

God's Grace to a Rebellious People

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Preacher: Andy Meadows

[0 : 00] Our reading this morning is taken from 2 Kings chapter 3 and we're starting at verse 1 and ending at verse 27. So that's 2 Kings chapter 3.

In the 18th year of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, Jehoram the son of Ahab became king over Israel in Samaria and he reigned 12 years. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, though not like his father and mother, for he put away the pillar of Baal that his father had made.

Nevertheless, he clung to the sin of Jeroboam, the son of Nabat, which he made sin, which he made Israel to sin. He did not depart from it. Naimisha, king of Moab, was a sheep breeder and he had to deliver the king of Israel 100,000 lambs and the wool of 100,000 rams.

But when Ahab died, the king of Moab rebelled against the king of Israel. So King Jehoram marched out of Samaria at the time and mustered all Israel. And he went and sent word to Jehoshaphat, king of Judah.

The king of Moab has rebelled against me. Will you go with me to battle against Moab? And he said, I will go. I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses.

[1 : 13] Then he said, by which way shall we march? Jehoram answered, by the way of the wilderness of Edom. So the king of Israel went with the king of Judah and the king of Edom.

And when they had made a circuitous march of seven days, there was no water for the army or for the animals that followed them. Then the king of Israel said, Alas, the Lord has called these three kings to give them into the hand of Moab.

And Jehoshaphat said, Is there no prophet of the Lord here, through whom we may inquire of the Lord? Then one of the king of Israel's servants answered, Elisha, the son of Shaphat is here, who poured water on the hands of Elijah.

And Jehoshaphat said, The word of the Lord is with him. So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat and the king of Edom went down to him. And Elisha said to the king of Israel, What have I to do with you?

Go to the prophets of your father and to the prophets of your mother. But the king of Israel said to him, No, it is the Lord who has called these three kings to give them into the hand of Moab. And Elisha said, As the Lord of hosts live, before whom I stand, were it not that I have regard for Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, I would neither look at you nor see you.

[2 : 22] But now, bring me a musician. And when the musician played, the hand of the Lord came upon him. And he said, Thus says the Lord, I will make this dry streambed full of pools.

For thus says the Lord, You shall not see wind or rain, but that streambed shall be filled with water, so that you shall drink, you, your livestock, and your animals. This is a light thing in the sight of the Lord.

He will also give the Moabites into your hand, and you shall attack every fortified city and every choice city, and shall fell every good tree, and stop up all springs of water, and ruin every good piece of land with stones.

The next morning, about the time of offering sacrifice, behold, water came from the direction of Edom, till the country was filled with water. When all the Moabites had heard that the kings had come up to fight against them, all who were able to put on armour, from the youngest to the oldest, were called out and were drawn up at the border.

And when they rose early in the morning, and the sun shone in the water, the Moabites saw the water opposite them, as red as blood. And they said, This is blood. The kings have surely fought together and struck one another down.

[3 : 30] Now then, Moab, to the spoil. But when they came to the camp of Israel, the Israelites rose and struck the Moabites, till they fled before them. And they went forward, striking the Moabites as they went.

And they overthrew the cities, and on every good piece of land, every man threw a stone, till it was uncovered, till it was covered. They stopped every spring of water, and felled all the good trees, till only its stones were left in Kirharseth.

And the slingers surrounded and attacked it. When the king of Moab saw that the battle was going against him, he took with him 700 swordsmen to break through, opposite the king of Edom, but they could not.

Then he took his oldest son, who was to reign in his place, and offered him for a burnt offering on the wall. And there came great wrath against Israel, and they withdrew from him, and returned to their own land.

Thanks, Suze. Good morning, everyone. Simon's prayed, so let's start together. Imagine lockdown finally eases, and you decide to book your holiday.

[4 : 40] And you decide to go to Paris. You've never been there before. And you want to show how cultured you are. So you see the Eiffel Tower, and then you go to the Louvre.

You see the Mona Lisa, and after you deal with that underwhelming experience, you go and see the Moabite stone. It's a stone that's in the Louvre, and on it is a vast inscription written by the king Misha of Moab in this chapter.

It describes all the punch-ups he had with the king of Israel. And you think, hmm, that's quite interesting. But then you walk on by, don't give it another thought, and head to the Champs-Elysees.

Well, like the Moabite stone itself, we might feel the right place for this story in 2 Kings 3 is in a museum. Obscure people, obscure places, kings we can't pronounce.

And maybe, probably, the beginning of the Iron Age is not of particular interest to many of us. But 2 Kings 3 is in the Bible.

[5 : 56] And so it's helpful to answer the question, why? Why did the author write this? Well, it's here to teach us.

On your handout, which is on the other side of your service sheet, you'll see there I put Romans chapter 15, verse 4, written by the Apostle Paul.

For whatever was written in the former days was written for our instruction. So this chapter does have historical value. It's interesting to see the archaeological evidence that shows us is talking about real events and real people, real places.

But the real value in this chapter is that it helps us get to know the living God better. The God of Elijah and Elisha, our God.

And like a Hollywood film, this chapter plays out with twists and turns, with probably the biggest twist coming at the end. So let's follow the story along and see what it teaches us about the Lord.

[7 : 03] And so first point on your handout then, on the outline. Israel looked doomed. Israel looked doomed. The author gives us layer upon layer of just how bad the situation is for Israel in this story.

At first, Elisha, the judge, has arrived. Last week we saw the handover, didn't we, of Elijah to Elisha. Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?

He is with Elisha. And we know, we looked at last week from 1 Kings 19, what Elisha's job description is. He's Mr. Judgment.

He's the assassin. Come to bring judgment on God's people who have turned away from him. He's now on the scene. The gun is loaded. He's ready to fire.

And it gets worse for Israel because they've got an evil king in charge. Now that's true of every single king of the northern kingdom, Israel. And we get the summary here in verses 1 to 3.

[8 : 08] Have a look down at verse 1 with me. In the 18th year of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, Jehoram, the son of Ahab, became king over Israel in Samaria.

He reigned for 12 years. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Though not like his father and mother, for he put away the pillar of Baal that his father had made.

Nevertheless, he clung to the sin of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin. He did not depart from it.

Now I enjoyed playing top trumps as a child. I still do. If you played top trumps with the kings of Israel, king Ahab would be 10 out of 10 for evilness on the card.

Along with Jezebel, his wife. But his son Jehoram is not far behind. He's probably 8.5, maybe 9. He's a massive improvement on his dad, Ahab.

[9 : 15] He gets rid of the pillar where they worship the false god Baal. But he still clings to sin. He clings to the sin of Jeroboam.

And just to fill you in on that, Jeroboam was, he is a king. He set up a rival way of worshipping God in the northern kingdom. After the kingdom split, he didn't want people going to the southern kingdom, to Jerusalem, to worship God.

Because he thought, oh, they might turn against me. So I'm going to set up a rival way of people worshipping God in the northern kingdom. Which was evil. It was wicked. So whilst Jehoram is not as wicked as he could be, he's certainly not as righteous as he could be either.

In the end, he's an evil king, leading Israel straight into exile. And it gets worse. He's an evil king under a family curse.

Some families joke, don't they, that there's a curse in the family. That you're all terrible at maths or a trait that is passed down through the generations. My parents are here this morning, so I couldn't possibly comment on that.

[10 : 25] But with Jehoram, there is a family curse. You may remember when we looked at King Ahab having killed Naboth in 1 Kings 21, so he could pinch his vineyard.

You may remember that story in November when we looked at that. Now after that, Elijah pronounced judgment on Ahab, didn't he? But Ahab repented. And so God said that he will not bring disaster in Ahab's days, but when his son is king.

In his son's days instead. And here we see Ahab's son ready to meet disaster. Because he's commanding an army with no water.

Next bullet point. An army with no water. So here we come to the action. Verse 4, Misha, the king of Moab. He had agreed to send a lot of sheep to King Ahab.

Maybe under duress, probably under duress. But now, verse 5, there's a change in the monarchy. So Misha seizes the opportunity to renege on the deal.

[11 : 38] Understandably, Jehoram, he likes his woolly coats. He's not best pleased. And so verse 7, he sets out mobilizing Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, and form a united kingdom in battle.

And after they go through Edom, they pick up king of Edom for the ride to bring Moab back into line, to whip him into shape.

So far, so good. Israel has a powerful army. It's three against one. This should be a walkover. But they walk in disaster as the water runs out.

The animals can't carry on. The dehydrated troops are in no way fit for combat. If the Moabite defense forces saw them now, they'd be done for.

They're sitting ducks. They're dying ducks. And so Jehoram comes to the conclusion that God is surely against them. God is surely against them.

[12 : 40] Have a look at verse 10 with me. Then the king of Israel said, Alas, the Lord has called these three kings to give them into the hand of Moab.

Jehoram reads the signs. A family under curse in a desert about to die. Like Private Fraser in Dad's army, his response is to say, we're doomed.

Or to be more exact, God has doomed us. And he's probably right. We know God is against them. He did pronounce that judgment would fall on them.

He did evil in the eyes of the Lord. There's no seeking of God's direction before they set off. There's no desire to live for God. There's no humble dependence or no repentance.

His little outburst in verse 10 is one of despair, not faith. Jehoshaphat is the optimist to Jehoram's pessimist.

[13 : 46] And look at what he says in verse 11. Jehoshaphat said, Is there no prophet of the Lord here through whom we may inquire of the Lord? Then one of the king of Israel's servants answered, Elisha, the son of Shaphat is here, who poured water on the hands of Elijah.

He has the bright idea of actually finding out if there's a good thing that God wants them to go into this battle. And Elisha is sought for. We're not sure what he's doing there, but he was.

And you can imagine Jehoram not being best pleased when he sees Elisha. You can see his eyes roll, his head drop. The successor to the person who pronounced judgment would fall on Ahab's son.

I think that's not going to end well. And Elisha makes it clear that he's no friend of his in verse 14. But he only really answers because Jehoshaphat is there.

You can hear the sharp intake of breath from Jehoram, expecting the worst. Israel looked doomed. But then, just like in a Hollywood film, here comes the twist.

[15 : 01] First, a second point, God unexpectedly saves Israel. Elisha tells them what God will do. Have a look at verse 16.

Thus says the Lord, I will make this dry stream bed full of pools. For thus says the Lord, you shall not see wind or rain, but that stream bed shall be filled with water, so that you shall drink.

You, your livestock and your animals. This is a light thing in the sight of the Lord. He will also give their Moabites into your hand, and you shall attack every fortified city and every choice city, and shall fell every good tree, and stop all the springs of water, and ruin every good piece of land with stones.

Elisha is the assassin. He's Mr. Judgment. But like last week, he surprised us. Mr. Judgment announces amazing grace.

Then in a two-for-one miracle, God says he's going to preserve Israel with water. And because that's just too easy for God, he is going to defeat the Moabites with water.

[16 : 12] And just to underline this is God acting, the water does turn up the very same time sacrifices are offered in Jerusalem. And then as we follow the story through, the Moabites get up early to see the sunrise.

They squint down the valley, and the red sun reflects on the water that certainly wasn't there yesterday. And they think, oh, this unstable coalition has collapsed.

They've all killed each other. And they set off to mop up. They expect to find corpses, but they find refreshed soldiers.

And Israel inflict heavy losses and destroy the Moabite cities until they reach the capital. So far, this seems like a classic story of God saving people in trouble.

It's so formulaic that we're not that shocked because we probably saw the twist coming, like when you're at the film and you can see the twist a mile off.

[17 : 24] This is actually playing out like most of Hugh Grant films in the late 90s. There's so much of a formula, you know what's going to happen next. And in the end, you spot the twist a mile off.

And at the end of verse 25, it looks all is well again. The empire is going to be rebuilt and restored. They're conquering again, like they did under Joshua.

It will soon be like Solomon's time again. It looks like they've said goodbye to judgment and the curse has been lifted. What a lovely story.

A standard God rescues people who don't deserve to be rescued. The credits roll. We all go home. But that's not how the story ends, is it? I wonder if you found those last two verses quite jarring, quite puzzling.

Because these two verses, where they explain to us that judgment will still certainly fall. Judgment will still certainly fall.

[18 : 30] Misha, the king of Moab, is about to lose. And he's about to lose huge. He has two moves left. Two last rolls of the dice. Both are desperate.

And the last one is horrendously evil. Have a look down at verse 26. When the king of Moab saw that the battle was going against him, he took with him 700 swordsmen to break through opposite the king of Edom.

But they could not. Then he took his oldest son, who was to reign in his place, and offered him for a burnt offering on the wall. Misha's first option is to go at it with more troops.

But that fails. And so Misha takes the one who would rule in his place, his firstborn, the most valuable thing he has, and sacrifices him to the Myrbite god, Chemosh.

It's an awfully wicked thing to do. We're shocked at that. But see what happened. Verse 27. Verse 27.

[19 : 41] And there came great wrath against... We expect that to say Moab, don't we? Look at what Misha's just done. But what does it say?

Great wrath against Israel. And they withdrew from him and returned to their own land. It's a puzzling verse.

It's exam season, so I'm going to show my working. Whose anger is it? The first option is that this is the wrath of the Myrbite god, Chemosh.

Offer him the human sacrifice he requires, and in response, Chemosh comes through for them. That's actually how it's described on their Myrbite stone in the Louvre.

Effectively, we taught the Israelites a lesson or two, thanks be to Chemosh. But that cannot be the case. As we saw when we looked at 1 Kings in chapter 18, fake gods can't even light a barbecue, let alone defeat a whole army.

[20 : 48] So this explanation is way off target. Next option, it may be it's Israel's anger. They witness a terrible act and they're so outraged and indignant, they withdraw.

But again, that doesn't really fit with the rest of the Bible. Elsewhere in the Bible, wrath came against always comes in the context of God punishing, of God's judgment.

And so this must be the Lord's anger. Why? Why then give all these cities into the hand of his people and then stay angry at them?

He fulfilled his word through Elisha that Israel would defeat Moab. But the thing is, the judgment of 1 Kings 21 and earlier in 1 Kings still stands.

Yes, it's been delayed. They live to fight another day. But it will still come.

[21 : 56] The Northern Kingdom is still under judgment. God has no intention of rebuilding the empire again. It's done for. It's finished. They're on borrowed time. A remnant will be saved.

God told that to Elisha. We looked at that last week. But God's judgment will fall on most of them. And then it does. Years later, in 2 Kings chapter 8, Jehu turns up and the assassinations start.

So this story isn't a lovely, nice story about God saving people who don't deserve to be saved or giving them total salvation. This is more a story of God's patience and his kindness, his forbearance.

God hasn't said, I'm changing my mind about judgment, but I've delayed it. He mercifully spares them. But this is not full-blown forgiveness.

There's no repentance. There's no turning away from their evil and turning back to God. So at the end of the story, what's the conclusion? Well, there will be certain future judgment, but there is now current patient mercy.

[23 : 14] Some people think, don't they, that there's a difference between the nasty God of the Old Testament and the nice forgiveness God of Jesus. The comedian and celebrity atheist Ricky Gervais in one of his stand-ups compares the God of the Old Testament to a 1950s dad and when their child disobeys, they reach for the belt.

But the God of Jesus, like a modern-day dad, when their child disobeys, they say, don't worry, do what you like, I'll forgive you, whatever. But people who have that view haven't read the Bible closely.

All the way through, the Lord does not change. He is full of judgment and mercy, both in the Old Testament and the New. As we see that in this story here, and it climaxes in the coming of the Lord Jesus, the one Elisha points to.

We saw last week the similarities between Elisha and Jesus. Elisha succeeded Elijah by the Jordan River. Jesus succeeded John the Baptist by the Jordan River.

Elisha received God's spirit by the Jordan. Jesus received God's spirit by the Jordan. And like Elisha, Jesus is announced as Mr. Judgment.

[24 : 33] In Mark chapter 13, Jesus said the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 is a warning sign that total judgment will fall on the whole world.

God's spirit and yet when Jesus' disciples ask whether they should call down fire from heaven for the cities that reject him, let's do some judging, Jesus says, no, it's not time for that because Jesus came to be the saviour before he comes again to be the judge.

as the Apostle Paul says in Acts 17 on your handout, God has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

perhaps instead of Paris on your holiday you go to Cornwall and you take a trip to, that's more likely probably, and you take a trip to the tidal island St. Michael's Mount.

It's connected to the mainland by a cobbled causeway but you have to get the time just right because if you go and then high tide comes the path is submerged the island is cut off and you are stranded.

[25 : 56] Well, in a similar way God says that salvation is open now through Jesus. We are under his current patient mercy. It's like it's low tide but one day the pathway will close.

There is a cut off and people will be stranded but unlike St. Michael's Mount where you can just wait for low tide again or just get in a boat when Jesus returns people will be cut off forever.

This is the time of salvation of God's current patient mercy but God's not forgotten about his judgment. Our nation and world is now under God's current patient delay as the nation of Israel was in two kings here.

That is a wonderful undeserved merciful thing. The deadline has been extended but it will still come. And so finally and very briefly we can learn from Jehoram and Jehoshaphat in how to respond in the delay.

Under certain future judgment self-improvement doesn't help Jehoram. Being a decisive leader doesn't help him. Despair doesn't help him.

[27 : 19] the only option was to be like Jehoshaphat seeking God's help. And that meant coming to Elisha Mr. Judgment on their knees the Saviour Judge.

And Jesus is the same. He is the Lord of judgment but he's also the Lord of mercy and patience because God has always been that way.

And if there are seconds left this morning before the pathway is closed then we can humble ourselves before Jesus the Saviour Judge and trust in his death for us and receive forgiveness.

But we mustn't mistake the delay for no judgment at all. Jesus' resurrection shows us that a date has been set. It's fixed in God's calendar in his diary.

But wonderfully there is current patient mercy. There is salvation before judgment. Let's pray together.

[28 : 31] For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction. Heavenly Father we thank you for teaching us about your character in two kings that you are loving you are patient you are merciful and you are just.

We praise you that we are in the time of salvation. The path to salvation is open through Jesus' death for us. Yet please help us to be more convinced of your certain future judgment on our world and to proclaim this message boldly as a church and as individuals.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.