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A Bleak Finale' **II Kings 23:31-24:20**

Intro: The British politician Richard Cobden has made the observation that, "Every great nation fell by suicide." This statement is aptly illustrated in the history of the kingdom of Judah. Sudden political blows or military attacks from the outside didn't destroy Judah. The kingdom committed a slow but steady suicide as it decayed morally and spiritually from within. These final 2 chapters of II Kings tell the tragic story of the desperate last years of a once great kingdom. By pulling information from II Chronicles and the Book of Jeremiah, we can witness the sad steps in their decline and the decisions of their kings and leaders who lead the people downward to destruction.

If you've ever skinned a knee or had a cut that required a band-aid, beside the pain of the injury, you may also be faced with the quandary of determining the least traumatic way of removing said band-aid. For some of you it may not be much of a problem but for those of us who don't shave their legs (or arms) it can be real problem. Now, for me, the best approach is to just firmly grab one end of the adhesive strip and with a quick jerk remove it in one pain-inclusive flash and be done with it. This is essentially what the author of Kings has given us in these last 2 chapters. He's telling us the story of Judah after Josiah's death and you get the distinct impression that he wants to hurry. He covers the reign of 4 kings over 22+ years in a rapid, nuts-and-bolts style (just the facts). He doesn't want to dawdle over the story of Judah; he wants to get it over with. His message is simple: in 22 yrs, Judah is toast!

23:31-24:6 – Jehoahaz ascends to the throne after the death of his father king Josiah. Josiah was a godly man who sincerely wanted to serve the Lord but he made a foolish blunder by attacking Pharaoh Neco. Meddling in Egyptian affairs was a personal decision, not a command from the Yahweh. Josiah wanted to prevent Pharaoh Neco from assisting Assyria in their fight against Babylon. Little did he realize it would be Babylon (not Assyria) who would be Judah's greatest enemy. Josiah was mortally wounded in battle and with his death, Judah lost her independence and became subject to Egypt for about 3 years until Egypt retreated and Babylon moved in and took over.

Jehoahaz, for his part, only reigned 3 months. He was Josiah's youngest son and the people chose him to be king over his 2 older brothers. But, when Pharaoh Neco came back through town, he deposed Jehoahaz and installed Josiah's eldest (living) son Eliakim as king over his newly acquired vassal state of Judah. Neco likely made this move because Jehoahaz favored alliances with Babylon while Eliakim had a more pro-Egypt stance. Neco imprisoned Jehoahaz temporarily in Riblah and then carried him off to exile in Egypt where he would eventually die. Regardless of the reasons, Jeremiah had prophesied about this event ([Jer 22:10-12](#)). He told the people not to mourn the death of Josiah but to mourn the exile of his son and successor, since he would never see Judah again. Unlike his father Josiah, Jehoahaz was an ungodly man and an evil king and deserved to be exiled.

Neco changed Eliakim's name to Jehoiakim. Both names mean "God has established" but one uses the covenant name of God "Jehovah" while the other uses the general name of God "El." In so doing, Neco was claiming to be the Lord's agent in ruling Judah. Also, Jehoiakim had to swear allegiance to Neco in the name of Jehovah and his new name would be a constant reminder of his obligations. 1 obligation was paying a heavy tribute to Neco. The new king had to now impose some new taxes on the people of Judah.

Jehoiakim was a wicked king. Paying this heavy tribute to Neco didn't stop him from building himself a new palace but when money got tight, he just refused to pay the builders ([Jer 22:13-19](#)). When Urijah the prophet denounced him and then fled to Egypt, he sent his thugs to go find him and bring him back so he could kill the prophet himself ([Jer 26:20-24](#)). It was Jehoiakim who cut to pieces and burned to ashes Jeremiah's prophecy ([Jer 36](#)). Unlike his father Josiah, he had no respect for the Lord of His Word. Thus, Jeremiah prophesied that Jehoiakim would not be mourned at his death and would have the burial of a donkey, not a king ([Jer 22:18-19](#)). Jehoiakim ruled by his own interests and desires because he knew Egypt and Neco had his back but his Egyptian backing didn't last very long.

Babylon and Egypt were having at each other and Babylon had gained the upper hand. Nebuchadnezzar soundly defeated the Egyptians at Charchemish and then pursued their fleeing army all the way down to the Sinai peninsula. While passing through, Babylon subdued Judah and Jehoiakim became a vassal king of Nebuchadnezzar. This was the first (but

not the last) encounter between Nebuchadnezzar and Jehoiakim; there would be 2 more invasions of Judah by the Babylonians but this was the first occasion of captives being carried off into exile. This 1st deportation is when Daniel and his 3 friends are brought to Babylon ([Dan 1:1-4](#)). But, after 3 years, Jehoiakim rebels!

What would possess a king to rebel against the apparent super power of the region? Nebuchadnezzar's army had fought Egypt to a stand still. During this campaign, he also learned of his father's death and had to race back to Babylon to secure his succession to the throne. He only had time to take a few choice captives and a few treasures and a promise of submission from Jehoiakim. Neb also had to return to refit his army but because of his hurried departure and continued absence, Jehoiakim falsely concluded that Egypt was strong enough to resist Babylon so he took advantage of this geopolitical situation and rebelled against Babylon and refused to pay the tribute.

We might think that Yahweh would honor the Judean independence movement of Jehoiakim but He did not bless it. In fact, Yahweh sent many adversaries against Jehoiakim during this time. Historians tell us that Nebuchadnezzar's army was made up of several different nations who were willing to fight under his victorious banner. It appears that while he was preoccupied with affairs of state in Babylon, he ordered these mercenary bands to invade and harass Judah in his absence. Whether they were sent by Nebu or not, the author has it right – it was Yahweh who sent these raiders against His people – to destroy Judah and fulfill His word.

These raids were a prelude to the greater invasion of Judah that would lead to the destruction of the temple. Isaiah told King Hezekiah this would happen ([20:16-18](#)) and King Manasseh heard the same warning but did not heed it ([21:10-15](#)). Many in the days of Jehoiakim believed that Yahweh's will was to deliver them from their enemies and preserve an independent Judah. But that was not Yahweh's will at all! It was His will to bring Judah into judgment, knowing that they had not genuinely repented and would not. The best thing for Judah to do was to submit to this will of God, as Jeremiah constantly instructed them to do – despite great opposition. God sent these raiders against Jehoiakim because, although he was a patriot of the kingdom of Judah, he was not a man submitted to Yahweh

The scenario of Jahoikim's death played out just as Jeremiah had

predicted. Nebu was returning to Judah to punish the rebellious king but his officers captured Jehoiakim before he arrived and he died in custody. We're not sure how he died but his body was likely thrown into a pit outside the walls of Jerusalem. He lived a disgraceful life and fittingly was buried in a disgraceful manner; a just end to an unjust and ungodly ruler. Then Jehoiachin his son replaced him.

7-16 – Jehoiachin (Jeconiah or Coniah) was made king but he only lasted 3 months! He was only 18 yrs old but when Nebuchadnezzar arrived with his newly refurbished army and surrounded the city, the new, young king led the royal family and leaders of the nation in surrendering to him. Jeremiah had also predicted this humiliating event (**Jer 22:24-30**). This tells us that as young as he was, Jehoiachin was still a grievous offender against God and although his sins are not listed in detail, we can see the severity of them in the punishment he receives for them.

At this time, Nebuchadnezzar didn't just take the king and his royal entourage; he took the king's treasures as well as treasures from the temple of Yahweh. Some of the temple treasures had already been removed in the first campaign but now the Babylonians stripped off all the gold they could find. Then they deported to Babylon over 10K key people including members of the royal family, government officials and valuable craftsmen. This is when the prophet Ezekiel was taken to Babylon (**Ez 1:1-3**). All of this was just a foretaste of the terrible events that would occur when Nebu returns in less than 10 yrs to lay siege to Jerusalem again for 2 years and for the last time.

17-20 – Jehoiachin would be a prisoner in Babylon for 37 yrs. In his absence, the throne wasn't given to any of his descendents (in accordance with the prophecy of **Jer 22:30**). Instead, the throne was given to his uncle Mattaniah, the brother of Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim. His name was changed to Zedekiah and just like his brothers; he did evil in the sight of the Lord. Besides being evil, he's also pretty dense because he decides to rebel against Babylon too!

I've filled in some gaps with other scriptures to give us some insight into the sins and foolishness of these 4 kings and there's more to said in the next chapter but while it may be helpful, it's only necessary because the author of our text just wants to tell us that Judah is history – but what kind of history

does Judah have here at the end? First, it is a boring history! It's the same old drip...drip: 4 times we read, he did evil in the sight of the Lord (23:32, 37; 24:9, 19). There's nothing exciting or even refreshing here; just the same old stale stuff. None of the trembling faith of Hezekiah or the enthusiastic obedience of Josiah gives spice and flavor and drama to kingdom life.

Clearly, the author wasn't excited about writing their biographies. The 2 kings that reigned only 3 months barely get a mention while the 2 the reigned 11 years are hardly given much more space than the other 2. We've already seen that Jehoiakim was a class-A scoundrel – he was anti-Yahweh to the core. Zedekiah, as we will see next time, didn't have enough backbone to be like that. He was as wishy-washy as Jehoiakim was rigid. He's the proverbial politician who doesn't know what he thinks until he reads the morning papers and checks the latest polls. So whether it was vicious wickedness or spineless wickedness that sat on Judah's throne in her last days, it made no real difference. He did evil and we all yawn together.

Sometimes people think parts of the Bible are so boring – like our text today. But it's not the author's fault! Some day we'll realize that while there's always a bite to holiness and a spice to righteousness, evil is sheer tedium! It's like watching a football game with your team losing 52-0. You go to the concession stand or wait in long lines at the rest room just to pass the time and avoid the pain. Not many pastors preach out of II Kings 24 and who can blame them. How can the Bible be exciting when it must tell of such tediously wicked men? The reality of both Scripture and life is that only holiness stirs our hearts and only godliness fascinates our minds. Sin is mind-numbing and heart-breaking.

2nd, it was a doomed history. Judah was past hope. The authors made this point repeatedly but note his description of that doom in our text. He says it's a faithful doom. Meaning Judah's end was a fulfillment of Yahweh's word and in bringing an end to Judah Yahweh was being faithful to that word. It may be a negative faithfulness but it is faithfulness nonetheless. Yahweh is a faithful God even when He destroys. We see this in v2 where God sends raiders against Judah to destroy it according to His Word! This reference is to 21:10-15 and 23:26-27. Yes, historians may be right in thinking they were egged on by Nebuchadnezzar but the text provides the real scoop on the matter – Yahweh sent them to destroy Judah and fulfill His word. We see

the same emphasis in v13 when Nebu rifles the temple and royal treasures and hacks up the gold vessels Solomon had made as the Lord said (in 20:17).

It's also an irreversible doom. The author's made this point before but gives it a frightening twist in v4. That last line doesn't mean Yahweh didn't want to forgive but might relent anyway. It means He's unwilling to forgive, will not forgive! This is the God of Ex 34:6-7 and Ps 103:10 and He doesn't want to forgive. It's a frightening comment about a frightening God! What can be more terrifying than when forgiveness is no longer even an option!

Finally, it's also a compounded doom. Look closer at v20. It says because of the anger of the Lord this happened ...what happened? Some scholars believe this refers to v18-19, to Zedekiah's doing evil or to the fact that such a wishy-washy, God-resisting man like him became king of Judah. Not that it was of God that Zedekiah was wicked but this weak man, who was so dependent upon counselors while at the same time despising the Word of God and stubbornly unrepentant, became king, so as to be the cause of Judah's destruction. In short, Zedekiah was part of Yahweh's wrath against Judah, His divine instrument for working their ultimate ruin. The leaders God gives a nation may be part of His judgment upon that nation. In Judah's case, this only makes a certain doom doubly certain.

So Judah's is a doomed history but why should we be surprised? After Manasseh, who could be surprised over a ravaged nation and an unforgiving God?

3rd, it's also a sad history. There's a pall that hangs over the text of v8-16, a gloom that the author wants us to feel. You can sense it in his record of Jehoiachin's fleeting tenure on the throne. He reigned just long enough to hand Jerusalem over to Babylon. It was the only sane thing to do. But then in v14-16 the author piles up his exile words – 5 uses of the root in 3 verses. That is the sadness of that event: captives, captivity – exile. The cream of Judean society carted off to Babylon. Here the sadness centers on what they left. In ch25 we'll see that the emphasis of their sadness will be on what they lost (25:8-17).

It almost seems as though the author wants to leave an emotional impression on his readers. It's like he wants them to be sad. It's like the

aftermath of a major storm. We know the devastating force of hurricane winds is coming our way and we generally know when it will arrive but when we go back to assess the damage in the aftermath, we're appalled. We knew it was coming, we knew it's power, knew the danger, yet still look on in horror at the devastation.

So it is with Judah's end. Yahweh's prophets had clearly proclaimed it, sometimes in shocking detail. They declared how irreversible it was and how appalling it would be. Yet when you watch the exiles dragging themselves off and see the wall-less, smoking ruins of Jerusalem, sadness sinks into your spirit like never before. I think the author wanted to do that – for good reason. Sadness is often the first step toward repentance ([II Cor 7:8-11](#)). Desolation may very well stir a prodigal's heart.

What lessons can we learn from the tragic decline and destruction of Judah? No nation rises any higher than its worship of God. Solomon's kingdom was torn into 2 kingdoms because of his sin in turning to idols to please his foreign wives. Because they forsook the true God and worshipped idols, the northern kingdom of Israel was taken captive by Assyria. It didn't take Judah long to succumb and eventually be captured by Babylon. Ps 115:8 tells us we become like the god we worship. If we refuse to worship the true and living God, we become as helpless as the idols that captivate our attention.

The people who led Israel and Judah astray were conformers, weak leaders who followed the crowd and pleased the people instead of seeking to please Yahweh. God warned them of their folly by raising up men and women who were distinctively different in that they sought to please the Lord but these faithful witnesses were ignored, abused and even martyred.

At this critical time in our history, God is looking for dedicated, distinctive people – not cookie-cutter, carbon copy Christians. We're to be living sacrifices for the Lord, distinctive people whose lives and witness point to Christ and shine like lights in the darkness. Living by faith is living without scheming. Accept God's Word for what it says and obey it. Disregard the clear teaching of Scripture and you'll soon find yourself slipping gradually out of the light and into the shadows and then into darkness, eventually ending in shame and defeat, just like Judah. All they had to do was to listen to God's Word and obey it. But that was asking too much. Is it too much for

you? 😊