

‘THE AFFAIRS OF THE WORLD & THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD’ 2 KINGS 8

[St Mark’s Northbridge, February 16, 2020 – All Services]

1. Determinism & Indeterminism: A Philosophical Argument.

For hundreds of years, philosophers have been arguing about how things happen in the world. Is everything that happens a reaction to other things that happened before? Is everything a product of some visible or invisible cause? Or, on the other hand, is everything in the world just pretty random? Is it actually pointless to try and work out what led to something or what caused something to happen? In philosophy, determinism is the idea that the things that happen are in some way “determined”- perhaps by way of reaction to a previous cause, perhaps because of “the universe” as people often say these days, or “fate”, or even some divine being. By contrast, indeterminism is the philosophical idea that takes a very high view of human free will, that thinks every new moment could go in many possible directions, and that rejects the idea that everything is determined. And this philosophical argument continues to this day.

But what does the Bible have to say about this? Well, interestingly, I think the main thing the Bible says is that the philosophical argument itself perpetuates a false distinction. The Bible insists that there is God who controls the world- a God who is sovereign and in whose hands the future rests. But at the same time the Bible insists that humans have real choices to make, they have the capacity to shape the future, and they are not just puppets or robots in the world God rules. Both those things are true. And we see this time and time again in the Scriptures. Including in 2 Kings 8. In fact, I think this chapter paints a very powerful picture of how this works- of the way humans act and react to create history, but also of the way God acts to bring about his purposes.

So let’s start this morning/evening by going back over the four sections of 2 Kings 8 to see what the author is drawing to our attention.

2. The Woman with Coins in her Pocket (vv.1-6).

Firstly, verses 1-6: the woman with coins in her pocket. Back in chapter 4 we met a Shunammite woman and her family¹. In God’s power, Elisha had done some amazing things for them. But here we learn that he had also urged her to take her family away from Israel to avoid a famine. She followed the prophet’s advice² and left for 7 years. But when she returned she found her property had been appropriated by the king. So she went to him to ask for it back.

¹ 4:8-37

² Demonstrating great faith in the prophet’s word.

But incredibly, when she arrived at the royal court, Elisha's servant Gehazi just happened to be there³, and he was actually in the process of telling the king what Elisha had done for this very woman, just as she walked through the doors. The timing of this is too incredible to be a coincidence.

I remember many years ago travelling in England with my parents and my sister and we were in a huge crowd of people on a London underground station waiting for a train. And I turned to look down the platform and noticed that the man squashed into the space next to me was a guy from our church back in Sydney. I just looked at him and said "hi Mark" and he got the shock of his life. In a city the size of London, that has as many underground stations as it does, and in a crowd of hundreds of people on that platform alone, what are the chances of seeing someone you know who lives on the other side of the world? Incredible timing. And so too here.

The woman walks through the door and Gehazi's jaw drops to the ground. This is the woman, my Lord the king. This is her! And so the king asks the woman to verify this unlikely story and she does. And as a result of this uncanny encounter, all her property is restored to her. But the king does even more for her. He also gives her all the income that had come from her property from the day she left Israel until the day she returned. So she leaves with her pocket full of coins. She leaves blessed.

Many years previously, Elisha had restored her son to life⁴. Now Elisha's servant is in the right place at the right time to ensure she has a life to come back to in Israel⁵. In one way or another, Elisha has been looking after this woman and her family for years. But, of course, it's more true to say that God has been looking after this woman for years. And that's the thing that strikes me most from this first section of our chapter today/tonight. That God cares for this woman. Isn't this meant to be a book about kings? Isn't 2 Kings a book of political history? Well at one level it is. But in another way, it's nothing like most political histories. Because it keeps telling us stories about politically insignificant individuals like this woman. Yes it's a story about God's work in the politics, and the wars, and the royal houses of this era. But it's also a story about God's work in the lives of ordinary people who have no part to play in national affairs. This is probably the thing that's struck me most about the book of 2 Kings so far. Inbetween the narratives about the kings we have narrative after narrative which describe God's care for ordinary people. There was the third army captain in chapter 1. The people in chapter 2 who could drink purified water for the first time in ages. The widow whose olive oil supply was abundantly replenished in chapter 4. Also the Shunnamite woman in chapter 4 who's given a son, and then who finds her son resurrected to life again after he dies- the same woman who appears again here in chapter 8. Then there was Naaman the Gentile leper in chapter 5. Not to mention the guy in chapter 6 who lost his friend's axe-head in the river but retrieved it when God caused it to float to the surface. These kinds of stories just keep appearing in 2 Kings.

³ Perhaps this incident predates his leprous punishment from chapter 5? This is Dale Ralph Davis' suggestion in his commentary (p.131) since most scholars think it's unlikely that he would have been welcome in the royal court with his leprosy. But this is just speculation of course.

⁴ This phrase is used once in verse 1 and three more times in verse 4 for emphasis! And actually again in verses 8, 9, 10, and 14.

⁵ In this she perhaps parallels God's care of Naomi in the book of Ruth. She also speaks a powerful to the exiled community of Israel who would have been reading 2 Kings perhaps while in exile or as they returned.

And they keep telling us that God isn't just interested in the affairs of kings and nations but that he cares for ordinary people- people like me, people like you.

3. The Prophet with Tears in his Eyes (vv.7-15).

Well, the second section of our chapter today/tonight is verses 7-15. And here we meet the prophet with tears in his eyes. Elisha travels to Damascus- Gentile territory, seemingly for no reason other than to have the conversation that we read about in these verses. And when Ben Hadad the sick king of Aram hears that Elisha is coming he sends his right hand man Hazael to Elisha with a question. Will I recover from my illness? In this moment he provides a fascinating counter-point to the Israelite king in chapter 1 who refused to consult Elisha when he had the very same question!

But when Hazael meets Elisha and asks him the king's question, the prophet's response is first strange, and then very profound. Verse 10.

[Read 8:10-11]

As you can see from your footnote in verse 10 it's not actually very easy to be sure how to translate what Elisha said. But I guess if he did tell Hazael to tell the king that he would recover even though, in fact, he wouldn't, it was just an exercise in telling someone what they want to hear because they've got no interest in hearing the alternative. Or perhaps it was Elisha's way of prophesying the lie Hazael would end up telling. Either way, Elisha reveals to Hazael what will really happen. In verses 12-13 he tells Hazael that he will become the king of Aram in place of Ben Hadad, and that when he does he will become a vicious enemy of the people of Israel. And, as verses 14-15 spell out, Hazael goes home, lies to the king about his recovery, then kills him and takes the throne⁶.

But the thing that stands out most to me from this is verse 11. It's the picture of Elisha weeping. And Elisha weeps because he loves God's people. He knew that when Hazael seized the throne it would be a very bad day for Ben Hadad. But it would be an even worse day for Israel.

Of course, Elisha knew that Hazael's murderous destruction would be an act of God's judgement upon his people. And he knew they deserved it. They deserved it because of their rebellion and wickedness. Elisha knew punishment was necessary. But it grieved him nevertheless. And in this Elisha sets an example for us. Do we weep when we consider the judgement of God falling on people we love? But not only do Elisha's tears challenge us here, they also reflect back to us the heart of God. Because in his justice, God does bring necessary punishment, but never gladly. He grieves even as he judges⁷. As one writer says: 'I think that the shower of fire and brimstone was wet with the tears of God as it fell'⁸. It always is.

⁶ In fulfilment of 1 Kings 19:15-17.

⁷ Eg. Ezekiel 33:11

⁸ Andrew Bonar- cited in Dale Ralph Davis' commentary- p.135.

4. The King with Evil in his Heart (vv.16-24).

And then the third section of our chapter today/tonight is in verses 16-24. The King with Evil in his Heart. And for the first time in 2 Kings we're focussing again on the southern Jewish kingdom called Judah as opposed to the northern Jewish kingdom- Israel⁹. And what we learn here about Jehoram King of Judah is that he's really no better than Hazael the new king of Aram. In the last section we saw Elisha weeping at the harm Hazael would do to God's people. And now we see that even their own kings are doing harm to the people of God. Verse 18.

[Read 8:18]

You see, the evil in his heart had a lot to do with the influence of Israel's King Ahab. And the fruit of this intergenerational wickedness is the judgement of God- the removal of rest and peace. This is what verses 20-22 are about. Edom rebels against Judah and sets up its own kingdom. And then there is war. And at the time of writing 2 Kings, that war was still going.

This is a most unhappy story for Judah. But of course, it's not the whole story. And it's not the whole story because of God, and because of what verse 19 tells us about God. And we'll come back to that in a couple of minutes.

5. The King with Corruption in his Family (vv.25-29).

But first our fourth section- verses 25-29. The King with Corruption in his Family. Ahaziah is Jehoram's son. And he wasn't just like his father genetically. He was like his father in evil. And for similar reasons. Verse 27.

[Read 8:27]

It's hard to miss how many times the author uses Ahab's name in that verse. So it's hard to miss his point. Ahab was one of the most corrupt and disobedient kings the northern kingdom ever had. But his influence has now spread to the southern kingdom of Judah as well. It's like a virus. We've been talking a lot about viruses lately, haven't we? So we know how they work. Ahab was infected with a virus of idolatry and rejection of God. But sadly, the kings Judah did not protect themselves against the Ahab virus. And as a result they allowed all the people of Judah to become infected too. So it's no surprise in verse 28 to find that Ahaziah is making an alliance with Ahab's son too. And it's no surprise in verse 29 to learn that when he's injured in battle Ahaziah doesn't turn to God, or to Elisha his prophet, but to Joram son of Ahab. As one writer puts it using a slightly different metaphor, here we see that the 'cancer from Israel has metastasized to Judah'¹⁰.

⁹ The last time Judah was the focus of the Books of the Kings was in 1 Kings 22:41-50.

¹⁰ Dale Ralph Davis in his commentary- p.138.

6. The God with Everything in his Hands.

So, that's 2 Kings 8 in four parts. But what do you think this chapter is about? Do you think it's just a story about a woman with coins in her pocket, and a story about a prophet with tears in his eyes, and a story about a king with evil in his heart, and a story about another king with corruption in his family? Is it anything else? Of course it is. It's also a story about the God with everything in his hands. It is a story about the affairs of the world- the affairs of destitute women, and heart-broken prophets, and apostate kings. Yes. But it's also a story about the providence of God in the lives of these people and nations.

Providence is a theological word with a long history. It's a way of talking about God's sovereignty, his guiding hand in our world and in our lives. It's not the same as talking about determinism. Partly because we're not just talking about impersonal forces in the world here but about a personal God who loves the world and the people in it. But it's a different concept to determinism too because the Bible resists the simplistic distinctions we said before that that philosophical argument perpetuates. Humans act wilfully and their choices do shape the present and the future. They are not simply victims of predetermination. We see that in this chapter. But at the same time the Bible is absolutely unambiguous about the fact that God rules everything. He is entirely sovereign. He works in and through human wills and choices to bring about his perfect purposes. That's God's providence. And 2 Kings 8 is a chapter rich in reminders of the provident hand of God.

In our first section this morning/evening we saw God's providence at work in the timing of the Shunnamite woman's entry to the king's throneroom- just as Gehazi was talking about her. The timing was too uncanny to be a coincidence. And it wasn't a coincidence. It was God at work to affirm Gehazi's testimony, to reveal his power to the king¹¹, and to provide for the needs of that woman and her son. God had that moment in his hands.

In our second section this morning/evening we saw God's providence at work in the unlikely journey Elisha took from Israel to Damascus. We also saw God's providence in the way Elisha predicts the future so flawlessly, and in the way he accepts the reality of God's judgement against his wayward people. We see God's providence even in the holy grief that causes Elisha's tears to drip to the floor. God had the life of Hazael, the life of Ben Hadad, and the lives of every Israelite in his hands.

And then in our third section this morning/evening we saw God's providence shine like the sun in verse 19. We didn't spend much time on this verse earlier but we must stop and reflect on it now. The author of 2 Kings has just finished telling us about the evil that King Jehoram did in the eyes of the LORD- following in the ways of King Ahab. We're left disturbed by the ease with which even the kings of Judah turn their backs on God. We'd be forgiven for expecting that God would therefore turn his back on Judah. But verse 19 says the opposite.

¹¹ See Proverbs 21:1

[Read 8:19]

God, you see, had made a promise to the second King who ever reigned in Judah. King David. His promise was that there would always be one of his descendants on the throne. Always. Forever. He'd promised that to David. And so for his sake- for the sake of his servant David- that promise would be kept, no matter how corrupt his royal descendants became. There would always be the torchlight of that promise shining in Israel- like a candle that sits in an otherwise dark room and which never goes out. God was not willing to snuff out the lamp¹² of Davidic kingship in Judah. And if the LORD is not willing, then it isn't going to happen. That's providence. God had the future of his people and a plan for their ruler safely in his hands.

And then in our fourth section this morning/evening we saw God's providence in the substantial losses that Jehoram faces. As Jehoram comes under God's judgement we also see Elisha's prediction about the damage Hazael would cause coming true¹³. Even Jehoram's life was in God's hands.

And, of course, one day the world would see the providence of God in the life of his own son. He would one day come to earth and interact with rulers and kings, but he would also care for the lowly- he would take an interest in widows, and the poor, and the blind, and the lame, and the demon-possessed, and the grieving. He would take an interest in the rich, and the corrupt, the children, and the outcasts. He would demonstrate God's care for ordinary people- people like you and me.

And that same Jesus would one day weep over Jerusalem just as Elisha wept over the fate of God's people in his day¹⁴. He would demonstrate the heart of God for the lost, and he would show us what it really means to love our neighbours.

And that same Jesus would be the fulfilment of God's promise to David- the lamp that would never be extinguished, because his kingship would never end. He was the ruler who came as a descendant of David to keep God's ancient promise. He was the one who ensured that sin and judgement were not the whole story. He was the one who would bring hope- hope for forgiveness, and peace. Providence at its very best.

And it's because of him, because of his everlasting reign, that you and I are even now in his hands. His providence guides our lives. We make our choices. We shape the present and the future. But we do not, and we cannot live independently of him. We cannot thwart his purposes. We cannot escape his loving care. We are, and always will be, in the hands of God- the God of kings and ordinary people alike, the God of tearful judgement, and the God of the unquenchable lamp.

[Read 8:19]

¹² The idea of the Davidic lamp is found elsewhere in the Old Testament. See 2 Samuel 21:17, 1 Kings 11:36, 1 Kings 15:4, Psalm 132:17.

¹³ Verse 28 is at least a partial fulfilment of verse 12.

¹⁴ Luke 19:41.