



The Thirty-Second Century of His-Story: The Gospel Goes Forth to the Nations as the Earthly Kingdom Decays

The word of God found in the middle of the books of Kings and Chronicles reveals that the church was increasingly feeling the pressure of persecution from within the nation of Israel and Judah itself. It was becoming very clear that “they are not all Israel that are of Israel” (Rom. 9:6). We have here the stories of Ahab and Jezebel murdering Naboth to get his vineyard, the prophets of God hiding in caves, and Athaliah trying to destroy the royal line of David. Even so, God spoke powerfully through many prophets, including Elijah and Elisha, for the comfort of his church and the judgment of the apostate church. God faithfully preserved the spiritual church while the earthly kingdom that pictured the church began to fall apart as they experienced the judgments of famine and political unrest. The growing powers of Syria and Assyria began to loom over Israel and we read in 2 Kings 10:32 that “Syria began to cut Israel short.”

During this time God directs special attention to two nations: Syria and Assyria. Not only is he raising them up and strengthening them to be employed in the complete destruction of Israel as a nation, but in a wonder of grace, he also reveals something more of his plan to gather spiritual children of Abraham from every nation of the world. In fact, it is in the way of the apostate church’s rejecting the gospel that the gospel is taken from them and preached to those whom the apostate church despises and counts as enemies. We get a hint of this wonder in the story of the Syrian general Naaman who is healed of his leprosy through the witnessing of a little girl he had taken captive from Israel. Jesus referred to Naaman when he preached at his home town synagogue and was rejected and despised by the Jews (Luke 4:27). Even more surprising is the prophet Jonah who is sent to preach not to the church in Israel, but to people whom God was pleased to save in the heart of enemy territory, Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria. Jesus referred to the repentance of Nineveh when confronting the unbelief of the Pharisees in Matthew 12:41. It is when the apostate church becomes lifted up in the pride of self-

righteousness that God demonstrates the power of his grace to save sinners who know and repent of their sin.

The previous hundred-year period ended with friendly relations being attempted between the formerly warring nations of Israel and Judah. Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, had worked hard to bring reformation and the true worship of Jehovah to Judah, but perhaps out of pride and thinking himself able even to have a good influence on the ungodly house of Ahab, king of Israel, permitted his son Jehoram to marry Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel (2 Kings 8:18, 2 Chron. 18:1). The families grew closer. Ahab had been engaged in some battles with the growing power of Syria and their king Benhadad, and as he prepared for another attack upon Syria, Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, came to join with Ahab in the battle against Syria saying "I am as thou art, my people as thy people" (1Kings 22:4). During the battle, Ahab was killed, and Jehoshaphat went back home to continue his work of reform, establishing godly judges and organizing instruction in God's law throughout the land (2 Chron. 19). Even though God spoke to him through a prophet saying, "Shouldest thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the Lord?" (2 Chron. 19:2), he again joined with the wicked king Ahaziah in a business venture which again was ended by God (20:37). These attempts at establishing friendly relations with the ungodly within the apostate church did not result in reform and a good influence upon them; rather, it opened the door to the spiritual enemy, exposed the promised seed of David to destruction by Athaliah, and led to the decay of the nation.

Athaliah had grown up in the Baal worshiping home of Ahab and Jezebel. When she married into the royal line of David, her love for the man-centered worship of Baal dominated the home, and her husband Jehoram could do little to prevent her influence. What she did learn about Jehovah and his purpose to bring the promised Messiah through the line of David only aroused in her a determination to use her position in the home to destroy that purpose. Her plan was to turn the promised seed from the royal line of David from God so that the promised seed would serve the purposes of Satan. She trained her son well in the ways of Baal, and he fell into perfect line with her desire to add royal authority to a Baal-worshipping heart when he became king. Ahaziah ruled for only a year, however, because God sent Jehu to execute judgment upon the wicked house of Ahab, and Ahaziah was killed on his way to visit his ungodly relatives from the house of Ahab (2 Kings 10:13–14).

Athaliah could see the hand of God in the death of her son, and she was now more determined than ever to destroy the purpose of God. God had prevented her plan to turn the royal line from God, so she determined to kill the whole line even if it meant killing her own grandchildren to cut the line of

David and prevent the purpose and promise of God. Also in this plan she failed, and God preserved one child who was hidden and raised by Jehoiada the priest until he was old enough to reign.

The earthly picture of the church as a kingdom—earthly kings that rule under God and defend the church and faithful prophets—was decaying. The earthly reality of a kingdom, the nation of Israel and Judah, was now caught in the storm-tossed sea of this world in which nation rises against nation in violence, pride, and greed. Soon king Jeroboam II in Israel would shine forth with one last burst of earthly power and glory like an exploding star before its death. In contrast to fallen man's way, God had revealed to Elijah that his power to save was in the "still, small voice." We see this work now as God quietly preserves the promised seed and also works powerfully to gather his church even from enemy lines.

Gathering his elect children from nations outside of Israel is not a new idea or plan of God. His people had been gathered from among various families before and after the flood. People like Rahab and others were taken into the covenant fold of Israel. God's focus on Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and establishing a nation is like a parenthesis in history to reveal certain characteristics of the church and also to provide a rich covenant sphere in which the Christ would be born and prepared for his great work of saving and gathering the church from all the nations of the world. As time goes on this purpose is given more and more attention. Especially in some of the final prophets God reveals this purpose. One of the clearest passages is in the second half of Joel 2, where we read about the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. This passage is quoted in Acts when the Holy Spirit is poured out and the gospel is proclaimed in the many different languages that were represented by people from different nations. Here too the work of God in connection with the preaching of the work is the powerful work of the Holy Spirit—the still small voice which is the work of the Holy Spirit.

During this period we begin to see this work when God sends his prophet Elijah to Zidon to the widow woman. Here, outside the borders of Israel, God reveals the wonder of his power to save by providing food, and also raising this widow's son from the dead (1 Kings 17). We then read in 2 Kings 4 when Jehovah God had given deliverance to Syria through the leadership of Naaman, that God used the witness of a little Israelite girl to reveal the saving power of Jehovah to Naaman, and even cured this enemy of Israel of leprosy, the picture of sin and death. The next chapter records another strange and striking event that I believe points to the plan of God to gather his church from the nations. Syria had besieged Samaria in an attempt to capture Elisha himself because God was revealing to him their battle plans, but God used Elisha to lead the entire blinded army into the city for a banquet feast

and then let them go (2 Kings 6). Finally, in 2 Kings 8:7 we read God sent Elisha to Damascus, the capital of Syria, to anoint the next king who would be used by God to bring judgment upon the apostate church. In all these works of God, we learn that God is not a respecter of persons or nations, but will gather his people through the preaching of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit when and where he pleases.

The history of the prophet Jonah being sent to Nineveh really belongs to the next century, but we discuss it here in connection with the theme of God's sending the gospel into the nations of the world. The nation of Israel had risen to its peak of earthly power and glory under king Jeroboam II. The nation of Syria that had threatened Israel was now cowering under the growing threat of Assyria, which was expanding and crushing every nation in its path. It was here that God was pleased to send the precious message of the gospel: a command to repent along with the power of the Holy Spirit to work repentance and a clinging to the way of salvation prepared by God.

Assyria was known for its ruthless war tactics and became extremely great and powerful especially with Nineveh as its capital. The city had connections with Nimrod the mighty hunter and the tower of Babel (Gen. 10:8-11) and represents a man-centered glory and the best that man has to offer. It is here, in the heart of Satan's show-case city where men of strength establish their own earthly heaven, that God with the still small voice of his Spirit brings the city to its knees in repentance for sin. Whether only one or all of them truly repented is not as important to know as it is to know that God worked repentance in the hearts of men who lived in the heart of Satan's realm. That is a wonder of God works in the heart of every child of God no matter who we are or where we were born.

Such were the mysterious workings of God during this century of his-story. We see the wonder of God's gathering his church from the nations, making dead hearts alive and warning against false security in anything we can do or claim. The church is a glorious work of God as he gathers his people from those we least expect. Among those who cherish, defend, and promote the precious truth of the gospel as it unfolds through the battles and brings comfort to saints of every age, God is pleased to continue gathering his children from covenant homes as well. The heritage of Israel and our own heritage is precious to us, but we may not assume that our national or denominational identity automatically entitles us to the gracious work of God and excludes others whom we may despise. May it not be that a careless attitude, lack of appreciation for the gospel, or a despising of and persecution of brothers and sisters in the church leave us with a famine of hearing the word as the gospel moves on to gather the church from the highways and hedges of this earth.