

Can we trust God to do what he has said?

You say that is a very strange question for a Bible teacher to ask – who would ever teach the Bible if he doubted that God could be depended on to do what he has said.

But it is a crucial question and one that goes to the heart of how you and I behave.

Abram did not believe that God could be depended on to give him a son once Sarah passed a certain age – and so he tried to achieve it some other way. To his credit he then **did** believe God when he renewed his promise and Sarah bore Isaac – but it was his doubt in God that made him the father of Ishmael.

Jesus said [Matt 6]:

- 31 do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'**
- 32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.**
- 33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.**
- 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow**

Do you believe that God can be depended on to give you all these things in accordance with the word of his son Jesus? Or do you worry? Indeed does your worry distract you from attending to the kingdom of God and his righteousness?

This is a huge question so don't avoid it. This is the question that made the prophet Jonah run from the LORD when he sent him to preach against Nineveh. Jonah lived right in the middle of the period of time we are dealing with this morning in our journey through the Bible. He lived during the reign of Jeroboam II of the northern kingdom – and he is often portrayed very wrongly as a man who was afraid (not least by the Jewish historian Josephus – who clearly didn't understand what motivated Jonah at all).

He would have had every right to be afraid because God had asked him to go to the capital city of Assyria, the world's only superpower and tell them that their city was to be destroyed because of their wickedness. But he wasn't afraid – or at least that was not why he ran from the LORD.

So why did he run? You can read it for yourself in Jonah ch4 just after the record of how God changed his mind and decided not to bring on Nineveh the destruction he had threatened because the people of Nineveh had repented of their wickedness. Jonah was angry with God and he said:

2 "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

3 Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

What is his problem? His problem is that he is a prophet – and as a prophet his survival depends on what he says coming true. His only credentials are that what he says will happen actually does happen – and if he loses his credentials then he becomes branded as a **false prophet** and for that the punishment is death. Jonah found himself in a cleft stick – he knew that God would change his mind if Nineveh repented. In other words if he did a good job of his preaching – if he was persuasive – then he would be made out to be a liar ... so he ran away.

The question is – can I trust God to do what he says.

Now of course in the case of Jonah God had a higher agenda – and Jonah needed to learn the way of God where grace trumps any kind of rigid legalism every time. But the story gives us a powerful insight into the importance of knowing that we can trust what God says. If we can't then we might as well just live every man for

himself. Our God is then reduced to someone we need to defend and make excuses for – and that is no God at all.

I tell you I will not worship a God I need to make excuses for. My God is fierce and free and utterly trustworthy – and I know this among other things because of the history of the kingdom of Israel.

During the making of the movie Ben-Hur, Charlton Heston who played the part of Judah Ben-Hur worked long hours with stunt trainers, learning to drive a chariot for the film's crucial chariot race. He became really good at controlling the horses and rig, but finally he had bitten off more than he could chew. So he approached the legendary film director Cecil B. De Mille about the scene. 'Mr. De Mille', he said, 'I've worked very hard at mastering this rig. I think I can drive it convincingly in the scene, but I don't think I can win the race.' After a moment's silence, De Mille looked at Heston, smiled and said, 'You just drive, I'll direct.'

Last week Jackie left us at the peak of the kingdom of Israel – the reign of David. Saul had reigned for 40 years but he had done evil in the eyes of the Lord and the kingdom was taken from him and given to David. And David served God all his life. He was no paragon of virtue – he was guilty of murder, adultery, deceit, abandonment – if blessing from God depended upon righteous living then David had no hope.

David was human like you and me – driven by the same passions that drive us – why would you expect him to be any different than we are? Of course he sinned – that is not the point. The point is that his sin drove him metaphorically to the feet of the God he never lost sight of – never in all his life did he lose his sense of the greatness and righteousness and wonder of God. He sinned – but his sin brought forth the most touching and revealing poem of worship to God that you will ever read. And it is that worship – that true humility of heart towards God – that made David's kingdom the pinnacle of the kingdom of Israel.

The history of the Kingdom lasted only 464 years give or take a few. The English monarchy dates back to 1066 but if it had only lasted 464 years then it would have ended with Henry VIII. That's how short a period we are talking about from Saul right through to the puppet king Zedekiah.

In fact, the northern kingdom only survived about 200 years – but we are getting ahead of ourselves because first we need to understand what is the northern kingdom.

This morning's title is *the fall of Israel* and it is the story that takes us from the height of David's kingdom to a land in tatters, a nation whose God had abandoned them, relocated wholesale out of the land that God had brought them to.

It is a desperately sad story but I want to tell you this morning why this story has been preserved for us. Our journey through the Bible in this series is not really intended to cover the detail – you will need to do that yourselves in your personal reading – we are trying to set the context on our way through. And the context for the story of the kingdom of Israel is unmistakable.

There is a phrase that crops up over and over again through the history – it is phrased in a number of slightly different formats but all with the same meaning – and it never occurs in the Bible outside the story of the kings of Israel as recorded in the books of 1 & 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles.

This phrase is **in accordance with the word of the LORD proclaimed by ...**

The history of the kings of Israel and Judah is a story of the utter dependability of the word of the LORD. What he says he will do.

We begin with the transition from David to his son Solomon. The wisdom of Solomon is legendary and 3 of the books he wrote have been included in our Bible for our learning – but be warned that wisdom is no guarantee of a worshipful heart toward God. We

will come to that shortly but first take a look at the transition of power from David. It was messy. Solomon was not the eldest – by right the succession should have gone to Adonijah and in fact he assumed it was his for the taking while his father lay on his deathbed. Among his political support was Abiathar the priest – the great-great-grandson of Eli who was the priest when Samuel was a boy.

Warned by Bathsheba and by Nathan the prophet about what was happening, David made a shrewd political counter-move and had Solomon installed as king amid great pomp and ceremony that effectively squashed any popular support for Adonijah.

But amongst the fall-out from these events we read these words: **so Solomon removed Abiathar from the priesthood of the LORD, fulfilling the word the LORD had spoken at Shiloh about the house of Eli.**

God had spoken 5 generations previously about the distain of the family of Eli for the worship of God – they had no worship in their heart for God – their interest was self – and God had said he would take the priesthood from them and give it to those who would be faithful. And he did.

But the next time we get this phrase reads as follows [1 Kings 12]:

15 So the king did not listen to the people, for this turn of events was from the LORD, to fulfil the word the LORD had spoken to Jeroboam son of Nebat through Ahijah the Shilonite.

What now? Solomon the wisest mortal who ever lived ...

4 grew old, ..., and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been.
5 He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites.

- 6 So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done.**
- 9. The LORD became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice.**

And God raised up a man named Jeroboam and gave into his responsibility the rule over 10 of the tribes of Israel – what became known as the Northern Kingdom.

Oh Christchurch pay attention to this please. You may think that good works are important (and so they are). You may think that wisdom is important (and so it is). But nothing – absolutely nothing – is as important as a heart that worships God. That is what matters!

Jeroboam didn't trust God to keep his word and establish a dynasty for his family so he took matters into his own hands. He established alternative sites for worship at Bethel and at Dan and he created priests and festivals of his own invention. Did that matter so very much? Remember what we said a few weeks ago about the importance of the place where God had established his name. God made himself accessible – but here Jeroboam was exploiting the ceremony of worship of God to establish his own name and to break the allegiance of the people of Israel to the city of Jerusalem in Judah so that there would be less risk of them turning against him in favour of the king in Jerusalem.

So a man of God came to Jeroboam – and he told of a day when a son of the house of David would arise by the name of Josiah – and he would destroy the detestable practise of worship at Bethel. And as an interim sign of his credentials to make this prophecy he told Jeroboam that the altar at Bethel would be split apart.

Jeroboam was outraged and he raised his hand to point at the man to have him seized for his impudence – but the hand he raised against the man of God shrivelled up on the spot so that he

couldn't draw it back – it became useless. And we get the familiar words again [1Kings 13]

5 Also, the altar was split apart and its ashes poured out according to the sign given by the man of God by the word of the LORD.

For the way Jeroboam turned his heart away from God – raising up idols – creating an alternative understanding of God – exploiting God for his own glory – God gave him a message through the prophet Ahijah that he would cut off his family completely. That every last male of his family would be killed and burned.

During this time and continuing on, the house of David remained the royal family in Jerusalem. Their influence was greatly reduced to only one tribe of the nation of Israel – but God had promised David that his family would sit on the throne in perpetuity and he did not break his word. In fairness, for the most part the house of David followed after David in spirit – leading the nation in the worship of God. But there were some wicked examples among them also.

Anyhow – there arose a man named Baasha who plotted against the son of Jeroboam and killed him during a siege of a Philistine town and so once again we get the now familiar words [1Kings 15]:

29 As soon as he began to reign, he killed Jeroboam's whole family. He did not leave Jeroboam anyone that breathed, but destroyed them all, according to the word of the LORD given through his servant Ahijah the Shilonite--

But Baasha was as bad if not worse than Jeroboam so it is not long before we read [1Kings 16]:

12 So Zimri destroyed the whole family of Baasha, in accordance with the word of the LORD spoken against Baasha through the prophet Jehu--

Mind you Zimri didn't survive long. He was king for 7 days before Omri challenged him and he committed suicide by setting the palace on fire.

But what a disaster for Israel it was when Omri became king. Not so much for himself but for the son he bequeathed to the throne when he died – for Omri was the father of Ahab, the worst king that Israel ever had to suffer.

Ahab introduced a new dimension into the wickedness of Israel – for he taught the people to worship Baal and Asherah, the deities of the Canaanites. Where Jeroboam distorted their theology, Ahab dismissed their God in favour of another god altogether.

And while you may never have heard before the names of any of the prophets who challenged the earlier kings – for this most wicked of kings God raised up his greatest prophet to challenge him – Elijah the Tishbite.

Ahab was a truly evil man with a truly evil wife Jezebel. The final straw to a life of wickedness was the day he coveted the vineyard of Naboth. Naboth refused to sell to him at any price because he didn't have the right to sell his inheritance from the Lord – so Ahab went home and sulked like a child. But his wife didn't sulk – she arranged for Naboth to be falsely accused in public of cursing God and the king so that he was stoned to death by the crowd and his property reverted to the king.

So he got what he wanted – but on the day he went to take possession of it Elijah went to meet him there to tell him what God had in store for him. God said of Ahab that there was never a man like Ahab who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord. What God had in store for Ahab and for his wife Jezebel was so awful in his hearing that he humbled himself before God for the first time in his life.

I had forgotten this part of the story until I read it again in preparation for this morning and it broke my heart as I read what God said of this evil wicked man:

29 "Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son."

Make no mistake – God is not fooled by any mere outward show of humility. I don't know if this was a genuine act of contrition on Ahab's part or mere regret for what he had brought on himself – but the grace of God overwhelmed me that he would take notice so readily and so immediately of this simple act of repentance.

Nevertheless – without fail – after the death of Ahab arose Jehu to the throne of Israel with this refrain [2Kings 10]

16When Jehu came to Samaria, he killed all who were left there of Ahab's family; he destroyed them, according to the word of the LORD spoken to Elijah.

Time just doesn't allow for us to see how God eventually gave the entire Northern Kingdom into captivity by the Assyrians – at the time when Hezekiah was king in Jerusalem.

Or how 2 generations later there arose that king Josiah foretold in the time of Jeroboam and how he was able – now that the Northern Kingdom was without a ruler – to destroy the high place at Bethel and end its detestable worship.

Or how eventually even the Southern Kingdom under the house of David was given over into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon – the time when Daniel and his friends were taken captive.

But the end of the story offers these words of hope:

21 The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfilment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah.

22. In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfil the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing:

23 "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you--may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up."

Brothers and Sisters I want you to know this morning that you can depend for your life on God keeping his word. He will not fail his promise. Depend on him. And worship him in your heart.