

2ND KINGS

Week 10, chapter 8

We'll study 2nd Kings 8 today, but before we do I want to explain the nature of what it is that we'll be looking at because otherwise it can be a bit confusing, and also because we'll see this same literary style on and off again throughout the remainder of the book of 2nd Kings. But also we're going to be in this chapter a couple of weeks, because while it might not seem so in a casual reading, there is a great deal going on here that we need to understand.

While the Old Testament has generally been presented to us in chronological sequence, sometimes it's not. And here in 2nd Kings 8, it is not. But that doesn't mean that we are reading standalone stories that were just kind of dumped here because there was nowhere else to put them. This is not a situation whereby there is no discernable link or connection to what has come just before, and what will come just after this chapter. There is definite meaning and intent to the way this was produced.

From a broad view, when it comes to the way the Old Testament is written especially in the books that deal with Israel's history, it's not as if only one thing is happening at any given moment. In a nation or even a community, whether large or small, whether ancient or modern, several important things can be going on simultaneously each having their complexities and reasons for occurring, but also at times these events become linked. Sometimes what seems like an isolated event or just a local matter has a wider ranging impact that anyone had a right to expect. And, sometimes the impact is immediate and at other times it is delayed; most times is cannot be predicted.

In secular history these seemingly unrelated events that conspire to at times even change the course of history are thought to be coincidental. But where the Lord is involved, as with Israel or with His church, these events that become somehow linked can be viewed as divine providence. It is the Lord, operating behind the scenes, unseen but in full control, and it might be years or even centuries before mankind can suddenly discern what He's been up to all along.

Thus whether for a secular historian or a writer of Scripture, the issue becomes how to weave together these several disparate events and tell a complete and intelligible story to future generations. In modern times, documentary film directors use a variety of methods to accomplish this; they'll use flashbacks, or introduce a character or an expert in a specific field

of study who adds needed information. Sometimes they'll create a film that starts at the end with a conclusion and then steps backward in time in order to create the links to show us the strange sequence of events that caused the end result to occur as it did.

Historical writers use other techniques. Sometimes entire chapters will be devoted to one specific event, and then another chapter shows what was happening elsewhere at the same time, and then how the connection occurred. Some writers use timelines, others appendices, long footnotes, and so on. If anyone has ever watched a good documentary on WWII, then you know that issues and conditions and politics that were critical and internal to specific nations like Japan, Germany, France, Italy, China, the USA, and others all came together to take what began as a war among some European nations into a worldwide conflagration. And each of these nations had different motives and causes that pushed them into it. But to accurately tell the story requires relating what happened within each nation in isolation; and then showing what impact that had on another nation, and then the unexpected domino effect it had elsewhere.

We see this in the Book of Kings especially, because we are dealing with 2 Israelite Kingdoms that existed simultaneously: one called Judah and the other Israel, which resulted from the breaking apart of a single Kingdom under David and then Solomon. And we find that due to long relationships and an extensive history of tensions and battles between the Hebrews and some neighboring kingdoms, each with their own political and social agendas in mind, that these often collided or came together to cause something important to happen. But knowing the history of what led up to an important event can be equally important as the event itself, so it must be captured and somehow woven into the discussion.

This is what is happening in Chapter 8. The writer or editor of the Book of Kings is putting another few pieces of the historical puzzle into their proper places so that we get a more complete picture. And as has been the case for a few chapters now, the life and prophetic ministry of Elisha (and to a lesser degree, Elijah) provide the context for the story. Thus after we have read of the siege of Samaria by the kingdom of Aram in Chapter 7. and the relief of that siege by means of Yehoveh scattering the Aramean army through a supernatural deception, we now have a flashback that provides some needed perspective.

Open your Bibles to 2nd Kings Chapter 8.

READ 2ND KINGS CHAPTER 8 all

Four chapters ago we read the story of the Shunammite woman whose loyalty and hospitality to Elisha, and whose trust in her Israelite God, brought her a degree of righteousness that

merited the resurrection of her only child, a son, from the dead. But here we read another piece of the story of which we were unaware. It is that Elisha had also shown her favor by informing her that a famine was coming and she needed to gather her family, pack up and leave the area so that they could survive it.

He gives her 3 important pieces of information: 1) The famine is coming and it is going to last for 7 years. 2) She needs to sojourn elsewhere. And 3) this famine is being caused by God. So here the famine is NOT merely being "allowed" by Yehoveh, but rather He is directly causing it to happen. Further, the famine is apparently going to affect all of the Holy Land; that is, Ephraim/Israel in the north, and Judah in the south (I'll tell you how I know that in a minute). But, in some unfathomable way, it is more or less going to be supernaturally restricted only to Hebrew territory (verse 1 says the land, the **eretz**, will suffer the famine) and it will have little or no effect on the neighboring gentile kingdoms. Thus the woman is told by Elisha to sojourn wherever she chooses; but the context is that she needs to be a sojourner (meaning a temporary stranger), which also means it must be in a foreign land. Naturally, as it was for the famine in Egypt during Joseph's time, the duration is 7 years indicating that this is God's doing since 7 years is kind of a symbolic heavenly unit of time that has a definite beginning and end.

Interestingly, we have heard of this particular famine that Elisha is warning the woman about in an earlier chapter.

CJB 2Kings 4:35-38

³⁵ Then he (Elisha) went down, walked around in the house awhile, went back up and stretched himself out on the child again. The child sneezed seven times, then opened his eyes.

³⁶ Elisha called Geichazi and said, "Call this Shunamit." So he called her; and when she came in to him, he said, "Pick up your son."

³⁷ She entered, fell at his feet and prostrated herself on the floor. Then she picked up her son and went out.

³⁸ Elisha went back to Gilgal. At the time, there was a famine in the land. The guild prophets were sitting before him, and he said to his servant, "Put the big pot on the fire, and boil some soup for the prophets."

So we know that this famine had begun when Elisha left the village of Shunem after reviving

the dead boy, and then went to the desert community of Gilgal, which is very near to Jericho and Jerusalem. Not only does this tell us when the 7 year famine had begun (very soon after Elisha had resurrected the woman's young son), but also that the famine extended to the south on into to Judah. Thus we learn that God was punishing not only the northern kingdom but also the southern because the King of Judah at the time of the beginning of the famine (probably Jehoshaphat) had been turning more and more unfaithful towards the Lord.

The woman from Shunem decided to go and live in Philistia because it wasn't too far away and because the famine wouldn't have much effect there. But, according to verse 3, when the woman and her household returned home 7 years later they found it occupied by squatters. Since she was an aristocrat, she was able to get an audience with King **Y'horam**. When she arrived at his palace, we are a little surprised to find none other than Elisha's servant **Geichazi** in conversation with the King of Israel. Why would he be there? First, it must be that although the Bible typically refers to him as a servant, it also typically refers to a king's royal court as servants even though they are really high level cabinet members. So at the least **Geichazi** was recognized as having a lofty status within the northern kingdom and was by no means a lowly attendant.

But the Rabbis are further puzzled by his presence because the sequence of the Book of Kings seems to be clear that by now **Geichazi** had been divinely afflicted with **tzara'at**, which wouldn't have permitted him to be inside the city walls let alone to be inside the king's palace. Thus it may be that we have a chronological sequence issue with the story of Na'aman (the Syrian army commander who was afflicted with **tzara'at** and cleansed of it by immersing in the Jordan River), because as a result of **Geichazi** dishonestly trying to extract money from Na'aman in Elisha's name, he contracted **tzara'at**. Of course, we don't know exactly when the **tzara'at** appeared on his body, or where on his body it might have broken out, so that perhaps he could hide it with clothing and not care one whit about bringing his ritual uncleanness into the king's palace. But it could be that the story of Na'aman actually occurred AFTER the 7 year famine; it's all a bit of a mystery.

Verse 4 has the king asking **Geichazi** to tell him about the several miracles that his master had performed when the woman appears, and she proceeds to explain her difficulty. The king is immediately receptive to her plight and orders that her property is to be returned to her. Further she is to be compensated for whatever produce had been grown and harvested in her fields during her absence.

There's a couple of things to notice about this. One is that we need not think of Biblical famines as a complete absence of food, but rather due to weather, or pestilence, or war the crops were greatly reduced. This forced food shortages, which caused the prices for what little there was to rise substantially; and of course this would disproportionately affect the poor of society. For them it could literally mean starvation, but for the wealthy it was more about inconvenience in that they might not be able to get some of their favorite foods or they had to

pay more of their disposable income for staples.

The second thing to notice is that the woman was to be compensated for the food that had been grown on her land by the squatters, during her absence. Here is why: technically, no one in Israel owned land. Everyone who possessed land was lease holders, not land owners. God owned the land. Therefore what the Israelites possessed was the use of the land, meaning whatever it produced. So the value of the land was not in the soil itself, it was in what could be grown on it. And this principle flows throughout the Bible, Old and New Testaments, and is reflected in a number of ways, but primarily in the laws concerning the Kinsman Redeemer whose primary job it was to rescue the USE of the land from being transferred into another clan or tribe, or worst case, into foreign hands. And the price that a Kinsman Redeemer paid was always based on the value of the crops produced.

The connection between this story and the one about the siege of Samaria is this: in the final moments of the siege, when the Lord rescued His people by throwing a supernatural terror into the Syrian army so that it fled, the King of Israel's servant who scoffed at Elisha's prediction that God would provide so much food in but hours that food prices would fall back to normal rates, was killed in the stampede of starving people to get the food that had been left behind in the Syrian war camp. Thus this man who had blasphemed the Lord in disbelief was destroyed by his lack of faith.

But here in chapter 8 the Shunammite woman not only escaped the horrible effects of famine by being delivered from it, but also she had her land and wealth rescued by the Lord and restored to her due to her steadfast obedience to the Word of God, her trust in the God of Israel, and her allegiance to Elisha, God's supreme prophet and earthly representative. Thus in the 1st few verses of chapter 8, the writer gives us a glaring contrast between the catastrophic results of faithlessness, versus the victorious deliverance by means of the righteous exercise of faithfulness by the people of God when our usual and needed source of life and sustenance suddenly disappears.

Let's move on to the next story that begins in verse 7.

I find this story as mysterious as it is fascinating. Elisha goes to Damascus, Syria to anoint a fellow named Haza'el as the new king of Syria (Aram). Haza'el is, of course, an Aramean and not a Hebrew. The question for me is not so much why Elisha went to Damascus, but rather why any Syrian would be at all interested in having the Israelite Elisha anoint one of them to be their king? Would Israel accept some Syrian prophet of a Syrian god coming to Israel to declare who would be the next king of Israel? He'd be laughed out of town.....for good reason.

As for the easy part (why he went), it was to fulfill a mission that the Lord had actually give to

Elisha's former master, **Eliyahu**, but he was never able to carry it out. Elijah had not remained on earth long enough for political conditions in Aram to play out to the point that it was time for this anointing of Haza'el, but now the time had come and so God sent Elisha to do it in Elijah's stead.

Let's re-read the section of 1st Kings where Elijah was commissioned to go and anoint this Haza'el as the next Syrian King.

READ 1ST KINGS 19: 11- 18

Elisha knew before he went that he was going to anoint a man as the new king of Aram who would become a cruel tormenter of Israel. I'm not sure that we can fully identify with what kind of emotional pain and anxiety this must have caused Elisha to essentially have a direct hand in helping a gentile to become a blood thirsty oppressor of his own kinsmen.

Alfred Edersheim, that astute 19th century Christian Jewish scholar who could be rightly considered the godfather of the Hebrew Roots movement, says this about Elisha's frightening assignment:

“Although there is not any express statement to that effect, we cannot (help) but connect the journey of Elisha to Damascus with the commission formerly given to Elijah to anoint Hazael king over Syria. This may help us to understand that the Word of God has a wider than the barely literal application which so often tends to perplex the superficial reader. It also shows that its fulfillment may be delayed, and when finally made, (it) comes in a different manner than expected. And lastly that the prophets may for many years have borne the painful secret of some terrible trouble to come; forbearing to take any part till the moment for action (arrived), or rather for their obedience, was indicated to them from above.”

Elisha knew this day was coming and what a terrible burden to bear. He would be obedient to the Lord to do something that could almost seem like treason to most any citizen of Israel. And he would do it without really understanding God's mind on this matter. However we do not hear of him asking the question that seems to be regularly on the tip of the tongue of most church goers in our age: why? Why, God, do you want to energize and authorize a killer to come and kill your own Chosen People? That is great trust and obedience at work when we act in faith and don't question or judge the motives of the Lord when the reasons for His actions seem incomprehensible.

But the real mystery to me is why Haza'el would pay any attention whatsoever to an old

Israelite prophet who represented a god that Haza'el certainly did not worship. And why would he think it appropriate for a Hebrew to come uninvited to anoint a new king of a foreign nation? And as usual, when we focus on "why" we tend to head down rabbit trails into allegory and speculation. Rather the issue for us ought to be "which"; which established God-pattern is being acted out here. And what we find is that over and over again the Lord uses gentiles to punish His people when His people become too unfaithful and rebellious. Even the great conqueror Nebuchadnezzar was anointed and set into motion by God to punish Israel. It's only that in time Nebuchadnezzar became too cruel to the Jews and over did it in God's eyes, and so God acted to punish Babylon.

READ JEREMIAH 27:1 – 10

The other thing we know historically is that Israel and Syria (especially Damascus) had an interesting and long term relationship; an on-again off-again relationship that in our time is certainly off-again. It seems that while the governments of Israel and Syria had a strange love-hate relationship over many centuries that regularly broke out into open hostilities, there must have been an underlying close knit relationship between the common citizens of Israel and of Damascus. I suspect that there had been a great deal of intermarriage and migration between the two kingdoms and so there were likely very close family ties. In fact we know that at one point around 150 years before Christ was born, that the High Priest Zadok was deposed by the Jewish Hasmonean dynasty and he chose to go into self-imposed exile in Damascus. There, he was the founder of a large colony of Levites who obviously lived in harmony with the Syrian people. Even the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Essenes of Qumran, had a large and thriving colony in Damascus.

In verses 7 and 8 we also learn that when the current King of Aram, Ben-Hadad, heard that Elisha was coming he told Haza'el to go and meet him with some gifts and inquire if the king would live or die. It seems that Ben-Hadad was seriously ill and it was common for a sick or injured person to seek a prophet or a seer to find out how this would turn out. People of all ages have always wanted to know the future and Elisha's gift of second sight was known far and wide. I'm not sure I can think of a person in the Bible who had been given more of a gift of knowing the future and knowing what others were thinking than Elisha.

Haza'el must have been a top aide to the King of Syria, perhaps Ben-Hadad's military commander (they were usually 2nd in command over the nation). Haza'el did as the king asked and we're told he took gifts that represented the best that Damascus had to offer, and it required 40 camels to carry it. However you should know that while the gift being brought to Elisha was no doubt rich, it's not like the 40 camels were heavily loaded. Rather in that era, the pomp and circumstance of presenting a gift was as important as the gift itself. So a large procession of camels, camel drivers, musicians and splendidly dressed dignitaries accompanied whatever the gift might be in order to make a big impression. It was not unusual that one camel might only carry a single modestly sized object. So it's not like a fortune was

carried to Elisha; in fact much of it was probably things like the local wine, local produce, dates, some cloth, and maybe a few gold or silver objects. It was more about a required Middle Eastern show of honor and respect.

Verse 9 says that upon greeting Elisha Haza'el got right to the point and asked if his king would recover from his sickbed or not. But the way he asked is something we also need to discuss; he said to Elisha, "Your **son** Ben-Hadad king of Aram has sent me....." It is the matter of the use of the term "your son" that I want to expound upon. First, obviously, Ben-Hadad was not Elisha's son nor were they related. But, second, this is usually said by Bible commentators to merely be a customary sign of respect or a standard Middle Eastern greeting; and while there is some truth to that it also carries yet another more subtle, yet more powerful, sense to it.

While affection was certainly part and parcel of a father/son relationship in the ancient Middle East, that is secondary to the working part of the relationship. Rather, such a relationship established a clear pecking order. The father was senior and therefore the senior authority in the family. The son was junior and therefore subject to his father's authority. Such an authority was then, and remains so to this day, an extremely serious and basic element of Middle Eastern societies. A son who refused to be subject to his father brought shame to the family, and such a thing was intolerable and often remedied by either the son leaving the area or by being killed by another family member since shame tended to extend to the entire clan. Thus then, as now, when an Arab says that you are a son to him, that might sound like you've made a dear friend; but it carries a much different implication to his mind. Because as a son you are obligated to honor him as a father, which means that while you have indeed established a cordial and friendly relationship, he has placed himself in a position of authority over you and you have therefore become subject to him.

So this is entirely different than when a Middle Easterner of ancient or modern times speaks of a person as a brother to him. A brother is an equal; it is a true offer of close friendship with no issues of authority.

Here, no doubt Elisha was the older man, and the King of Aram was truly offering that he would show Elisha the honor and respect of a father. This was no trivial thing and I suspect that Haza'el saw it as a great insult to the Syrian people that their king would offer submission to a tattered old Israelite prophet, whose people he was at war with; but it also expressed Ben-Hadad's current weakness and vulnerability. As we'll soon see, for Haza'el, that was like washing the blood off of a wound in a pool of Piranhas.

Elisha answered Haza'el's question about the king's health in a way that has caused great difficulties both in intent and in translation. The typical rendering in English is that Elisha told him to go back and tell Ben-Hadad that he would recover, but in fact he would NOT recover.

And that this is what God specifically told him to do. As you can imagine, this has caused a great deal of heartburn among Jewish and Christian scholars as here we have Yehoveh instructing Elisha to tell a lie to a deathly ill man, who was honoring God's prophet and giving full respect to Israel's God. This had nothing to do with deceiving an enemy in order to win a battle, so what do we have here?

The words "you shall certainly recover" are in Hebrew *va-yomer elay ve Elisha lek emor lo chayyah*. Those who know a little Hebrew ought to have heard something a bit suspicious among those Hebrew words; you heard the word "**lo**". **Lo** means no or not. So when we translate these words literally it is "you shall certainly NOT live" even though our English Bibles leave out the word "not". But then it seems strange to say in addition to "you will not live" that "however you will surely die".

While there is no academic consensus of what to do with this oddly constructed sentence, in my opinion the meaning is quite transparent once we find out what actually happened in the end. The meaning is: 1) you will **not** die of your illness (which is what the king directly asked of Elisha), however Elisha also volunteered that 2) you **will** surely die (meaning that you will die but it won't be from your illness). And as we see in a couple of verses the king indeed did not die of his illness as he was fearing, rather he was unexpectedly murdered as he lay in bed, helplessly weakened by his illness. So Elisha nailed it, and told the truth, just as the Lord had told him to say. In fact Elisha's words absolutely stunned Haza'el who already was considering murder in his heart; but what with the shame and dishonor that Ben-Hadad had heaped upon the Syrian people by calling himself a "son" before his "father" Elisha, it cemented it in his heart to go ahead with the assassination.

We'll pick up this fascinating narrative next time.