

The Kindness and Severity of God

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Preacher: Philip Copeland

[0:00] We're going to turn now to our Bibles and our Bible reading in the Old Testament in the second book of Kings. If you don't have a Bible with you, we've got visitors' Bibles outside. The steers will be glad to give you one, so just stick your hand up or go and ask for one outside.

You'll be able to follow along. Phil Copeland has been leading us on and off through some studies in the books of Kings. And we've come this morning to 2 Kings chapter 8. And we're going to read together the first half of this chapter down to verse 15.

And we've been seeing in these stories concerning Elijah the prophet the great dramas that go on in God's kingdom among his people, with the enemies of God's kingdom, and with the word of the Lord, which comes always into the midst through his prophet.

And this is another interesting and somewhat dramatic story. So we're going to read beginning at chapter 8 of 2 Kings and at verse 1.

Now Elisha had said to the woman whose son he had restored to life, Arise and depart with your household and sojourn wherever you can, for the Lord has called for a famine and it will come upon the land for seven years.

[1:20] So the woman arose and did according to the word of the man of God. She went with her household and sojourned in the land of the Philistines seven years.

And at the end of seven years, when the woman returned from the land of the Philistines, she went to appeal to the king for her house and her land. Now the king was talking with Gehazi, the servant of the man of God, saying, Tell me all the great things Elisha has done.

While he was telling the king how Elisha had restored the dead to life, behold, the woman whose son he had restored to life appealed to the king for her house and her land. And Gehazi said, My lord, O king, here is the woman, and here is her son whom Elisha restored to life.

And when the king asked the woman, she told him. So the king appointed an official for her, saying, Restore all that was hers together with all the produce of the fields from the day that she left the land until now.

Now Elisha came to Damascus. Ben-Hadad, the king of Syria, was sick. And when it was told him the man of God has come here, the king said to Hazael, Take a present with you and go to meet the man of God and inquire of the Lord through him, saying, Shall I recover from this sickness?

[2:47] So Hazael went to meet him, took a present with him, all kinds of goods of Damascus, forty camel loads. When he came and stood before him, he said, Your son Ben-Hadad, king of Syria, has sent me to you, saying, Shall I recover from this sickness?

And Elisha said to him, Go, say to him, you shall certainly recover. But the Lord has shown me that he shall certainly die.

And he fixed his gaze and stared at him until he was embarrassed. And the man of God wept. And Hazael said, Why does my Lord weep?

He answered, Because I know the evil that you will do to the people of Israel. You will set on fire their fortresses, and you will kill their young men with a sword and dash in pieces their little ones and rip open their pregnant women.

And Hazael said, What is your servant who is but a dog that he should do this great thing? And he said, And he said, Elisha answered, The Lord has shown me that you are to be king over Syria.

[4:06] And he departed from Elisha and came to his master, who said to him, What did Elisha say to you? And he answered, He told me that you would certainly recover. But the next day, he took the bedcloth and dipped it in water and spread it over his face until he died.

And Hazael became king in his place. Amen. And may God bless to us his word and teach us all that we're to learn from it today.

Well, good morning, everybody. Please do have your Bibles open to the verses that we read in 2 Kings chapter 8.

In Romans chapter 11, the Apostle Paul says, Note the kindness and the severity of the Lord. Note the kindness and the severity of the Lord. And I've chosen this title because that is what the writer of Kings wants us all to note this morning in these verses.

[5:26] The kindness and the severity of the Lord. Let me just say a couple of things by way of introduction before we launch into the passage. Firstly, I want you to notice, and this isn't obvious from our English translations, but the two sections, verses 1 to 6 and 7 to 15 are linked by one word, one main word in the Hebrew that comes up again and again.

It's translated as either restored or recover. Restored or recover is the one word. So you'll find it in the first section in verse 1, three times in verse 5, all referring to the way that the Lord raised a dead boy to life.

And then in the second section, the word comes up in verse 8, verse 9, verse 10, and verse 14, all referring to whether or not the Lord will allow a pagan king to recover from serious sickness. However, as we'll see, the main focus of the second section is actually not about the recovery of the king, but about the ruin and the death that will be meted out by the hand of his successor, the successor whom the Lord will sovereignly raise up to take on the reign.

So to summarize all that, in this passage, we will see the kindness and the severity of God on display. In verses 1 to 6, we will see his kindness, that he is the sovereign giver of life.

[7:04] But in verse 7 to 15, we will see his severity that he is also the sovereign bringer of death. Second introductory comment is to remind you that we are in a section of kings that I call dismal kings in the divided kingdom.

Remember, God's people at this point in history were torn in two, ripped apart into two separate kingdoms. In the south, there were two tribes that made up the nation of Judah and up north were the ten tribes that formed the nation of Israel.

And remember that ever since Israel had broken away up in the north, they have been outstanding at rejecting the Lord God. They have rebelled against his grace and spurned his goodness and instead they've grotesquely chosen to worship idols, false gods.

And you know, despite all that persistent and flagrant unfaithfulness, the Lord has been so patient, so kind with them and so kind with their current king.

But my friends, time is running out as we'll see later this morning. Right, let's look at the kindness of the Lord.

[8:27] Verses 1-6. The kindness of the Lord. He is the sovereign giver of life. In verse 1, we're told that the Lord shows great kindness to a familiar face.

Please look at verse 1. Now Elisha had said to the woman whose son he had restored to life, arise and depart with your household and sojourn wherever you can for the Lord has called for a famine and it will come upon the land for seven years.

So the Lord, friends, does not forget his faithful servants. He knows the needs of his people and he tends to our needs every day. He truly is our salvation and our shield.

And that is the great truth that this woman could testify to in verse 1. Remember, she's quite clearly the woman that we were introduced to back in 2 Kings 4. She was a member of the righteous remnant in the land.

That is, she was a true Israelite who walked by faith before the Lord and refused to conform to unbelieving Israel around her. And we're also told in chapter 4, you'll probably remember this, those of you who were here back before the summer, she was very wealthy.

[9:50] But she was exemplary in her behavior because she used all that she had to worship the Lord and to serve the Lord. For example, she showed Elisha unbelievable hospitality whenever he was in town in the area of Shunam where she lived.

And she would also welcome Elisha into the house and eventually she persuaded her husband even to add an extension onto their house so that there would be a guest room for Elisha to stay in. She worshipped the Lord with all that she had. And remember the Lord was so kind to this woman for he graciously gave her and her elderly husband a son and she was thrilled.

But then one morning out of the blue our little boy comes running in with a desperately sore head so severe and only a matter of hours later he died in his mother's arms.

And in response the woman turned in faith to the only one who could help her she turned to the Lord and his word she turned to Elisha and again in chapter 4 the word of the Lord powerfully worked through Elisha and this wee boy who was dead was raised to life he was restored.

[11:09] Well here in 2nd Kings 8 verse 1 the Lord continues to shield and protect this faithful servant and her household. He gives Elisha advanced warning on a famine that was coming upon the land which was most likely a covenant curse sent by the Lord and his just wrath against the unfaithfulness of Israel in order to warn the nation so that they might repent.

And so here in verse 1 the Lord is warning the woman to flee the wrath to come and she's to leave the promised land but that's okay in this instance and she ends up in the land of the Philistines the Lord often uses the most surprising means to shelter his people.

She goes to this land of an old enemy but the Lord keeps her and just as promised she finds food and sustenance there in order to keep her and her family alive for the next seven years.

Well then she returns home in verse 3 now that the famine is over but there's a problem a new problem when she was out of the country her land her home everything that she had it was snatched up by someone else most probably likely it was the king because as we know in this book the kings of Israel love to take other people's land but it's a disaster for her and her family because back in those days your land your inheritance in the promised land it stood for your share in the covenant promises of the Lord and so it's desperately desperately unfair that this woman has lost all of that she must do all that she can to get it back and you know her only hope is to go to the king and to plead for him to act justly to restore the land that was hers but which she's lost but given the current state of how things are in Israel that is not guaranteed that is not guaranteed what will happen well verse three she sets out to make an appeal to the king to get her land back and in verse four just look at what the king is doing in verse four at that precise very moment could you believe it what a remarkable coincidence my my right then and there the king just so happens to be having a chat with

Elisha's former assistant Gehazi and the king has just said to Gehazi Gehazi come please tell me all the great things that Elisha has done tell me about them for Gehazi had witnessed all of the awesome events of second kings four he had seen all of the awesome works of power that the word of the lord had done through his prophet including the raising of this little dead boy and so in verse five the conversation may have gone like this I'm not a very good actor I'm going to do some acting for you this morning can you believe that here we go I'm going to pretend to be Gehazi okay he's Glaswegian okay oh yes my king Elisha really did save us all that day we were all starving me and the other sons of the prophets in the famine we had worked so hard to cook this pot of stew but you know one of the guys numpty it's Glaswegian for idiot numpty he unknowingly had thrown in some poisonous vegetables into the stew and we were about to eat it but luckily we spotted the poisonous veg and thyme it would have killed us if we'd eaten it but you know Elisha all he had to do was toss a little bit of flour into the pot of stew and it was completely safe and we feasted and we lived and I'll tell you king if you thought that was good let me tell you on another occasion

[15:08] I saw Elisha even raise a boy from the dead it's true I was there I saw it with my own eyes I'll never forget it one day me and Elisha were sat at the foot of Mount Carmel and suddenly this Shunamite woman came to us and she was in tears crying that her son had just died and she was devastated and so were we because she'd been very good to us and we'd known that this boy was a gift from the Lord but now he was dead well Elisha decided that we would all travel back to the house to where the dead boy's body was lying and you know he sent me on ahead of him and the woman and he told me to take his staff and to place it on the dead body of the boy and so I did boy I don't know how old maybe about eight years old and he was lying there and so I put the staff on top of him and it was useless nothing happened until Elisha turned up and he went into the room next to the corpse he shut the door behind him

I heard him praying through the door but then there was silence and then it felt like an age as I waited outside and then all of a sudden this almighty sneeze unlike any sneeze I've ever heard before came out and it was the boy who did that because he was no longer dead he was alive and Elisha called in his mother and it was the most incredible thing I've ever witnessed now scene over at that precise moment who should walk in the room to the king and Gehazi but the woman from Shunam and notice the son who was once dead is there and she makes her appeal to the king with this story this account of what Gehazi had witnessed ringing in his ears and in verse 6 Gehazi then puts two and two together and he says oh my lord oh king it's her it's the woman I've just been

talking about it's her she's here and that's her son that was the one who was dead look he's alive and Elisha had did it and having heard Gehazi's story and clearly this has moved the king's heart at that very instance he turns very favourable to this woman and he restores all that was hers he points out an official verse 6 and he says go restore there's that word again restore to her all that was hers was that just an unbelievable coincidence a product of chance of course not of course not friends this is all the lord's doing he moves in a mysterious way even when we cannot see him he is always at work working all things for the good of those who love him the lord has set up this whole situation so that the king would be moved in his heart to return this woman's inheritance and more do you notice the end of verse 6 the king goes on he says also give her all the produce of the fields of her land that we have in storage everything that we harvested from the day she left until now it's all hers give it all back to her incredible provision of the lord and my friend if you're a christian here this morning then this episode in kings that you might be tempted to skim over because it's not as dramatic maybe as some of the other things we've seen in this book but you should not rush over it because it should teach you something that fills your heart with joy and that is the fact that the lord your god is so kind and faithful to his servants the lord is always daily attending to the needs of us of his church to use a phrase from psalm 23 his goodness and mercy follows us all the days of our lives we are not this shunammite woman but we have this shunammite woman's god and perhaps you're just visiting this morning perhaps you're here this morning and maybe you're a new student to the city and you trust in the lord jesus but you've come to our city and it's all new and you're not a little bit anxious about starting this new chapter in your life well if that is you then let this scene in second kings fill you with joy because this is your god and this is what he's like as the lord jesus would later say centuries after this do not be anxious for your father in heaven knows your needs so trust him and seek first his kingdom that is get on living like this shunammite woman lived her life obeying the lord's word building your whole life and future upon his promises and doing that within a loving church family do that and you will find peace and knowing that he is always at work in all things using everything to bring about good for us even in the hard times in our lives well we will move on to verses 7 to 15 in just a moment right but before then i want us just to go back and notice something else about these verses and what they teach us about the lord's kindness okay now i mentioned earlier just in passing or maybe i did i'm not sure i did i'm not sure i did forgive me i don't think this is in chronological order here why do i think that well for a number of reasons i think this is an earlier incident that's been spliced in here and the main reason i think that is because gehazi is there in the presence of the king when was the last time we saw gehazi chapter 6 he was placed under the lord's judgment for great wickedness and what he had done in despising god's grace the lord struck him down with leprosy and we are told that it clung to his skin for all his days and that makes me think that this episode in chapter 8 is a flashback because gehazi is standing talking in the presence of the king and that would never have happened if he was leprous so friends why has the author of kings put this flashback incident here well i take it he's put this here not only to tell us about the wonderful thing that the lord did for the woman i think the author wants us to pause for a moment and the whole story of kings and reflect upon verse 4 chapter 8 verse 4 let me read it again now the king was talking with gehazi the servant of the man of god saying tell me all the great things that elisha had done as i take it the author of kings wants us to see that the lord has not just been incredibly kind to the woman he's also been incredibly kind to his unfaithful enemy and that is this king as we read what he says in verse 4 we're meant to stop and think look at how good and patient the lord has been with this utterly wicked and willfully blind man he has given this king and all the previous kings plenty of chances to hear about his wonderful word in action and thinking back over chapters 5 and 7 this current king has also had plenty of chances to see the powerful word of the lord in action too it's a gift of the lord's kindness that but has this kindness of the lord had any impact on the king well he is clearly very impressed with the testimony of the lord's power through elisha he's impressed enough to give the shunammite women justice he's clearly interested in the stories he's maybe even a little bit entertained by them but at the end of the day in his heart this king remains thoroughly unchanged so we have a king who is curious about the lord but not committed he's attracted to elisha's works but not submissive to elisha's lord he's fascinated but he does not have faith it reminds us does it not of herod centuries later in the gospels where we told that herod loved nothing more than getting john the baptist out of his prison cell to speak the word of the lord to him herod was fascinated by what he heard but it never brought him to his knees he never once repented and

turned in faith to the christ whom john pointed forward to you see friend one can recognize the power and the pull of the gospel without ever embracing the gospel there is it seems a vast gulf between being charmed by the truth and being converted to the truth it reminds me heartbreakingly of a man that i used to know down in england where we used to live this man was a really charming guy he came to church regularly and during the sermons i just looked over at the corner of my eye he would seem absolutely captivated by every word he would sit on the edge of his seat he would even have his bible open and after the service he would often come up to people like myself and say that was remarkable i've never heard anything like that before how remarkable but you know last i heard he is nowhere with the lord jesus oh he still goes to church week in and week out he still loves hearing nicely delivered sermons but he has never surrendered to the lord who has been so kind to him and letting him hear his word being preached week in and week out what about you do you know the lord has been so kind to you and letting you hear his word preached he's been especially kind to you and letting you come along to church if you've been coming week by week to hear his life-giving word of truth if it fascinates you good but my friend do not stop here second kings eight pleads with us all yet again to shun the way of the kings of israel and instead let the lord's kindness lead you to repentance today without delay because my friend there will be a point and i say this with fear and trembling there will be a point where the lord's kindness runs out and that is what we see from our next section in the passage verses 7 to 15 where we see the severity of the lord the severity of the lord he is the sovereign bringer of death so in verse 7 we suddenly find ourselves outside of israel elisha is outside of israel and he's in where syria the nation that has done so much damage to israel in recent days elisha comes right to the heart of the this the country in damascus their capital city why is he here well we're not told explicitly but clearly we are to assume that the lord has sent him here and his appearance in damascus as you'd imagine doesn't go unnoticed in verse 7 the king of syria at that time ben hadad hears about it he was the strong king who had almost destroyed samaria in chapter 7 but now look at where he's at look at what he's doing things aren't looking so good for him he's lying on his sick bed which could well soon be his death bed so in verse 8 he calls his servant hazael that is a big name in kings i'll come back to that in a minute hazael but right now he's just a servant so hazael comes to the king of syria and the king of syria says elisha is here please go to him with an enormous gift and inquire of the lord through him and ask will i recover that is will i be restored same word from the sickness so verse 9 hazael goes to elisha as instructed with his humongous gift the text says in verse 9 40 camel loads i'm not sure if that's a load of 40 camels or 40 loads of numerous other camels it's a lot of camels anyway it's a big gift i just find that really amusing anyway and hazael says look at the respect look how different it is here's the pagan coming to the lord's prophet look at the respect here your son ben hadad king of syria has sent me to you saying shall i recover that is shall i be restored from this sickness and look at elisha's response in verse 10 please look at verse 10 elisha says go say to him you shall certainly recover but the lord has shown me that he will certainly die that's a very enigmatic reply is it not his answer is yes and no yes the king is suffering from a sickness that if he is left alone he will recover from he will be restored but also no for the lord has shown me elisha that the king will still perish and having said this enigmatic answer you get this awkward moment i wonder if you've ever been in an awkward moment like this and it's not really clear who's doing the staring here but most people think it's elisha elisha fixes this stare upon hazael and hazael doesn't know what to do he's embarrassed he looks away and then all of a sudden elisha bursts into tears and he's weeping weeping and hazael doesn't know what to make of all of this he says well why are you weeping why are you crying and elisha answers in verse 12 look at verse 12 and the despair in the man's voice he says because i know the evil that you will do to the people of israel you will set on fire their fortresses and you will kill their young men with a sword and dash in pieces their little ones and rip open their pregnant women he's describing what military forces did back then to any country in which they conquered!

[30:46] and so in verse 13 Hazael shocked by all of this says who am i to carry out such great military success for Syria against Israel i'm just a dog and Elisha replies but the Lord has shown me that you are to be the king of Syria and their friends is the explanation of the enigmatic message of verse 10 see in verse 10 Elisha what he was really saying is this if you leave the king alone then he will live he will recover but the Lord has shown me that he will meet his demise by your hand Hazael and then you will be king for the Lord is raising you up to be his new instrument of judgment upon Israel the Lord is going to hand his own rebellious!

over to your hand friends let me just say this this marks a massive shift in the ministry of Elisha as one eavesdrops here on this conversation with Hazael you can't help think back to a promise that the Lord made to Elijah in 1 Kings 19 let's just flick back to that 1 Kings 19 keep your finger in 2 Kings 8 but 1 Kings 19 please let me read to you from verse 15 1 Kings 19 verse 15 as I say this was at the end of the ministry really of Elijah the Lord's last big prophet and the Lord had said these words chapter 19 verse 15 the Lord said to him Elijah go return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus and when you arrive you shall anoint who

Hazael king over Syria and then go and anoint Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint him to be king over Israel and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel Meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place and then look at verse 17 the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel all the knees that have not bowed to Baal the false gods and every mouth that has not kissed Baal please turn back over to 2nd Kings 8 you see as one eavesdrops in in this conversation here you're supposed to see that here are finally the Lord's words coming to fulfillment Elijah actually didn't go on and anoint Hazael neither did he touch Jehu but he did anoint Elisha and as you read that about Elisha in 1st Kings 19 when he comes and takes over from Elijah you're expecting judgment judgment judgment all we have seen friends from chapter 2 to 7 of 2nd Kings is grace grace grace patience patience patience patience with Israel not a mention of Hazael not a mention of Jehu but not anymore as one commentator has said Israel and this should make us shudder listen to this Israel has sinned away her day of grace Israel has sinned away her day of grace Hazael has now been anointed and in chapter 9 which we shall God willing come back to soon we meet

Jehu judgment has now come so verse 14 Hazael leaves Elisha and with all of this news ringing in his ears he goes back to Ben Hadad and Ben Hadad asks what did Elisha say did he say I was going to be restored did he say I would recover and Hazael says oh yes yes he did yes but the next day Hazael takes a wet bed cloth and he smothers Ben Hadad to death and he dies and with him out of the way Hazael becomes king over Syria just as the Lord said he would Hazael has been appointed and set up by the Lord God to crush and batter Israel friends before we finish this morning let's just quickly focus upon

[35 : 46] Elisha's tears in verse 11 and 12 remember Elisha knows that the day of judgment is coming and he's broken he knows it's totally necessary he knows it's totally deserved but at the same time Elisha is absolutely broken by the news and you know that when we look at this weeping prophet friends we see actually the Lord's heart on display too the Lord is just and righteous so he will and must judge his apostate people he must punish them for their idolatry he cannot let such evil slide he must execute his just judgment but he is so slow to anger and full of mercy that there is an element of divine sadness in his judgment just think of what the

Lord would say later on in history in Ezekiel 33 verse 11 again speaking about unbelieving Israel he says as I live declares the Lord God I have no pleasure no pleasure in the death of the wicked but that the wicked would turn from his way and live that's what the Lord has pleasure in and he says turn back turn back from your evil ways why will you die oh house of Israel or just think even later in salvation history to Luke chapter 19 when the Lord Jesus looks over Jerusalem that was under wrath and headed for catastrophic judgment and he weeps just like I'm doing just now sorry I'll have a drink of water Jesus broke down and wept at the thought of these people facing judgment the Lord's severity against sinners is always soaked in tears this week I came across a really vivid quote from a Scottish minister from the 19th century called Andrew Bonar and again he's speaking in metaphor here but he's speaking truth he says this I think on the last day the Lord Jesus will weep over the lost just as he did over Jerusalem and it'll be something forever talked about in heaven the saints in glory will say did you see how Jesus wept as he said depart from me ye cursed but then it was also absolutely necessary or on another occasion speaking about the judgment that fell upon Sodom and Gomorrah Bonar says this he said I think the shower of fire and brimstone that fell was also wet with the tears of God as it fell for God has said he has no pleasure in the death of him that dieth friends

God's judgment is both a necessary thing and a sad thing Elisha knew that and he felt that so clearly in his heart and his tears in verse 11 you could see that they were sent from above because that is how the Lord views all of this too there is no fiendish delight in the Lord's judgment but his judgment must fall nonetheless for sin is so serious friends 2nd Kings 8 tells us to note the kindness

and the severity of God he is the giver of life and sadly he is also the bringer of death how then shall we live before him 2nd Kings 8 says please choose life shun the way of the king of Israel shun the way of unbelieving Israel and live like this woman walk humbly before the Lord by the obedience of faith and take his word seriously and look to him as your only giver of life and take heart if you know him that he has such beautiful kindness for people like you and me people who don't deserve his kindness and know that his goodness and mercy will follow you even through the most difficult circumstances you face and take heart that in Jesus nothing today will ever take away the eternal inheritance that's been given to you by God's grace and in Christ also take heart that you will never face the judgment that you deserve for all of it has been poured out upon him so cling to him amen let's pray heavenly father we praise you for revealing yourself to us what kindness you've shown us we do not deserve this gift of revelation from you we do not deserve your word but we praise you that you've so graciously made yourself known that you're slow to anger may we remember this all of our days and turn to you in faith we pray this in [41:50] Jesus name amen