

2. God does not settle for second best

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[0 : 00] Now, can we have our Bibles open, please, at page 320 of this passage that's been read for us in 2 Kings 14, and we'll have a moment of prayer.

God our Father, we praise you. This is not simply the age-old Word, this is the living Word for us today. We pray as we look into this passage that the Word, the living Word, will speak right into our hearts, opening our eyes to what is true, showing us what is false, and leading us to the living Word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

And so, to 2 Kings 14, verses 1 to 22.

Many years ago, when I was an English teacher, I used to try and very hard to find words to describe a type of assignment which was good enough, which was fulfilled the criteria, but did not sparkle.

Somehow or other, did not quite make the highest grade. The word I fastened on was adequate. And after a short time, people began to realise what I meant by adequate.

[1 : 33] I didn't mean I was jumping with joy and slavering with glee over the things that were submitted. It meant I was pleased, but just pleased. And I recommend this word to you, if you're in some difficulty of whether you're a teacher marking essays or being asked to pronounce on a piece of work that doesn't quite make it somehow or other, I recommend the word adequate.

It seems to me if the author of Kings, looking at the reign of Amaziah, king of Judah, would have used the word adequate. Verse 3, he did in all things as Joash, his father, had done.

Now those of you who were here last week, remember that Joash, his father, was a man who was moderately good, adequate, if you like. A man who relied on other people's faith.

A man without vision. A man of great complacency. So to say that he did what was right in all the things as Joash, his father, had done is hardly a ringing endorsement.

If you read the parallel account in Chronicles, you'll find it's put even more starkly. It's in 2 Chronicles 25, you might want to read it later. Amaziah did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, but not wholeheartedly.

[3 : 00] He did what was right, but not wholeheartedly. We can sense a weariness in the author here. This is the second of the yes-but Kings.

The half-hearted Kings who, and this is going to continue in the next chapter, and behind it you can sense the Lord's own weariness. The weariness that we are having a set of Kings who are content to settle for what is simply adequate.

He did not do, we are told, like David, his father. God doesn't want another Joash. He doesn't want another yes-but King.

He wants another David. He's going to have to wait a while for it. It's going to be Hezekiah before we come to a King who walks in all the ways of David. Here we have the danger of second and third generation complacency.

You get this in the New Testament as well. That's the main thrust of the letter to the Hebrews, written to second, third generation Christians who've lost the early vision, who are maybe doing the right things, but doing them in a complacent manner.

[4 : 11] Now, before I'm misunderstood, I want to make a point here. When Christians listen to the Word of God and hear something like half-hearted and complacent, isn't it true that we begin to think something like this?

We can't do any more than we're doing. We're already working to the limit of our capacity. Now, here's somebody coming telling us to do more.

That's not what I'm saying at all. Undoubtedly, there are always people who could be doing more, but that's not the point. The point is not doing more, but doing what's already being done and doing it wholeheartedly.

Doing it for the Lord. Not doing it for others. Not doing it because our Father has done it, but doing it because it is the Lord's will. And that seems to me the underlying thrust of so many of these passages in Kings.

It's not so much, at least at the beginning, that this king did badly, but he was half-hearted. And looking at the structure of the passage, this is very much in the shadow of the kings of Israel.

[5 : 25] So, as they said, there's lots of names that sound alike. But then you read our own history, all the Jameses and the Georges and all the rest of it. Very common in royal families, as you know, to pass names down the generations.

Jehoash of Israel dominates verses 8 to 14. And then we have the story, which we didn't read, of Jeroboam, his son, who raises Israel to a high peak of prestige.

So, we've got God's own kingdom in Judah, the Davidic line not seeming to do very much, and the northern kingdom of Israel seeming to prosper. Because God is working his purpose out with imperfect humans.

So, let's look then at the story of this king, this yes-but-king. Now, I'm going to call this God Does Not Settle for Second Best. That's the title of what I want to talk about today.

God Does Not Settle for Second Best. The story clearly develops in three parts. 1 to 6, then 7 to 15, 7 to 16, sorry, and then verses 17 to 22.

[6 : 41] So, first of all, verses 1 to 6, which I'm going to call God's Truth is One Truth. God's Truth is One Truth.

And what I mean by this is we cannot pick and choose among the things that God says, obey the bits we like, and ignore the others. Now, that seems to me the point of these early verses on Amaziah.

Amaziah was a pick-and-mix guy. He picked the parts of God's truth that he liked and ignored others. The high places, verse 4, But the high places were not removed.

The people still sacrificed and made offerings in the high places. Now, haven't we heard all that before? We heard that last week, after all. Joash did not remove the high places.

And earlier still, good kings like Asa and Jehoshaphat did not remove the high places. Now, this may be repetition, but it's not vain repetition. God is going to continue saying this until we actually get someone who does something about it.

[7 : 44] And when we come to Hezekiah, we're going to find that this man, Hezekiah, actually does something about it. You see, God is going to continue telling his people things until they do them.

And that is the point of the repetition. Numbers 33, Moses had said, When you come into the land, you will demolish the high places.

And as I said last week, the problem with high places were, it was repeating the error of the Tower of Babel. The higher up you get, the closer you are to God. Sometimes hills, sometimes platforms raised on hilltops.

But that's the theology behind it. If you make tall buildings, if you make this great effort to climb stairs, then you are closer to God.

So the high places are still there. And that's why God is going to keep on repeating it until something is done about it. But there is selective obedience with this man. Verse 5, He struck down his servants who had struck down the king, his father.

[8 : 51] Verse 6, But he did not put to death the children of the murderers, according to what was written in the book of the Law of Moses. And the reference here is to Deuteronomy 24, verse 16.

And obviously, it's to prevent a blood shoot going down the generations. But wait a minute now. Amaziah knew the words of Moses. He knew these words from Deuteronomy 24.

Why obey Deuteronomy 24 and ignore Numbers 33? What is it so special about the one chapter that has to be obeyed and the other that doesn't?

Now this may seem old, far away, old, forgotten, far off things and battles long ago. But this is exactly what's happening in the 21st century church, is it not?

All our current problems are springing from a pick-and-mix attitude towards God's truth. You'll hear it said, Everything must be judged by the love of God.

[9 : 57] This was all raised in the, and is still raised in debates about morality, particularly sexuality. God is love, and everything must be judged by his love.

Well, of course, God is love. But how do we know that? How do we know? What access do we have? Apart from the truth of God, Jesus loves me. This I know.

But how do I know it? Because the Bible tells me so. That same Bible also tells me that God is holy. That same Bible tells me the Spirit, when he comes, will convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment.

That same Bible tells me that God will judge the world by the man whom he has raised from the dead. God's book is one truth.

We dare not sit in judgment on it. You see, when we obey one part and don't obey another part, even more so, when we say, because of this part, I'm going to disobey this part, you see what we're doing?

[10 : 59] We've dethroned the word of God and made ourselves the judges. Now, one thing we can be absolutely certain about is this, that on the judgment day, it will not be those who pick and mix parts of the Bible to suit themselves, will be on the judgment seat.

God's truth is one truth. We dare not settle for second best. And when we pick and mix in the word of God, that's what we're doing.

And that is why this story is so unsatisfactory. Amaziah clearly knew the truth. His father, after all, had been taught the truth by Jehoiada the high priest, who had lived to a great old age.

Very probably the young Amaziah had listened in on these lessons on the word of God, the law of Moses, because he knew enough of the law of Moses. As I say, to follow Deuteronomy 24, somehow or other, not enough to follow Numbers 33.

We must not, we dare not, choose and pick and mix. And that seems to me to be, to run through all these stories in chapter 13, 14.

[12 : 15] We're not particularly going to look at chapter 15. But in chapter 15, the two successors of Amaziah follow much the same pattern as he did.

And next week we're going to look at King Ahaz, who went the next stage and simply rejected the lot of it. You see, that's what happens. When we pick and mix, there soon comes a time we say, well, why bother about any of it?

Why not just follow our own inclinations? But secondly, the second part of the story, verses 7 to 14, God's judgments are always at work.

Now one of the fascinating things about Scripture is different kinds of literature in them. In these books, in these Old Testament books, we have to read the stories very carefully.

And not just the individual stories, we've got to see how they fit into the context, and the context of their own books, and the context of the whole Bible story as it develops.

[13 : 19] Whereas in some books, in apocalyptic writings, like Daniel and Revelation, the veil is thrown aside, and we are shown God and his angels at work, behind the scenes, as they direct world affairs, as they govern what's happening.

So that in Scripture, we find both a concern, if you like, with the ordinary routine matters, as we do here, but also showing us what's happening behind the scenes.

We've got to remember that here, and there are two things. First of all, in verse 7, God sometimes gives his people victory. Amaziah strikes down 10,000 Edomites, Edom, Esau, the old enemy.

The chronicle actually says, the Lord gave Amaziah victory. Indeed, it was a prophet, who told Amaziah to go and fight Edom, for the Lord will give him victory.

The chronicle also tells us, that after that victory, Amaziah crazily started to worship the Edomite gods. I mean, even from the point of view of common sense, that doesn't make a lot of sense.

[14 : 29] You defeat an enemy at the word of the Lord your God, and then you start worshipping the gods of the enemy whom you've defeated. We have here a man who is utterly confused, which always happens when people pick and mix the word of God.

There is no consistency in their actions, no coherence in their thinking. And it's very, very obvious that this had made him conceited. But God sometimes gives his people victory.

But the second thing, and this is the longer part of it, verses 8 and following, God sometimes allows his people to be defeated.

Now, when we studied Elisha the prophet a bit earlier this year, we saw how Naaman the Syrian had been used by God to punish his own people. And this is happening here again.

Notice Amaziah boasts. Amaziah sent messengers to Jehoash, come let us look one another in the face. That's a somewhat tight-lipped translation, because he's not asking for a conference, he's asking for a confrontation.

[15 : 42] The contemporary phrase, in your face, would give a better idea of what Amaziah actually said. He's not saying, come and sit around a table, saying, come, I'm a big guy, a tough guy, and you come and see if you can handle me.

Now Jehoash of Israel proves himself to be as good with words as he is in battle. And we have this fable, a thistle on Lebanon sent to a cedar in Lebanon, saying, give your daughter to my son for a wife.

A wild beast of Lebanon passed by and trampled down the thistle. Amaziah, you think you're a cedar. You think you're tough. You're in fact a thistle.

He mocks Amaziah's pretensions. And you know, so often we get in today's world, the church postures and talks about its influence, talks about how people listen, how people care of what's said.

And so often, it's simply living in fantasy land. Notice what Jehoash said, you have indeed struck down Eden, and your heart has been lifted up.

[16 : 51] You won a game against somebody far down the league, but now you're in the big time. This is not going to be... Be content with your glory and stay at home.

For why would you provoke trouble so that you follow you and Judah with you? Not only is Amaziah a boaster, though, he is someone who won't listen. But Amaziah would not listen.

He would not see reality. And so the king of Israel comes against him. Beth Shemesh is in Judah's territory, which means that very far from Amaziah, carrying a war to the enemy, the enemy is carrying a war to him.

And the king himself is captured, the treasure of palace and temple taken away. In other words, in anticipation of what's going to happen at the very end of the story, when the whole nation are going to be taken into exile.

It's uncertain how long he stayed in exile. Perhaps Jehoash released him immediately. Perhaps he had to stay there until Jeroboam came to the throne. But it's a sorry, sorry tale.

[18 : 00] A tale of pride and boasting, which leads to humiliation. Now, as you know, there's a great deal of debate always about what is the problem with the church today.

Why is the church not making a greater impact? Why is the church not more like a thistle in Lebanon than a cedar in Lebanon, to use the imagery of this passage?

And all kinds of explanations are given. But surely often the explanation must be the one that's implied in this passage.

It is that the Lord is judging his people for their unfaithfulness. We love the phrase in Romans, don't we? If God is for us, who can be against us?

I think we need to learn from these stories the salutary mirror image of that. If God is against us, who can be for us? No amount of so-called influence, no amount of so-called prestige, no amount of hobnobbing with the good and the great, no amount of posturing will make any difference if God is punishing his people.

[19 : 12] So we've got to learn from this that God sometimes gives victory to his people when they don't deserve it, but God also sometimes withholds victory from his people.

And that's the... As I said last week, there's an awful lot of what Willie calls necessary negatives. And there's going to be a lot in this series.

Because if we don't learn from these negatives, then we'll never live in the world of reality, which the Bible is always telling us to live in. So don't pick and mix God's truth.

God's truth is one whole. Don't boast about our strength, because it is God who gives the victory. And what's the point then of the last part, of the verses 15 to 22?

And the point of this surely is that God's purposes never fail. Now if you're reading this story simply as a historical account, Jehoash of Israel is very much in the driving seat.

[20 : 20] Indeed, it's interesting in verses 15 and 16 that Jehoash's obituary, which has already been given in the previous chapter, is given again.

Jehoash, obviously the big player, and he's followed by another able king. Verse 22, we didn't read this, in the 15th year of Amaziah, son of Jehoash, Jeroboam, son of Jehoash, king of Israel, began to reign.

He reigned 41 years. He did what was evil, but at the same time, he was powerful, he was effective, he was impressive. Now, you'll see the point of all this surely is that very often in the world it seems that God's purposes are failing.

It seems that the godless are triumphing. But the point is, if we read the story as a whole, this man, this man, Jeroboam, is the fourth in line from the great warrior, King Jehu, who overthrew Ahab and his dynasty.

And in chapter 15, verse 12, this was the promise of the Lord he gave to Jehu, your son shall sit on the throne of Israel to the fourth generation.

[21 : 39] And so it came to pass. God is in control. So are we to learn from this then? It's not just ancient history, about which kings rose and which kings fell, which Jehuash was in Israel or in Judah.

The point is, first of all, that the triumph of the godless is temporary. That's the point that's being made four generations and gone as if they had never been.

Now we've so often seen this, haven't we, in recent months in the studies in Acts. Very often the godless world triumphs. Herod and the Jewish authorities so often triumph.

Later on, at the end of the New Testament in the book of Revelation, the godless Roman Empire seems to triumph. But ultimately, all these godless powers comes to an end.

As I said in the book of Revelation, we're shown behind the scenes what's happening. You've got to remember that's happening here as well. But if you like only seeing the play, we're not seeing what's happening behind the scenes.

[22 : 43] We're not seeing the director in charge of every movement. That's why the psalmist says, why do the nations rage and the people imagine a vain thing.

The people live in fantasy world. And when we see the godless triumphing, we need to remember two things. First of all, that God is still in charge and that this triumph is temporary.

That's the first thing. But the second thing is the Davidic line, the line of promise, continues. verse 21. Amaziah follows the same sordid end as his father.

He's assassinated and obviously had caused great unhappiness. I mean, people don't get assassinated for being magnificent and ruling well. But all the people of Judah took Azariah.

This is the king who is also called Uzziah. And I always am very sorry for poor Uzziah because he's the guy who's remembered, not for anything he did in his life, but because he died.

[23 : 50] In the year that King Uzziah died, says Isaiah, I saw the Lord. And his story is told briefly here. We're not going to go into that. Very briefly here.

Longer in Chronicles. But he built ill at this little detail. this settlement on the coast. Once again, the hint of the worldwide nature of what's happening and the significance of the Davidic line.

You see, it's going to be a long, long time before all these things come to fruition. The building of Eilat on the coast is symbolic of the time when the gospel will come to all the nations.

It's fascinating that following the letter to the Romans in Romans chapter 15, wrestling with this question, how is the Davidic king still reigning? There's no Davidic king.

There's not even a Davidic throne. How is he still reigning? And he is reigning because the gospel is spreading around the nations and thus the nations come and give allegiance to the son and heir of David, great David's greater son.

[25 : 04] The Davidic line continues. The one son who will eventually reign where'er the son thus his successive journeys run. Now this line is often hidden and it's going to be apparently snuffed out.

But this line will continue because God has said it will continue. This line is in accordance with God's purposes. So he's going to sing in a few moments round his standard ranging.

Victory is secure for his truth unchanging makes the triumph sure. So this line as it continues through these intrigues, through these difficult names and complicated narratives in Kings and Chronicles God sees clearly what is happening.

So you see God's truth cannot be the subject of pick and mix. God's judgments are always in the world but the final message surely from this story is that God's purposes never fail.

A great Methodist preacher and scholar of an earlier generation Gordon Rupp tells of how he visited Berlin in the months following the end of the Nazi regime and the fall of Hitler.

[26 : 30] It was a bright sunny morning a winter morning and as he travelled through the streets he came to the ruins of Hitler's chancelry that place where so much evil so much godlessness so much wickedness had been hatched.

And as he passed there he saw a mother with her child on her knee and at that moment just as he passed the child laughed and threw back his head and the child's shadow fell over Hitler's ruined chancelry.

So said Gordon Rupp the shadow of another child falls over the ruins of this world's vanished empires. And that's the ultimate message of this passage the ultimate message of the book of Kings.

That Jesus will reign that his kingdom will never end that the Davidic line cannot be destroyed. So this passage is not only a challenge not to be half-hearted and complacent and pick and mix this passage is a great encouragement that one day the King of Kings will reign and his kingdom will never end.

Amen. Let's pray. And indeed Father we can pray as you have taught us your kingdom come your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

[28 : 09] We know and rejoice that that day will come and so help us to live in the days before that to live to anticipate that kingdom and to welcome the king when he returns.

We ask this in his name. Amen.