

When The Balloon Bursts

Preaching through 1 Kings

by Bryson Smith



I have a love-hate relationship with balloons. On the one hand I love them because of the joy they give my two young daughters. My girls have great fun kicking, throwing and bouncing balloons around the house. I love to hear their giggles and squeals of joy.

Unfortunately, though, balloons have a limited life expectancy in our household. It might take one minute, or it may take an hour, but the balloon will always break - and suddenly I have a distraught little girl on my hands. I hate that.

Life is full of things we have love-hate relationships with. Things that give us a lot of joy can equally give us a lot pain. For Israel the monarchy was one of those things. In the history of national Israel it was her kings who brought both the greatest triumphs and the deepest disasters. This is graphically seen in the Old Testament book of 1 Kings.

The Content of 1 Kings

The structure of 1 Kings is quite straightforward. After firstly describing the golden age of Israel under Solomon the book then chronicles the decline of the Kingdom with particular interest being given to the northern tribes and the Omri dynasty. The book of 2 Kings completes the picture by describing the destruction of the northern tribes by Assyria and the exile of the southern tribes at the hands of the Babylonians. In this regard 1 Kings on it's own really only tells half the story.

Preaching on 1 Kings

As noted above 1-2 Kings should really be considered as a unit. Nevertheless for preaching purposes there are advantages in only dealing with 1 Kings. Preaching on 1 Kings alone lends itself to a nice containable series. To spend any less time on 1 Kings runs the risk of being too superficial in some of the important themes that run into the New Testament (eg the Temple, the ministry of Elijah). To spend any more time in the book runs the risk of boring people with all the different names, places and events. My sermon series ended up looking like this:

1. The good old days - 1 Kings 1-4
a sermon dealing with the golden age of Israel under Solomon.
2. God gets a house - 1 Kings 5-9
a sermon focusing on the Temple.
3. The fading of a shadow - 1 Kings 10-16
a sermon dealing with the failures of Solomon and the splitting of the nation.
4. How long will you waver? - 1 Kings 17-18
a sermon on the confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal
5. The sound of silence - 1 Kings 19
a sermon on Elijah's theophany at Mt Sinai
6. The kings are dead - 1 Kings 20-22
a sermon about the moral decline of the kings of Israel

The lesson of 1 Kings

1 and 2 Kings together provide an explanation for the decline of the Davidic empire. The books show how a pattern of rebellion and punishment eventually led to the virtual extermination of Israel. However 1-2 Kings are more than an historical apologetic for the

Exile. The books tell us about God's dealings with humanity and as such the big issue is, What now!? Have the Jews got what it takes to get their act together? Will the monarchy ever reach its full potential? More significantly can God even be bothered with them anymore?

1 and 2 Kings offer no really conclusive answers to the above questions. This is evidenced by the way scholars are divided over whether Jehoiachin's elevation from prison (2 Kings 25:27-30) should be seen as a sign of hope or a symbol of humiliation. In the end it is this very ambiguity which is the genius of these two Old Testament books. 1 and 2 Kings virtually beg you to talk about Jesus as the fulfilment of all God's promises and the answer to all Israel's problems.

When Israel is at her best it provides a foreshadowing of the greatness of Jesus. We are filled with anticipation for the even greater blessings to be enjoyed under King David's greatest son. Alternatively when Israel is at her worst it forces us to look forward to a more satisfying fulfilment of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants.

Commentaries

Most commentaries on 1 Kings are just plain boring - big on historical detail but small on narrative criticism. The one exception is Russell Dilday's commentary on 1 & 2 Kings in the Mastering the Old Testament series. It's not bad at all. Just the right amount of Hebrew (virtually none) with some nice little insights into theme development and even some useful illustrations thrown in here and there.

Talk Outlines

Talk 1 - THE GOOD OLD DAYS

1 Kings 1-4

1.0 The Golden Age of Israel

We often talk about the golden age of something eg the golden age of Hollywood. In 1 Kings 1-4 we have reached the golden age of Israel. As far as Israel is concerned it just doesn't get any better than this period of history under King Solomon. Wealth, military muscle, building concerns and cultural sophistication all peaked during the reign of Solomon. Furthermore there are indications in 1 Kings 4 that Solomon's reign is a very tangible fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham and King David.

2.0 God's Promises To Abraham

In Genesis 12 God promised Abraham three things: 1) that his descendants would be very numerous and form a great nation, 2) that they would have their own special land and 3) that God would bless them and bless other nations through them. During Solomon's reign you get the distinct impression that now at last all those promises have come true (4:20,25,34).

3.0 God's Promises to David

In 2 Sam 7 God promised King David two new things; 1) that one of David's descendants would always occupy the throne of Israel and 2) that one of his descendants would build a temple for Yahweh. Again Solomon is a tangible fulfilment. Solomon is David's descendant who builds Yahweh's temple.

4.0 Solomon and Jesus

The tragedy is that the golden age of Israel quickly tarnishes. This forces us to see that 1 Kings 1-4 is not a fulfilment but a foreshadowing of the answer to God's promises. The ultimate fulfilment to all God's promises is Jesus Christ. These chapters therefore throw us onto the greatness of Jesus. It's like thumbing through tourist brochures. As you look at all the photos and read all about exotic holiday destinations you can really get excited and full of anticipation. In like manner the grandeur of Solomon should fill us with anticipation for Jesus.

We should be thinking, "Boy, if Solomon was this important imagine how great Jesus must be!!"

Talk 2 GOD GETS A HOUSE

1 Kings 5-9

1.0 When a dream house becomes a nightmare

Occasionally we hear the story of someone's dream home turning into a nightmare. A family put all their money into building or buying their own home only to discover they're living on a toxic waste dump or else the ground is shifting and huge cracks start appearing all over the house or else the council decide to run a six lane highway past their back door, or else they discover that they're under the flight path for a new airport runway. 1 Kings 5-9 is the start of one of those "dream home turns nightmare" stories.

2.0 A dream home for God

The idea for a temple goes back to 1 Sam 6. David felt bad about living in a nice palace while God still lived in a tent. But God told David that the Temple would be built when there wasn't so much fighting going on. Which leads us to 1 Kings and with Israel riding on the crest of a wave (sermon 1), the Temple is built and opened in a blaze of pomp and ceremony. It's hard to overstate the importance of this moment. The Temple was the dwelling place of God, the contact point between heaven and earth, and therefore the focal point of forgiveness (1 Kings 8:30,33-34).

3.0 The Dream becomes a Nightmare

The excitement of the opening is short lived. As the years pass civil war splits the nation, a godless priesthood supervise the Temple and a fickle public play the whore with other gods. The great Temple becomes a sham until finally the cloud of God's glory lifts up from the Temple and disappears over the horizon (Ezek 10). God has had a gutful of Israel and He's not prepared to dwell with them anymore.

4.0 A new dream

In all the nightmare there is still some hope. Ezekiel dreams of a Temple which is even more grand than Solomon's. The new Temple after the Exile however falls far short of expectations.

5.0 A dream comes true

It's into that period of disappointment that Jesus Christ steps. A new temple has come. A temple which far surpasses the glory of Solomon's temple in 1 Kings. A temple which again reflects God dwelling with mankind and the granting forgiveness. Only this time the Temple isn't a building. It's God Himself in the flesh.

Talk 3 - THE FADING OF A SHADOW

1 Kings 10-16

1.0 When the Balloon Bursts

There are many things in life that are like balloons. Things that can make you so happy and joyful and yet in a flash they can burst and hurt you so badly. Friendships can be like that. So can family. And for Israel, Solomon was like that. All the excitement and wonder and enthusiasm of the previous chapters are now swept away in a flood of misery and tears and frustration.

2.0 Solomon's Fall

To understand where Solomon went wrong we need to go back to Deuteronomy 17:14-17 where God lists three things an Israel's king should not do. He shouldn't acquire horses for himself, take many wives or accumulate silver and gold. In the space of two chapters Solomon blows all three!

3.0 The consequences

Because of Solomon's rebellion God promises to tear the kingdom away from his family. That's precisely what happens over the next six chapters. The northern 10 tribes under the leadership of Jeroboam break away from the southern tribe of Judah who stay under the rule of Solomon's son, Rehoboam. It gets a bit confusing with all these "oboam's", but the bottom line is the once great nation of Israel splits into two weak, little, spiteful nations that are always at each other's throat. The remainder of 1 Kings will show us the sorts of mess that these two little squabbling nations get themselves into. In all this we are left with two very important lessons.

4.0 The lessons

a) God's Word is absolute.

God doesn't make idle threats. Back in Deuteronomy God said some things which Solomon didn't do and so God punished the most powerful man in the world. It doesn't matter who you are, God is not someone to treat lightly.

b) The reality of Jesus. The most important lesson is that Israel and Solomon were always only ever a shadow of things to come (Heb 8:3-6, 10:1). When the Solomon bubble bursts it drives us to the point of asking, "Surely God must have something more in store for humanity than a fractured little middle eastern country. Surely there's something better to come." Yes there is. Jesus Christ. Jesus is the centre of everything. Which brings us to the natural application of whether Jesus has that position in our life? Just as Jesus Christ stands at the centre of God's plans for the world, Jesus Christ should also stand at the centre of our plans for our lives.

Talk 4 - "HOW LONG WILL YOU WAVER?" 1 Kings 17-18

1.0 Decisions, decisions

Life is full of decisions. Some decisions are little and seem to have no major consequences, like what to have for breakfast. Other decisions are big and full of ongoing consequences, like who to marry. Sometimes a decision is so important that it can't be delayed. The choice has to be made now! That's the situation we find in 1 Kings 17-18. Elijah calls on Israel to make up her mind once and for all about God.

2.0 The story so far

Israel has fallen apart into two bickering segments. 1 Kings now starts to jump around between the northern and southern tribes but as a rule of thumb it mainly stays with the northern tribes. The northern kingdom is particularly hopeless because of godless leadership. Elijah appears out of the blue to call them back to God.

3.0 Elijah's alter call

Elijah brazenly reappears after three years of drought and a competition is set up between him and the prophets of Baal. After a comical scene of over 400 Baal prophets frantically running around their sacrifice, nothing happens. Alternatively Elijah says a few words and Yahweh's sacrifice explodes into flame. We're meant to see that this is a laughable contest. It is no contest. There is only one God.

4.0 The "other" Elijah

It's a great story but it's even more wonderful what the NT does with it. In the NT John the

Baptist comes and with all the brazenness and authority of the original Elijah he calls people back to God. Only the miracle that occurs in the NT is not fire coming from heaven to burn a sacrifice. The miracle that John the Baptist prepared people for was that God Himself came down from heaven to be a sacrifice. John the Baptist's role was the same as the original Elijah's. To ask the question, "How long will you waver?" We may need to ask ourselves the same thing!

Talk 5 -THE SOUND OF SILENCE

1 Kings 19

1.0 The Virtue of Stickability

What do you admire or look for in your friends? A common answer is that we look for friends who will stick by us no matter what. 1 Kings 19 tells us that God makes a good friend because He has stickability. These chapters take us into a time when Elijah is in great despair and so God shows Elijah that He is committed to His people.

2.0 Elijah's Despair

Amazingly only one chapter after Elijah boldly confronted 450 prophets of Baal he runs away in fear. Clearly Jezebel is a nasty piece of work. First, he heads to the desert a days journey from Beersheba. This is the region where Abraham was tested by God when God asked Him to sacrifice Isaac. God provides a meal for Elijah, and strengthened by that he now travels for 40 days through the wilderness to Mt Horeb. Elijah is therefore hanging around towns and places which were important in Israel's history. It's as if Elijah is retracing Israel's steps. In that context we are meant to see Elijah's words to God as a plea to God to start all over again.

3.0 God's Reassurance

God's answer is silence. God will not do something new. He is going to persist with His promises. God has stickability, He will remain committed to his people and to his word.

4.0 Our joy

Through Elijah's despair we are brought joy because of what we discover about God. We are seeing that God is reliable; God will not be two faced and change the rules half way through. That's nice to know because for most of us life is like a roller coaster. One moment we're up and another we're down. Yet running through it all Solomon's reign is a very tangible fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham and King David.

Talk 6 THE KINGS ARE DEAD, LONG LIVE THE KING!

1 Kings 20-22

1.0 Where are all the GOOD LEADERS?

We have grown accustomed to bad leaders. We cynically believe that most politicians are only in it for the power and most corporate leaders are only in it for the money. The closing chapters of 1 Kings show us that nothing much is new.

2.0 Israel's leaders

1 Kings has shown us the decline of Israel's monarchy. It seems to reach its worst in 1 Kings 21 where Jezebel and Ahab ruthlessly murder Naboth so as to take possession of his vineyard. This pattern of sinful leadership persists in Israel. So much so that Ezekiel cries out in anger over the harsh and brutal treatment that the shepherds of Israel have brought on the people (Ezek 34).

3.0 Jesus

It's with this background in mind that Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd (Jn 10). Here at last is the good shepherd of Ezek 34 who will properly care for His flock. He ultimately does that at the cross. Whereas Ahab killed to help himself, Jesus was killed so as to help us.

4.0 A leader worth following

Jesus is not your average leader! Unlike the corporate giants of today or the Kings of yesterday, Jesus leads with self sacrificing love. He's the sort of leader who's really worth following.

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