of Jeroboam, *and also because he destroyed it.*” So let’s get this straight: the prophet Jehu rebuked Baasha for two sins: following the worship practices of the house of Jeroboam and destroying the house of Jeroboam when he killed all the male descendants. Now, that second act was one that God himself had declared as a judgment against Jeroboam. So we could put it this way: the destruction of Jeroboam’s house by Baasha was an act of God’s judgment. But it was also a sinful act carried out by Baasha, because it provoked the Lord to anger. So in one and the same act, God acts righteously to judge, and Baasha acts wickedly in a murderous rampage to advance his own political career. Can one and the same act be righteous on God’s part and wicked on man’s part? Yes! Theologians call this the doctrine of “concurrency,” a word that means “running together.” God’s acts and man’s acts “run together,” with God intending his holy purpose and man often intending his wicked purpose. And so, as Joseph said to his brothers years after they had sold him into slavery: “What you intended for evil, God intended for good” (Gen. 50:20). That means God uses even the sinful acts of men to fulfill his greater purposes, and that’s why he can use someone like Baasha to destroy Jeroboam’s house in his righteous judgment, and then turn around and declare judgment against Baasha for his wicked motives in doing so. God is not the author of sin, but in his sovereignty, he rules over sin for his purposes, which is one reason sin will not have the last word.

But after Baasha’s 24-year reign we come to the two-year reign of his son Elah in 16:8-14. About all we know about King Elah is that he loved to party, and on an occasion when he was in a drunken stupor, one of his chariot commanders named Zimri assassinated him. So the chaos continues. And then note how Zimri simply did to Baasha’s house what Baasha had done to Jeroboam’s house in verses 11-13: “When he began to reign, as soon as he had seated himself on his throne, he struck down all the house of Baasha. He did not leave him a single male of his relatives or his friends. Thus Zimri destroyed all the house of Baasha, according to the word of the Lord, which he spoke against Baasha by Jehu the prophet, for all the sins of Baasha 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.” Once again, the Word of the Lord is the true power in Israel.

Three kings down, three to go. King Zimri (16:15-20) ruled Israel for a grand total of seven days. Why so short? Here’s a bit of advice: if you ever decide to assassinate your king and take over for him, make sure you get the army on your side first. Zimri had failed to secure the army’s loyalty, so when he knocked off Elah, the army decided they would rather have their commander Omri ruling Israel instead of Zimri. So Omri led his forces away from their siege of the Philistine

city Gibbethon and laid siege to Tirzah, the capital city of Israel. When King Zimri saw that he had not escape from Omri's forces, he went into the citadel and set it on fire, committing suicide.

So now we come to the account of King Omri in 16:21-28. Continuing on the theme of chaos, we note that Omri didn't secure power immediately, but half the people wanted another man named Tibni to rule, so a civil war ensued that lasted about four years. But eventually, Omri prevailed, securing his rule over the kingdom and establishing a new house in Israel that would last for several generations. One of his most significant acts was moving the capital city of Israel to Samaria. But notice the author's conclusion about Omri in verses 25-26: "Omri did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did more evil than all who were before him. For 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." We are now on the third royal house since Jeroboam, and yet the king continues worshiping at Golden Calf Community Church. It's like Jeroboam, but now on steroids! Every one of these kings loves power more than he loves the Lord, and so the chaos of the Lord's judgment has been unleashed.

After Omri's twelve-year reign, we come to the last king on this list, who will occupy several chapters moving forward, and that is Omri's son Ahab (16:29-34). The verdict on King Ahab is found in verses 30-33: "And 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 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 worshiped him. He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. And Ahab made an Asherah. Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him." Ahab was not content with Jeroboam's golden calves. He secured a political alliance with the Sidonians by marrying a Sidonian princess named Jezebel, and he imported her devotion to the Sidonian god Baal into the land of Israel. Jeroboam's golden calf sin was a violation of the second commandment, worshiping the true God in a false way. Ahab took it a step further and normalized a violation of the first commandment, namely, the open worship of other gods in Israel. Why? Again, because he subordinated worship to politics. His alliance with the Sidonians, secured through his marriage, mattered more to him than worshiping the Lord.

Now notice the last verse of our text, 16:34: "In his [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." Why give us that detail? The author is telling us two things. One is that in Ahab's days, Israel had become just like the Canaanites they originally drove out from the land. Jericho was the first city they destroyed when they came into the land, and Joshua had pronounced a curse over the man who might ever dare to rebuild it. So it lay in ruins for over 500 years, until King Ahab had the audacity to give Hiel of Bethel a permit to rebuild it. But a second thing the author is showing us is that, once again, the Word of the Lord is the true power in Israel. In Joshua 6:26, this is the curse Joshua had pronounced: "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, and at the cost of his youngest son shall he set up its gates." Hiel's two sons were struck down by the Lord when he rebuilt Jericho, just as the Lord had said centuries before. Once again, we see that sin will not have the last word because the Lord will. The Word of the Lord is the true power in Israel.

Corruption and chaos. That's the picture we get from the kingdom of Israel during this time period. But take heart in the author's repeated references to the Word of the Lord coming to fulfillment through it all, and trust that the Word of the Lord is the real power that rules this world. In the midst of the culture wars of our day, we need to remember that, because the desire for power is one that can easily corrupt us. We live in a day when secular LGBTQ tyranny is seeking to dominate the West, while Islamic tyranny dominates the Middle East, and somehow these two wildly opposing forces have become allies against our Christian heritage. In the face of these threats and all the issues associated with them, some Christian podcasters are now living by the motto, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend," and they are cozying up to white supremacy and Nazism. Their motive is to maximize power. How can we bother policing the ideologies on the right when the left is doing such terrible things? But that mindset will only degrade us over time. Just like Jeroboam's golden calf religion, it is driven by fear rather than trust in the Word of God. If you want to align yourself with power, don't ever, ever subordinate the gospel to politics. The Word of God remains the true power in this world, and you can trust it, no matter how bad the culture wars get.

But now we come to the good part. We have seen the corruption and chaos in Israel, so let's come back now to

2. The Southern Kingdom of Judah: Bloodline and Blessing

In some ways, the account here is very similar to what we saw with Israel. It starts with King Abijam, son of Rehoboam, who continued the idolatrous practices of his father. But after his short reign, we come the reign of his son Asa, and what a breath of fresh air! During his long 41-year reign, Asa did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. After two generations of idolatrous kings, King Asa destroyed the idols, removed cult prostitutes from the land, and even fired his grandmother Maacah from her influential position as Queen Mother because she was promoted the worship of the goddess Asherah. Asa took her idol and burned it at the Brook Kidron. In addition to stamping out false worship, Asa enriched the temple at Jerusalem with wealth from the royal treasury.

But Asa was not perfect. He failed to remove all the high places in Judah, which were basically unauthorized places dedicated to the worship of the one true God. In addition to that, late in his reign he plundered the temple treasury in order to bribe the Syrian king Ben-Hadad to help him break up an attempted blockade imposed by Baasha king of Israel, as detailed in verses 16-22. Verse 23 notes that in his old age he was diseased in his feet, and the author of 2 Chronicles tells us that he did not seek the Lord for healing, but only went to physicians. It seems that Asa was a man who did not finish well, in spite of the overall positive tenor of his reign.

But let's step back now and take in the big picture. During roughly the same time period, Judah had two kings from one dynasty, centered in one capital city. God preserved the line of David and the city of Jerusalem, where he caused his name to dwell in the temple that Solomon had built. Meanwhile, the northern kingdom of Israel had six kings from four different lines, two assassinations, one royal suicide, a civil war, and two capital cities. The northern kingdom of Israel plunged into utter chaos, while the southern kingdom of Judah experienced a period of relative stability. Why? What makes the difference between these two kingdoms?

The answer is in 15:4, where it says of King Abijam: “Nevertheless, for David's sake the Lord his God gave him a lamp in Jerusalem, setting up his son after him, and establishing Jerusalem.” It was “for the sake of David” that we see a difference between the chaos of Israel and the stability of David’s house in Judah. Now, what does that mean? Does that mean “for the sake of the promises God had made to David?” Well, certainly, God’s gracious promises to David are in the background here. But verse 5 puts David’s obedience to the Lord in the foreground: “...because David did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn aside from anything that he commanded him all the days of his life except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite.” There are two incredible insights packed into that verse. One is that David’s terrible sins do not define him. Can you imagine if I said to you, “I was blessed to know a godly man who honored the Lord with his life, except for when he secretly committed adultery, impregnated another man’s wife, and then had that man murdered so he could marry her and cover it up?” You would say, “A *godly* man?!” And yet, the author tells us here that David’s life and reign were marked by faithfulness to the Lord, so that he became the standard by which all future kings are measured. David wasn’t perfect, but he was broken over his sin, and he sought the Lord’s mercy, so he was forgiven, fully and completely. As believers, we are not defined by our sins, as wretched as they are.

But I haven’t even gotten to the good part yet, the second big insight from verse 5. Here it is: David’s covenantal obedience to the Lord merited the Lord’s blessings on the kingdom of Judah in the generations that followed him. That’s what “for David’s sake” means. While Israel was descending into utter chaos, Judah was preserved with relative stability and blessing, *because David had obeyed the Lord*. This is an illustration of a doctrine known as “federal headship,” or covenantal headship. A federal head is one whose actions represent those under his headship, so that they receive blessings or curses based on his actions. As federal head of the Davidic house, David’s obedience merited blessings for the kings and the kingdom that followed him. Now, to be sure, these blessings were limited, temporal, and earthly. Nobody made it to Heaven on the basis of David’s obedience, including David himself. But David’s imperfect obedience secured for his often unfaithful descendants a measure of limited, earthly blessing, setting his house and the kingdom of Judah apart from the chaos of Israel for a time. And that is a type that points us to the federal headship of Jesus Christ, whose federal headship is greater and secures far greater blessings. As the kingdom of Judah experienced blessings that flow out of David’s obedience, so do we experience blessings that flow out of Jesus’ obedience. Our sins do not have the last word over us if we are in Christ, because his covenantal obedience wipes them away. We stand under the favor of God, not because of anything we have done, but because Jesus has done it all for us.

Theologians have spoken of the redeeming work of Christ as consisting of two aspects: passive obedience and active obedience. By his passive obedience, Jesus took upon himself the penalty that our sins deserved so that we would not have to bear it. By his active obedience, Jesus fulfilled the positive demands of the Law, meriting eternal life for us. Consequently, as we hold to Christ by faith, we stand before God in Christ as our federal head, and we are not merely innocent of sin through his passive obedience, but through his active obedience we are counted righteous, as though we had fulfilled the obedience God held out to Adam at the beginning as a condition for entering Sabbath rest with him forever. David’s imperfect active obedience here, flowing out in covenantal blessings for the southern kingdom of Judah generations after his death, is but a small foretaste of the perfect active obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom

our sins are wiped away and we are clothed with a righteousness that ensures the favor of God is upon us. Our sin is wretched, but it will not have the last word.

J. Gresham Machen was a professor at Princeton Seminary in the early 20th century who was alarmed by the influence of liberal theology in his denomination, the Presbyterian Church USA. After coming to a point of a decisive break with his denomination in 1929, Machen founded a new seminary, Westminster Theological Seminary, as well as a new denomination, known today as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and he even founded a new mission board to continue the work of spreading the biblical gospel. Machen was steadfastly committed the faith once and for all delivered to the saints, and he was a builder. The institutions he founded continue to preserve biblical authority and the teachings of Old Princeton down to this day.

On January 1, 1937, Machen lay dying in a hospital bed in Bismarck, North Dakota, and he sent a telegram to his good friend John Murray, a professor at Westminster. That telegram carried the last recorded words of J. Gresham Machen: "I'm so thankful for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it." In his final moments, a man who had given his life to the labors of the gospel, who had stood firm for the truth against theological error, who had built three major institutions that have endured now for generations, this man set his hope, not on anything he had done, but on what Christ had done for him. May we all die the same way. And if, somewhere down the road, you aspire to die with your hope fixed on Christ alone, you must live that way today. Thank God for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it. Amen.