

Sermon 20, “The Wicked Will Fall by His Own Wickedness,” 1 Kings 15:25-16:20

- I. Baasha Executes God’s Prophesied Judgment on Nadab Ben Jeroboam, 15:25-31
- II. God Prophesies Judgment on Baasha, 15:32-16:7
- III. Zimri Executes God’s Prophesied Judgment on Elah Ben Baasha, 16:8-14
- IV. Zimri Executes God’s Judgment on Himself, 16:15-20

Intro: Solomon could have been writing the history of the USSR when he said, “The righteousness of the blameless will direct his way aright, But the wicked will fall by his own wickedness” (Proverbs 11:5). Let me just read to you a bit from *Espionage's Most Wanted: The Top 10 Book of Malicious Moles, Blown Covers, and Intelligence Oddities*.

Felix Dzerzhinsky, once a student for the Catholic Priesthood, became the first head of the CHEKA [in 1917] . . . He was head until his death in 1926 at age 58 (said to be of natural causes). The OGPU oversaw forced collectivization of the Ukraine and the liquidation of the rich peasants, the Kulaks, as many as 9 or 10 million of them. The man in charge during the killing spree was Vyacheslav Menzhinsky. By 1934 the name and the initials smelled awful, so another name change was in order. Menzhinsky was poisoned by one of his ambitious underlings who wanted his job--so much for that logjam at the top.

NKVD served as the new, innocent-sounding name. It came with a new director, the poisoner Genrikh Yagoda. Mr. Yagoda was a man of little education but he was the sort of hard-charging, hands-on manager that Stalin loved, at least for a while. . . .

Yagoda was so good he made Stalin uneasy. This was bad. Stalin had him arrested and shot by Nikolai “The Bloody Dwarf” Yezhov. As the new boss, Yezhov enthusiastically completed the purges, which had liquidated more than two million Russians by the end of the 1930s. In 1938 that included Yezhov himself, who, word has it, was personally strangled by his successor Lavrenti Beria. . . .

Beria’s end came in 1953. Most stories suggest that he was shot, either at his desk or by a firing squad. Soviet Premier Nikita Krushchev later claimed that he personally shot Beria when Beria came into his office without bodyguards. . . .

The historical record . . . suggests that anyone who becomes chief of one of these organizations need not burden himself with much retirement planning.²

² Selections from Tom E. Mahl, *Espionage's Most Wanted: The Top 10 Book of Malicious Moles, Blown Covers, and Intelligence Oddities* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2003), 29-35.

While Mr. Mahl may make light of it, the fact of the matter is, brothers and sisters, that the wicked will fall by his own wickedness. Our Lord Jesus Himself put the same truth in very summary terms when He said that those who live by the sword die by the sword (Matt. 26:52). Well, long before the KGB and its predecessors gave us the lovely examples of Yezhov the Bloody Dwarf and his friends, the Northern kingdom of Israel presented a similar revolting spectacle. Here, in rapid succession, four kings in three dynasties fall by their own wickedness. We must come away from this gruesome story appalled by the depths to which evil reaches, but comforted by the fact that God is in control and that His word rules the evil of wicked men. We see this in the life of each of these four kings.

I. Baasha Executes God's Prophesied Judgment on Nadab Ben Jeroboam, 15:25-31

Last time, we left the story at the death of Asa, having discussed the challenges of faithfulness. The four kings we discuss tonight lived concurrently with the three kings we heard about last week--basically, just after the year 900 B.C.

So Jeroboam ruled Northern Israel as its first monarch. He died of natural causes, and left his kingdom to his son, Nadab. Remember, two weeks ago we heard how Ahijah, the prophet from Shiloh, had pronounced judgment against the kingdom of Jeroboam. Specifically, he had declared that the dynasty of Jeroboam would not endure, because Jeroboam trusted in his golden calves instead of trusting in the promises of God. Well, Nadab, unlike his righteous brother Abijah, also trusted in the golden calves instead of in God's word. He walked in the way of his father Jeroboam. He sponsored bull religion. So after less than two years on the throne a man from Issachar rose up and killed him.

Now, we haven't heard of Philistines during the reigns of Solomon and Rehoboam. But now, the Philistines, so prominent in Samuel and during David's time, are back in action. Nadab is out with the army besieging a Philistine town when Baasha jumps him and slaughters him. But that's not where it ends; Baasha proceeds to wipe out every descendant of Jeroboam. exactly as God had promised would happen.

Once again, since the text virtually begs that we ask this question once again, I ask you--do you think God takes idolatry lightly? Would your guess, based on this text, be that God really doesn't care that deeply about who you worship, or how you worship? Yeah, I didn't think so. For the sake of His glory, God will not tolerate or compromise with idols. Period. That begs the further question: where do you stand in relation to idols? Is there something you are willing to sin to have? If so, then that thing is your idol. It may be a good, even a really good thing. But it's still an idol.

Notice, too, how God's threatening words work together with human sin. Nadab and his family were slaughtered because of the prophecy against them and because of their family legacy of sin. Both of these intertwined, working together to bring about the destruction of this family.

II. God Prophesies Judgment on Baasha, 15:32-16:7

Well, Baasha is the most successful of these four kings, managing to spend 24 years on the throne. He was just as wicked as the other kings of Northern Israel. Notice that absolutely

nothing is told us about him except the formulaic--his name, his father's name, how long he ruled, what his capital was, and how you can read the rest in the story of the chronicles of the kings of Israel. So he slept with his fathers, and Elah his son reigned in his place.

In other words, evil is boring. Tolstoy had it backwards. Rather than saying, "All happy families are alike, but every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," he really should have said, "All unhappy families are alike, but every happy family is happy in its own way." Good is pluriform, creative; evil is alike, imitative and desecrating but never creating. Only God can create; Satan only parodies. That's mostly why, if I ask you afterwards, probably none of you will be able to tell me the difference between Elah, Baasha, Nadab, and Zimri. It's because they're practically indistinguishable. But all of you know the difference between David and Solomon.

In our age, evil has managed to sell that lie that it is interesting, and good is boring. Evil sells tickets; good only attracts tween homeschool girls. Family of God, it's not true. Satan does not exist just to keep things interesting, and heaven is not boring because everybody there is good all the time. Fun and excitement are not dependent on wickedness for their existence. Satan is not only boring; he is bored. It is God who is thrilling. If you don't believe that, of course, then you are fundamentally easy prey for Satan.

So rather than telling us what Baasha did, this passage fundamentally is about the prophecy against him. Jehu, son of Hanani, prophesied that Baasha's dynasty would meet the same fate inflicted on Jeroboam's dynasty. There are two reasons for this: first, Baasha was exalted out of the dust, yet rather than honoring God in response, he kept following the golden calves. Second, Baasha mercilessly slaughtered the house of Jeroboam. Let's look at each of these.

God takes sin against Himself seriously. He had been very good to Baasha. He had given him royal power. God expected and demanded gratitude and worship. Baasha refused to be grateful to God, and kept worshipping false gods. Thus, he provoked the true God to anger.

Has God been generous to you? Do you have more than you can possibly use in all kinds of areas of life? Of course you do. So, I ask you--do you respond with obedience to God? Is praying and giving thanks before meals a delight or a chore to you? Is taking time to worship God something you love, or something you wish to hurry through so that you can get to the real excitement? Where, in other words, is your heart?

Secondly, God judged Baasha because he destroyed Nadab and the rest of Jeroboam's family. How does that work? you may ask. Well, God uses wicked agents to accomplish His goals, and then He punishes them for being wicked. He did the same thing with Assyria, whom He punished with Babylon, and then He punished Babylon with Media. He uses the wicked to punish the wicked, and He does it all righteously. Does it seem unfair to us that God would strike down Baasha for carrying out a threat that God Himself had made? It shouldn't. Do you have pity in your heart for those leaders of the KGB, each of whom personally eliminated his predecessor? Why not? God has promised, maybe not as specifically as He did about Jeroboam,

but nonetheless very clearly, that whoever takes up the sword will perish by the sword. My heart doesn't break over Lavrenti Beria's manner of death. We regret his wickedness, but we do not charge God with wrongdoing when He uses one wicked man against another.

Finally, notice quickly the curse on the house of Baasha. Once again, there will be no one who cares left around to bury his posterity. They will be eaten by dogs and vultures where they fall. Once again, the message is clear: flee from idolatry! If God has given you the blessing of eternal salvation--a blessing which is given to most of us in this room--then how should we respond? We must flee idolatry! We must walk in gratitude! If you owe God more than Baasha, be sure that you show Him more fear and reverence than Baasha did!

III. Zimri Executes God's Prophesied Judgment on Elah Ben Baasha, 16:8-14

Baasha left a son to reign after him; the Baasha dynasty lasted for part of two years after its founder died. It was represented by Elah. What do we know about this man? He was drinking himself drunk when he was struck down. Indeed, this whole section on Elah effectively boils down to a summary of how Zimri executed the judgment prophesied about the household of Baasha. How pitiful, to kill a man who's drunk and helpless. And in case Baasha's other surviving relatives showed any disposition to claim the throne for themselves, Zimri struck down all of them too.

So what can we say about this king? First of all, we can say that it is genuinely pathetic when you amuse yourself with alcohol rather than taking seriously the business of doing your daily work in the fear of God. Elah didn't have to kill anyone to get the throne. It was handed to him. He had power. And what did he use it for? Drinking with his buddy Arza.

Secondly, we see that all of this took place according to the word of the Lord, which He spoke against these kings. Every last bit of this sordid history was under God's control.

So if you are subject to a foolish ruler, a foolish father, a foolish boss, know that God is still in control. Be appalled by the depths of evil, and recognize that without God's grace, there is nothing that makes any one of us different from Baasha, Elah, Zimri, and all the rest of them. Without the saving righteousness of Christ applied to you by the Holy Spirit, you could very well be on a drunken binge right now. Don't boast in the fact that you're way better than that wicked Elah; boast in the kindness of your God, who took pity on you and saved you when you deserved to be struck down by a homicidal opportunist like Zimri. Be appalled by evil, and grateful that God controls history. Know that He will not spare an idolatrous people unless they turn and repent.

IV. Zimri Executes God's Judgment on Himself, 16:15-20

Well, Zimri was busy. He executed every relative and friend of Baasha. And he did it all in less than a week. Yes, that's how long his evil reign lasted--seven days. Here is the ultimate in political instability. Talk about regime change! The prophet had called Northern Israel a reed shaken in the water. He wasn't kidding.

Do you see how appallingly futile evil is? Zimri was a homicidal maniac, and the reward of his crimes was a single week of power. He didn't even get to enjoy the fruits of his sin.

So it is with you, whenever you sin. How do you know that you will even get to enjoy the results of that sin? Sin is appalling, not only because it's wicked but because it's stupid. Why would you sin? Obviously, because your heart is bent toward it, like Zimri's was. And the only solution is for God Himself to come and unbend your heart by His Spirit so that you love what's good. Zimri probably thought that winning the throne would fulfill him, give his life meaning. God tells us that only walking with Christ can give our lives meaning.

So the official report of Zimri's reign takes us back to Gibbethon. The Israelites were besieging Gibbethon 25 years previously, when Baasha killed Nadab. Here they are, at it again. Zimri was not at Gibbethon; he was back in the capital city of Tirzah. Well, Omri, the commander of the army, saw an opportunity, and he abandoned the Philistines to go and fight Zimri. They quickly captured the city, but they had not yet broken into the inner ring of defenses in the royal palace, where Zimri had stationed himself. Nonetheless, he quickly saw that he could not hope to win. So he committed suicide. The authors give their moralizing comment on his life: he died because he followed Jeroboam into idolatry. Now, we can think of a number of other reasons that he died. He died because he killed himself. He died because he hadn't figured on Omri. He died because he lost the will to live. And so on. But we shouldn't overlook this notice. Had he trusted the true God, he never would have committed all those murders and provoked the anger of the army against himself. Or, in God's providence Omri could have taken a Philistine arrow in his guts and been in no condition to lead anyone. Or any number of other things could have happened. You see, beyond his burning the palace over himself, we don't know but that his idolatry led directly to his death. In fact, the inspired authors tell us that it did. By the way, it's still idolatry that leads to suicide today. Why do people kill themselves? Because they have a guilty conscience. Because they just can't take it anymore. Because they've lost the will to live. Because whatever God they worship will never forgive them for their failure to live up to his standards. If you live for public approval, public approval will ultimately kill you. If you live for pleasure, pleasure will kill you. If you live for power, power will kill you. It killed Zimri. No one commits suicide because he says, "I serve the true God and the true God will never forgive me for my sins." No, the true God forgives sins, including the sin of suicide. Suicide is not the unforgivable sin. But nonetheless, we all intuitively recognize it as a very serious form of sin.

So what's the takeaway from Zimri? Once again, recognize the depth of evil, and rejoice in the goodness of God. Evil is bad. Appalling, in fact. But evil is also under God's control. God saves people. God in his common grace gives periods of stability. I don't think anyone in the room knows what it's like to live in the kind of anarchy that characterized Israel in this period. Why don't we know that? Because of the goodness of God in sending revival to our land and giving us the grace to be righteous in how we govern. Ultimately, we don't have this kind of chaos because of the remnants of the fear of God that exist in our society.

Does the history of these wicked kings, or for that matter, the history of the USSR, make you question the goodness of God? Don't let it do so. Unless God is good, we have no foundation for declaring Elah and Beria wicked. Unless God is good, we have no reason to

expect fallen human beings to govern uprightly. But the fact of the matter is that there is a God who judges on the earth. There is a God who condemns the wicked, but also forgives some of the wicked and makes them righteous. Let's serve that God, shall we? Amen.