

# Repent or Perish

## The good life?

What's the key to the good life? That's kind of a universal question for all people everywhere isn't it? And there are many suggestions, many pieces of advice.

### - **be true to yourself**

Perhaps the most common piece of advice you might hear these days is to *be true to yourself*. This is the message of so many of our movies, and music, and TV: you need to look deep down inside yourself and figure out who you really are, and then live out your authentic self. Satisfy your desires, follow your dreams. You do you. It's a compelling story.

### - **sort yourself out**

But maybe it's not that simple. Because many people recognise that being true to yourself is actually more complex than it first appears. For our hearts are pretty *complicated*: which *true self* is really me? And our hearts are *compromised*: what about all those things about me which are not especially pleasant or praiseworthy? Someone who has really hit on this, and has obviously touched a nerve for many people, in the last couple of years is Jordan Peterson.

I heard him say this recently:

*Human beings are terrible creatures. Now, I happened to think humans are remarkable creatures, but we also have an unlimited capacity for brutality and evil. And every one of us carries that.*

Now that's a sobering assessment. And so what do we need to do? Well, he goes on to say we need to *sort ourselves out*. We must ruthlessly confront the little dragons of chaos in ourselves and bring order and peace to our lives.

So it's not about satisfying our desires, but about self-control and discipline. It's not about following your dreams, but facing up to reality. Sorting yourself out is the path to the good life.

And neither of these paths is particularly new, of course. Jesus famously told the story of two sons. One who ran away to the far country to follow his every dream and desire. The other stayed home, cleaned his room, and followed the road of discipline and self-control.

### **- Repent and believe**

But what does Jesus say? What is Jesus' advice to those looking for the good life? Well, he says, what we really need is not the high-life, or hard-work, but to run home to our Father.

Or, as he says at the very beginning of his ministry: "Repent and believe the good news." The message of Jesus, the message of the Bible, and the message of 2 Kings 13, is that we must turn *away* from ourselves, and turn *towards* God, relying not on our own self or strength, but on his power and grace.

When we see both ourselves and God clearly, we will understand that the good life, is the life of repentance and faith.

## Wholly wicked kings

So let's see how this works in 2 Kings 13. You may have noticed as we've been working through the book of 2 Kings, that the narrative flips back and forth between the north and the south of the Divided Kingdom of Israel. Last week we were down south in Judah, where the descendants of David sat on the throne. This week we are back north, in the kingdom of Israel. And as we hear about 2 more Kings of Israel, Jehoahaz and Jehoash, it is all very sadly familiar.

Listen to verdict given of both these Kings in this chapter:

We're told in verse 2 that,

*Jehoahaz did evil in the eyes of the Lord by following the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit, and he did not turn away from them.*

*And then in 11, Jehoash did evil in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn away from the any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit; he continued in them.*

Again, we are told of these two wholly wicked kings, who fail to turn away from the idolatry that has plagued Israel ever since Jeroboam led the division of north and south hundreds of years before.

And do you notice the way this is all described. It's not only sinful *actions* that these kings *repeat*, but it's a sinful path, a crooked *way of life* that these kings *follow*. Jehoahaz and Jehoash *continue* to walk in step with the wicked and do not *turn away* from the way that sinners take.

And it's a disaster for them and for the nation they lead. In verse 3 we are told that the Lord's anger burned against Israel, that for a long time they were under the power of Hazael king of Aram. In verse 7 we read of how almost the whole nation had been ground down to dust. And Jehoash didn't do much better. Constantly fighting with Aram, and even locked in a war against Amaziah king of Judah.

And these two things are not disconnected. The way of sinful rebellion is filled with strife. It provokes the anger of God, and it leads to violence and conflict with other people.

And as we read about Jehoahaz and Jehoash, we are not only getting a historical insight into the character of two Ancient Kings. For all of these narratives in the Bible are always giving us little windows into the nature of all humanity, throughout all of history. This is the natural inclination of every human heart: idolatrous rebellion against God.

A few weeks ago I bought this little book, it's just come out this year, it's a Catechism. The purpose of a Catechism is to teach the truth of the gospel and the Christian life through a series of Questions and Answers that all flow on from each other.

Listen to how the catechism unfolds the predicament of all people, everywhere:

## **2. What is the human condition?**

The universal human condition is that, though made for fellowship with our Creator, we have been cut off from him by self-centred rebellion against him, leading to guilt, shame, and fear of death and judgment. This is the state of sin. (Genesis 3; Romans 3:23)

## **3. How does sin affect you?**

Sin alienates me from God, my neighbour, God's good creation, and myself. I am hopeless, guilty, lost, helpless, and walking in the way of death. (Isaiah 59:2; Romans 6:23)

## **4. What is the way of death?**

The way of death is a life empty of God's love and life-giving Holy Spirit, controlled by things that cannot bring me eternal joy, but that lead only into darkness, misery and eternal condemnation. (Romans 1:25; Proverbs 14:12; John 8:34)

## **5. Can you mend your broken relationship with God?**

No. I have no power to save myself, for sin has corrupted my conscience and captured my will. Only God can save you. (Ephesians 2:1-9; John 14:6; Titus 3:3-7)

Now you can start to see why “Be True to Yourself” and “Sort yourself out” are such catastrophic pieces of advice. For the problem with ourselves is, in fact, ourselves! Jesus says the same thing: “out of the *heart* come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.” To look inside of ourselves for the answer is a disaster, it can only end in despair.

Now this all sounds very desperate doesn't it? And it should, this is not good news. BUT if we have eyes to see, it is an open door to the good news of the gospel. For when we recognise the true state of our sinful hearts, we will be driven to look *outside* of ourselves for rescue. When we recognise our own helplessness, we are then freed to look to the only place where help is truly found. And as we just read, “it is only God who can save us.”

## Half-hearted repentance

And so it proves in 2 Kings 13. Obviously, at some stage each of these Kings comes to the end of their rope. Each of them realises their own powerlessness, that they simply can't "sort themselves out" and so the both turn to God. They repent.

So first, we're told that Jehoahaz "sought the Lord's favour" in verse 4. And remarkably, God actually listens to him! He gives attention to Israel's plight and with his help they escape from the power of Aram and live with a measure of peace. Even when a wholly wicked king seeks the Lord, God sees and freely gives his favour to his people. But, the repentance of Israel under Jehoahaz is limp and half-hearted. Verse 6 is thoroughly deflating:

*But they did not turn away from the sins of the house of Jeroboam, which he had caused Israel to commit; they continued in them. Also, the Asherah pole, remained standing in Samaria.*

And you see exactly the same thing in the reign and repentance of Jehoash in the second half of the chapter. In his desperation he runs to an old and dying Elisha: "My Father! My Father!" He cries out in verse 14. And he tells Elisha about the depleted chariots and horsemen of Israel.

Now, I reckon Elisha must have done his fair share of children's ministry in his time, because he responds by giving an object lesson to Jehoash, and to us, that illustrates the two key points of this passage perfectly.

First, he tells Jehoash to fire an arrow from the east window. "Shoot!" Elisha said, "The Lord's arrow of victory, the arrow of victory over Aram." And as the arrow flies out of the window, it's this picture for the King that victory over Aram, release from their oppression, will not come from his own strength or power, but the strength and power of God, coming from above, to help his people. "Victory will come from the Lord", Elisha tells the King.

Then it gets a little bit strange. Next Elisha tells Jehoash to take the arrows and strike them against the ground. The arrows remember, are signs of God's provision and protection for his people. And Jehoash, you could imagine, must have been very confused. He probably hit the arrows against the ground a few times and looked at Elisha saying "what's this all about?!"

And Elisha is furious! Listen again to his response in verse 19:

*The man of God was angry with him and said, "You should have struck the ground five or six times; then you would have defeated Aram and completely destroyed it. But now you will defeat it only three times.*

"You should have trusted God with absolutely everything you had!" Elisha is saying. Why did you start on the right track, only to bail so quickly?

See Jehoash and Jehoahaz are exactly the same. They turned to the Lord, and they sought his favour, but they failed to fully trust the Lord, and seek his honour. They wanted God's help in the middle of a crisis, but they failed to turn away from their sin and turn to God in true worship. They recognised the enormity of their physical problem, but

they were blind to the enormity of their *Spiritual* problem. And so their repentance was a half-hearted repentance.

## A wholly gracious God

And yet, amazingly, in each case God responds. For in the postscript of the chapter we are reminded of the glorious truth that God is moved not primarily through the quality of our repentance, but out of the abundance of his grace.

Have a look at verses 22 and 23:

*Hazael king of Aram oppressed Israel throughout the reign of Jehoahaz. But the LORD was **gracious** to them and had compassion and showed concern for them because of his **covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob**. To this day he has been unwilling to destroy them or banish them from his presence.*

That's really quite stunning. We saw last week how God was totally committed to his promise to David that one of his descendants would always rule over God's people. But what hope then is there for the northern kingdom of Israel? This nation started in *rebellion* against the descendants of David and is wracked with idolatry from the first to the last.

But even still, there is hope, because God reaches back past David to the promise he made to Abraham. The promise that God would preserve Abraham's descendants and bless them. Both the Kings in this chapter are completely wicked, and their repentance is half-hearted at

best. It seems that the nation of Israel is stuck in an unstoppable spiral towards destruction. But God is wholly gracious, and he will not abandon his covenant commitment to his people.

The true problem, then, for the 2 Kings of this chapter is that they failed to grasp the enormity of God's **love**, and the enormity of his **power**. As we see in that strange little aside about Elisha's dead body, God's power can even work through death, and beyond the grave. What fools these Kings were to place their trust in a wooden pole of a false God, when resurrection power was available to them from the true and living God of the universe.

And it's here that the good news of the gospel opens up to us as well! For remember that God's promise to Abraham was a promise to bless all the nations through Abraham's family. God is not only committed to Israel, but he's committed to the whole world that he has made.

And so, while we recognise our true spiritual condition and our own utter helplessness, we declare that only this God of faithful love and resurrecting power can save us. And so we ask:

***How does God save us?***

*God forgives my sins and reconciles me to himself through his Son, Jesus Christ, whom he has given to the World as an undeserved gift of his love. "God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

It turns out that the good life is the *god-life*. The life of abandoning reliance upon ourselves and placing all our trust in the abundant grace

of God. Not trusting in ourselves, but denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following Jesus. Not trying to sort it out ourselves but trusting that Jesus came into the mess we made and sorting it out for us.

In Jesus, every promise of God finds its resounding YES.

Jesus is the true King of Israel who leads his people in perfect righteousness.

Jesus is the true prophet of God, who not only brought life from the grave, but who himself rose from the dead and offers eternal life to the whole world.

Jesus is the true Son of Abraham, through whom God blesses every nation.

And he says to us, "Repent, and believe the good news."

The good life, is the life of repentance.

## **The life of repentance**

### **- At the start of the Christian life**

And so maybe you're here today and you're actually pursuing the good life by your own strength. Perhaps your trying to be true to yourself, or maybe you're trying to sort everything out all by yourself.

And maybe, you're here today, because like the Kings of this chapter, you're just overwhelmed and exhausted and you're looking for help from somewhere, anywhere, to find rest and release.

Hear Jesus' word for you today: "Repent." This is the start of the Christian life, to turn away from self and sin, and turn to Jesus. If you'd like to make that start today, and you're not sure how. Here's another question from the Catechism:

***How can you repent and put your faith in Jesus Christ?***

*With God's help, I can acknowledge and turn from my sins, receive the gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ, and embrace the new life he freely gives me.*

All you need to do is sincerely pray and receive what God freely offers you in Jesus. There's a beautiful little prayer in this book that you can pray. If that's something you'd like to do, please come and find me, or Simon, or Kath, or speak to someone you trust. I guarantee any of us here would be delighted to pray with you.

**- The daily experience of the Christian life**

But, for those of us who have made that initial turn to Christ, this repentance at the start of the Christian life is the beginning of a *life-time* characterised by continually turning from sin and trusting in God. Repentance isn't a one-time deal, it's for every day and every moment.

Martin Luther famously expressed it like this over 500 years ago:

*When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said "Repent," he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.*

For we never ever get to the point of graduating beyond our need for God. We always need to be letting go of some area of self-reliance, turning away from some stubborn sin, calling out for the favour of God and asking for his help to continue in the way of Jesus.

To borrow the image of this chapter in 2 Kings, we need to spend our whole lives clinging onto the powerful arrows of the gospel, continually beating them against the ground, trusting that apart from the life-giving power and strength of Jesus we can't do anything on our own.

So if you are struggling with some particular sin in your life. Repent! Stop trying to overcome it on your own strength, or clean yourself up before you come to God. Instead run to him, ask for his forgiveness. Ask that he would lead you not into temptation but deliver you from evil. Then seek to live a holy life by the strength of his Holy Spirit.

Or if you are feeling frustrated in your efforts to share your faith with others. Repent! Stop trying to convince people with your own clever arguments and turn to God. Plead with him to give new life to those you love. And then share the gospel trusting in his power to work through your weakness.

If you have a growing frustration and anger about some social or political issue. Repent! Stop trying to change the world by your own strength and call upon God to act for justice in his world. Then move for change not with anger, but with the peace that God will humble the proud and lift up the lowly.

If you are feeling dry and unenthusiastic about your relationship with God, then repent! Stop relying on what you already know, open his Word, and ask him to help you see Jesus and the gospel with fresh eyes, that your heart may be revived and your life energised by the power and energy of his Spirit.

And even though our repentance will be weak, frail, and even hard-hearted, we are reminded again and again of God's grace. That he sees and responds to our every little turn to him. In the end, we will often

need to repent of our own repentance. But that's OK. Because our confidence in repentance, just like in everything else, is not in ourselves, but in the grace and mercy of God, in the power of his Spirit, and the his every promise to us is Yes in Jesus Christ.

### **- In the middle of a crisis (Luke 13)**

Repentance is the beginning, middle and end of the Christian life. But I do want to finish today by saying that Jesus also says to us that repentance is the right response in the middle of a crisis.

That's why we read that passage from Luke 13. For Jesus hears about two local tragedies, and his response is one of those ones where you just think to yourself, wait, *Jesus said what?!*

Because his advice is not to revolt against tyranny of Roman rule. His advice is not to be safe and avoid dodgy structures, or to lobby for an inquiry into the tower-building industry. And it's not even to pray for safety, that others or ourselves would not face a similarly untimely death.

No. Twice Jesus tells the crowd: "Unless you repent, you too will all perish."

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Jesus says that these events don't reveal that some are more sinful than others. They *remind* us, in the words of Hebrews 9:27, that all of us are destined to die once and to face judgement. They shock us out of the mundanity of everyday life and bring close to home the reality of our own death, and our own helplessness in the face of it.

Now, I am no expert, but it does seem that the Coronavirus is highly infectious, and its mortality rate is not insignificant. And many of us, and many of our neighbours are dealing with that cross-pressure of something that is far beyond our control. Something that can attack our health, and as we are seeing, our wealth; two things in which we normally find great security.

But, brothers and sisters, let us not lose sight of the perspective of Jesus. For he is concerned for us to remember that Human Sin is a far more insidious infection, that all of us carry, and that has a mortality rate of 100%. It claimed Jehoahaz. It claimed Jehoash. It even claimed the great prophet Elisha. And it will claim every single one of us.

But it could not claim Jesus, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. He burst through the grave and into new life, and he will take us through death into life with him, if only we would abandon our sin and self-reliance and trust him with our lives.

Our world needs the good life of Jesus, now more than ever, our world needs to hear what Jesus might say in the face of a crisis:

“Do you think that those infected with Coronavirus are any more sinful than you? Do you think that the people of Wuhan are any more sinful than us here in Sydney? Do you think that Willoughby Girls High School is any more sinful than Cammeraygal? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

Let's pray.

*ALMIGHTY God, you see that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies, and inwardly in our souls; that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil*

*thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*