

**‘THE FALLIBLE KING & THE UNFAILING GOD’
2 KINGS 10**

[St Mark’s Northbridge, March 1, 2020 – All Services]

1. More Gore.

If you were here last week at church you would’ve sat through a fairly confronting Bible reading and a pretty confronting sermon. In chapter 9 we met King Jehu for the first time. And pretty much as soon as the crown had been placed on his head he started killing people or arranging for them to be killed. God was using him to deliver his justice to the family of wicked King Ahab. But nevertheless he seemed like a pretty bloodthirsty guy. Chapter 9 ended with Queen Jezebel being thrown from a window and having horses trample her body and splatter the walls of her house with her blood before dogs came along and ate her flesh leaving just her skull, her feet, and her hands. It wasn’t for the faint-hearted.

And now this! One week later and we’re reading 2 Kings 10. And the blood continues to flow. Same king. Violent Jehu. And there is most definitely more gore. Now we have 70 heads being delivered to him in baskets and arranged in two piles at the city gate for people to see. And that’s not all. Seemingly every new paragraph in this chapter brings a new killing. It’s like a Soprano’s episode. Jehu really does seem to have a “hit list” and he’s just working his way through it. And it culminates in his massacre of all the prophets of Baal. And once again you’d be forgiven for feeling a bit queasy about the chapter- both physically, and morally.

What are we to make of this? Well, of course, I’m planning to spell out what I think the significance of this chapter is for us over the next 25 minutes. God has preserved this chapter for our learning and there are definitely good things for us to take away this morning/evening. But in terms of the violence and gore of the chapter I do want to make three preliminary comments, just to try and help us wrestle with why the Bible is sometimes like this.

So number 1- we need to remember that this was a different time. Now I’m not kidding myself that simply saying this is the way things were back then answers all our questions or resolves all our ethical issues with this kind of narrative. But nevertheless it is important to remember that we’re reading history. Almost three thousand year old history! Things were definitely very different back then. And whilst our modern sensibilities struggle to cope with scenes like these, we do need to be careful not to project those sensibilities onto ancient history. What disturbs or offends us may well have been far less shocking to people who heard about it back then. That’s the first thing.

But number 2- we also need to remember that the gore of chapters like these does speak to us about the seriousness of sin. Because the modern objection to this kind of

retribution includes a similar objection to the whole concept of divine punishment, and especially of hell. We need to accept the fact that part of why modern Australians might balk at this chapter is because they really don't like the idea of a just God (at least not until it really suits them). But as Pat reminded us last week, we actually really need a God who is just. And part of coming to terms with his justice is coming to terms with the serious evil of sin, and learning to accept that great rebellion against God deserves great punishment.

But number 3- we need to remember that God chooses to use people to accomplish his purposes, and he only has sinful people to choose from! One of the things we especially need to wrestle with in this passage is the fact that God uses Jehu to bring justice to the family of Ahab. But just because God is using him, doesn't absolve him from his own moral accountability. This is always the way with God. He uses the weak, the foolish, and the sinful. He has, in fact, chosen to accomplish much of his work in the world through human agents. And it's not as if he has any sinless human beings to choose from¹.

So, please bear those three things in mind as we look back over this chapter and draw our conclusions. 1- this was a different time. 2- the gore of these chapters does speak to the seriousness of sin. And 3- God uses sinful people to accomplish his purposes. But now let's go back to the text and briefly summarise what we find in each section of this chapter. Here are the final chapters in the Jehu story.

2. The Final Chapters in the Jehu Story.

- the elimination of Ahab's sons (vv.1-11)

Firstly, verses 1-11. The elimination of Ahab's sons. Here we discover that Jehu's plan to obliterate the family of his predecessor Ahab is not finished. He is aware of 70 sons of the house of Ahab- quite probably grandchildren- all living in the care of some elders and guardians in Samaria. So Jehu writes a letter to the guardians and elders. And he encourages them to assemble the sons and others into a fighting force and to prepare themselves for his attack. But Jehu's reputation has already reached the ears of these men and they are terrified at the thought. So instead of doing as he suggested they completely capitulate and write back telling him they will serve him as king and follow his orders. So Jehu writes back again requesting they prove their loyalty by decapitating the 70 princes and sending him their heads. Incredibly, these weak and fearful men did exactly as Jehu asked. And when the heads arrive in Jezreel, Jehu proudly displays them at the city gate. Then the next day he stands up to make a speech to the people of Jezreel. Verse 9.

[Read 10:9-10]

¹ Apart from one notable exception, of course.

I think he's taking responsibility for the death of Ahab but claiming innocence for the death of the 70 princes. Nevertheless, he states his belief that what has befallen both Ahab and his descendants is the judgement of God. And in this he speaks the truth. Nevertheless, the summary verse for this section in verse 11 reminds us just how merciless and brutal Jehu was.

[Read 10:11]

- the elimination of Ahaziah's relatives (vv.12-14)

Then we come to verses 12-14 where we see Jehu eliminating the relatives of Ahaziah. Ahaziah was a king in Judah not Israel, but he was related by marriage to Ahab's family² so perhaps he was therefore tainted in Jehu's mind. And in these verses he just happens to meet some of Ahaziah's relatives on the road. And he captured them and slaughtered them- 42 people in all. Once again, the summary at the end of verse 14 speaks to Jehu's brutality. He left no survivor.

- the elimination of the rest of Ahab's family (vv.15-17)

But then in verses 15-17 we come back to more members of Ahab's family being eliminated. This time we hear about how Jehu meets a guy called Jehonadab on the road and he discovers that Jehonadab is a friend not a foe. Perhaps Jehonadab too had heard of Jehu's reputation and was too scared to be anything but obsequious. In any event, Jehonadab is welcomed into Jehu's chariot with these words. Verse 16.

[Read 10:16]

By this stage I think most readers would be pretty suspicious of Jehu. When we hear him brag about his zeal for the LORD, it's hard not to wonder whether that's really what's going on. He may well mean it quite sincerely in one sense. But it's also hard to avoid a growing sense that this guy just likes killing people. It's also hard to miss the fact that a lot of this killing seems to be to his advantage politically. And of course, we're then told that he rode into Samaria and killed all who were left there from Ahab's family. Again- no survivors. And this was according to the LORD's prophecy through Elijah³. But it feels like there's more to this for Jehu than just delivering the LORD's justice.

And this is often the way in life isn't it? We might meet someone who claims to be deeply committed to God. They certainly talk the talk. But there are things about their conduct which raise questions in our minds. Are they really as zealous for God as they say? Are they the real deal?

² See 8:27

³ 1 Kings 21:21

I read a story online this week about this guy⁴. [SLIDE] Apparently police in Portsmouth Ohio in the US were looking for this man- Ronnie Williams Junior. It was reported that he'd convinced three local churches that he is Ed Sheeran- the famous singer. And it was further reported that he even went as far as performing The Shape Of You in front of Christ Community Church last Sunday. The report said that when the pastor was asked why he believed the real Ed Sheeran would perform for 35 dollars and a sandwich, he said he just assumed he'd fallen on tough times.

Now sadly, it turned out the report was a hoax. But it certainly served the purpose of amusing me. And it illustrates my point. Sometimes people aren't who they claim to be. Jehu says here that he's a man of great zeal for God. But we're right, I think, to have a sneaking suspicion that Jehu may not be all he claims.

- the elimination of Baal worship (vv.18-28)

And then we come to verses 18-28- the elimination of Baal worship. Here we find Jehu pretending to be a Baal worshipper himself, and assembling a great gathering of all the idol's prophets and priests. He deceived them into thinking he was going to give a great sacrifice to Baal. He even dressed all the Baal-serving guests in special robes. But as it turned out the robes were probably just to make them identifiable for those who'd come to kill them. Because when they're all assembled in the temple of Baal, 80 of Jehu's soldiers are let loose and all Baal's prophets and priests are massacred. No survivors.

And they also destroyed Baal's temple too. Verse 26- they burnt Baal's sacred stone. Verse 27- they tore down the building and turned it into a latrine. As one writer says, this is Jehu's "temple to toilet program"⁵.

And once again there are some reasons why Jehu may have thought that this was a good thing in the eyes of God⁶. But it's also possible, isn't it, that this was Jehu obliterating everything to do with Ahab's reign, more than it was a genuine zealous pursuit for the honour of the LORD. At best we'd want to say that to the very end of this narrative, Jehu remains a very ambiguous character.

- the evaluation of Jehu (vv. 29-36)

But then when we come to the evaluation of Jehu in verses 29-36, most of the ambiguity falls away. The author of 2 Kings tells us what God thinks about Jehu and his reign as Israel's king. And here we're not left in any doubt, that Jehu was, in fact, a great disappointment to God.

Although, as we might expect, this evaluation of Jehu's life is still a mixed review. To begin with verse 29 spells out that for all his opposition to Baal and his servants, Jehu was still an idol worshipper himself. At the end of the day he was a hypocrite. His self-

⁴ <https://wokr.net/local-news/item/165252-ed-sheeran-look-a-like-scammed-ohio-churches>. Accessed 27/02/2020- 3:24pm.

⁵ Dale Ralph Davis, p.162. Or as we could call it: 'desecration by defecation'.

⁶ Eg. Deuteronomy 13.

proclaimed zeal for the LORD was not the whole story. He had a sinful secret. He talked the talk but he didn't walk the walk. Verse 29.

[Read 10:29]

And this is reiterated in verse 31.

[Read 10:31]

And it's probably because of his sinful hypocrisy that God brings the punishments on Israel that verses 32-33 describe.

But at the same time there's still the fact that God did use him to accomplish his purposes. And we may wish that this wasn't the case, but the author of 2 Kings doesn't fail to include verse 30 in his final assessment of Jehu too.

[Read 10:30]⁷

Despite his hypocrisy, God still praises Jehu for having delivered justice to the house of Ahab. And we who read this today have to come to terms with this. At one level, it may trouble us. But I want to remind you that this is not an issue unique to Jehu. In fact, we see this time and time again throughout the Bible. God uses wicked men to accomplish his purposes. Some of the so-called heroes like Abraham and David are in that boat. But then we might also think of Joseph's wicked brothers; the people of Assyria who took Israel into exile. And most notably, of course, the Jewish leaders who crucified Jesus. All of these are examples of sinners used by God to fulfil his plan. Many of these are examples of God using the sin of sinners but turning it to a good purpose. As I said at the beginning tonight- God chooses to use people to accomplish his purposes, and he only has sinful people to choose from. Or in the more poetic words of one commentator: 'God has no sterilized instruments'⁸. It's true isn't it? After all, he uses us to fulfil his purposes too?!⁹

3. Learning from the Fallible King.

Well, so much for Jehu. What about us? What are we meant to learn from a chapter like this? What's the relevance? Well, let me conclude this morning/evening by pointing out some things we can learn here from Jehu, and also some things we're reminded of about God.

So first, point 3, learning from the fallible king. What does Jehu teach us?

⁷ I suppose four generations of kings is something. But it's really only a fractional blessing from God, and one that matches Jehu's half-hearted service.

⁸ Dale Ralph Davis- p.161.

⁹ I note as well here that verse 36 tells us Jehu reigned for 28 years. And yet, it would seem that his life is summarised in these two chapters by focussing on the violent start to his reign. It would seem that the author of 2 Kings believes we learn all we need to about Jehu from this snapshot (cf. how we learn about the reign of Ahaziah in chapter 1 from the way he died).

- going too far

I guess firstly he teaches us about the danger of going too far. He knew God had a role for him to play in dispensing his justice. And there was nothing wrong with that. But the ambiguity that runs through this chapter is because we're never sure whether that's all Jehu is doing. We've always got this nagging hunch that Jehu is going beyond his brief. And I think in the end that is the conclusion the chapter invites us to draw. Jehu may well have been dispensing God's justice. But it also seems true that he just liked killing people, that he's a basically bloodthirsty man. And it's hard not to think he was, at many points, working to establish his own dynasty, more than God's rule. He went too far.

Perhaps when he invited Jehonadab in verse 16 to come and see his zeal for the LORD there was something true in that? Maybe at some level he really did want to do the LORD's work? But what becomes pretty clear is that Jehu was zealous for other things too. With his mouth he identified as a zealous servant of God. But in his heart he was deeply divided. That's certainly the verdict of verse 31.

- not going far enough¹⁰

And ultimately it's that verse, verse 31, that might lead us to say the deeper problem with Jehu wasn't that he went too far, but that he didn't go far enough. That is, he was happy to take the blow-torch to God's enemies, but he wasn't prepared to turn it on himself. God's verdict in verse 31 is that he was not committed to obeying God with all his heart. And that ought to make us sit up and take notice.

Because the danger of us being like Jehu in this is very real. In fact, Jesus once said that on the final day of judgement there will be people who with their mouths identify as zealous servants of God, but whose hearts betray them. Matthew 7:21-23.

[Read Matthew 7:21-23]

They're pretty sobering words aren't they? Like Jehu, they remind us that it's possible to believe you're in God's corner, and it's even possible to be doing God's work, but to ultimately not belong to him. This also makes me think of the apostle Paul before he became a Christian. He teaches us, does he not, that it's possible to be known as "zealous" for God, but to actually be an opponent of God's Son. In all of these ways the Bible reminds us that there are plenty of people in the world today who think they're Christians but who aren't. There may even be people like that here at St Mark's today? These are people who say some of the right things, and who maybe even do some good things, but they are not actually committed to obeying God with all their heart. And in what can only be described as a tragedy beyond all tragedies, one day, Jesus will have to tell them that he never knew them.

¹⁰ This expression is borrowed from Dale Ralph Davis- p.163

But of course there's also a warning here for true Christians isn't there? We must be so careful not to allow compromise in our hearts to grow up like a weed in the garden of our work for God. We must be so careful not to rely on the appearance of zeal for God. We must never fall back into thinking that our relationship with God is measured by the extent to which we serve his purposes. Because it's always about the heart. And we must keep asking ourselves- does Jesus have all of it? All of our hearts?

4. Trusting the Unfailing God.

That's an important question isn't it? And it's a question that can really expose us and trouble us. And that's why it's important we don't finish there. Because 2 Kings 10 does want us to ask ourselves that hard question about our hearts. But that's not where 2 Kings 10 wants to leave us. It doesn't want us to finish our reflections with introspection, but rather with the knowledge of God. It doesn't want us to leave this chapter thinking only about ourselves, but also, and most importantly, about God.

Because at the heart of this chapter is a powerful contrast. It's a contrast between a fallible king and the unfailing God. A contrast between a flawed and corrupt servant of God, and the one he served who is never corrupt- the one who is entirely without failings. Entirely.

Verse 10 of our chapter is the critical verse I think. And ironically, these words come from Jehu's own mouth.

[Read 10:10]

If the theme of Jehu's life was "no survivors", the theme of God's life, is "no failures". No promise has ever failed. No word that has come from his mouth has ever failed to be true. No action he has intended has ever failed to come to pass. That sounds to us too good to be true. It's genuinely hard for us to imagine a faultless person. We don't know any. But if we know God we do. And here there are three dimensions of the divine faultlessness that I want to finish with this morning/evening.

- his justice

Part of what verse 10 is saying is that his justice never fails. And as we've seen over the past two Sundays, this is a big part of what 2 Kings 9-10 are teaching us. Ahab shook his fist at God his whole life long. And God said that one day his wrath would fall on Ahab and his family. And 2 Kings 9-10 show us that it did. God kept his word. There is no escaping God's justice.

And as Pat reminded us last week in his very fine sermon on 2 Kings 9, it's superlatively good to have a God of justice. It means that no injustice we suffer or see in this world will go unchecked. We can trust him to be just. And knowing that is what helps us survive in an unjust world without going completely crazy. And knowing that is what

helps us not to take vengeance into our own hands, but to be able to treat people, even our enemies, with grace. Because God's unfailing justice can be trusted.

- his word

But more than that, verse 10 is also telling us that his word never fails. Verse 10 isn't just saying that when God promises to punish he most certainly will. It's actually saying that when God promises to do anything, he most certainly will. So if he promises to save you, he will. If he promises to forgive the sins you confess, he will. If he promises to strengthen you through the trials you face, he will. If he promises not to give you anything you can't bear, he will. If he promises to be with you always, he will. If he promises to one day wipe the tears from your face with his own finger, and to lead you by the hand into your eternal rest, he will. We can trust every promise he makes. In fact, we can trust that everything he has ever said to us is true. Because his word is unfailing.

- his king

And finally, his king. Because the undercurrent of 2 Kings 10 is actually an unresolved tension. And it's an unresolved tension that runs right through the books of the kings, and right through Israel's history. Because it's reassuring to know that God is unfailing and can be trusted. But, his people still have to live with fallible kings. And they still have to live with the consequences of their kings failures. God may be faultless, but life in a world of fallible kings sucks/is still a painful life. And the nagging question of 1 and 2 Kings is this. What is God going to do about it? When will his people find a king whose character is not flawed, whose rule is not wicked, and whose heart is not divided?

Well, thankfully, we know the answer to that don't we? Because we've met the king of unfailing justice, the king who was and is God's unfailing and eternal Word. We've met the king whose whole heart belonged to God. We've met the king who really was consumed with zeal for the things of God. We've met the king who wasn't at all bloodthirsty, but who in fact allowed his blood to be spilt for the people in his kingdom. We've met the king who is infallible in every way, because he actually is the unfailing God.

Let me finish by reading to you from Revelation 11:15:

'The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.'

Amen.