

9. The Word of God and the Nations

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[0 : 0 0] God our Father, how we praise you. You have given us your word like a light shining in a dark place until the day dawns and the day star rises.

Father, how we need the light shed on this by the Holy Spirit. And so we pray that that gracious Holy Spirit who inspired the word will come to us now and that we will have the experience of those on the Emmaus Road, that our eyes may be opened, that our hearts may burn, that we may go out into the world with the message that the Lord is risen, that the Lord reigns.

We ask this in the name of Christ Jesus. Amen. Your God is Too Small.

That was the name of a book written nearly 60 years ago by the distinguished Bible translator J.B. Phillips. And it's a book still worth reading if you ever get it second hand. It's very well worth reading.

What Phillips meant was that for many people in his day, that's back in 1951, God had simply become a comfort blanket. Simply someone to turn to with our personal problems, with our own troubles, with our own worries.

[1 : 2 4] Now of course that is true. We've seen that in earlier Elisha stories where the God of heaven has come right down into the experiences of the poor, the humble and the nameless.

But there's a catch there, isn't there? If God is going to do that, he's got to be a big enough God to deliver the goods, so to speak.

And J.B. Phillips said, if we only have a God who is interested in our personal problems, how can we be certain that he is big enough to give us answers? Unless he is the Lord of the nations, unless he is the Lord of history, unless he holds in his hand the whole sweep of history, indeed from eternity to eternity, then that God is too small.

We need a big God. And this is the kind of God we're going to be looking at tonight and in the next few weeks. This is the God of the nations. My title tonight is God's Word and the Nations.

God has a message for the nations of the world. That message doesn't stop at the front door there. That message is for Glasgow. That message is for Sydney. That message is for New York.

[2 : 3 6] That message is for the whole wide world because he is the God of the nations. Now the reason I read 1 Kings 19 is because that's the background. When Elijah calls Elisha, God says that certain things have to happen.

Three things, in fact, have to happen. One of them is the calling of Elisha. Now that's happened, obviously, and we've been looking at that over the last few weeks. But two other things have to happen as well.

That's what we're going to be looking at now in the next couple of weeks. First of all, the king of Syria has to be anointed. Hazeal, we read his name back in 1 Kings 19, and now we meet him in 2 Kings 8.

He is to be anointed king of Damascus, king of Syria. That hasn't yet happened. And then the rotten house of Ahab has to be obliterated and a new dynasty set up in Israel.

That's what's going to happen now. Now, we looked at that passage 1 Kings 19 quite some months ago, and I said then that often the commentators are unfair to Elijah there.

[3 : 44] They say God commanded him to do three things. He only did one thing. He only called Elisha, did not anoint the king of Syria, nor did he anoint the king of Israel. But that's to misunderstand what's happening here.

The anointing is a symbolic action. The anointing means that God has set up this person as king over the land.

And the way that's done is not literally by anointing with oil, but by the word of the prophet. That is the point. The change of government in Israel and in Syria is not brought about, in other words, by an anointing of oil.

It's brought about by the word of the Lord. Look at Daniel says, he changes times and seasons. He removes kings and sets up kings.

That's what we're looking at this week and next week. Now, this is a word of judgment. Now, all through the Elisha stories, we have rejoiced, and I sadly have rejoiced.

[4 : 45] I always say to the Cornhill guys, by the way, that when you are preaching or teaching, make sure you enjoy it yourself. Then at least one person is blessed. I've been greatly blessed by the stories of grace in the story of Elisha.

Stories of God's wonderful stooping down to people like us. But there's also a word of judgment. Because if grace is not accepted, if grace is rejected, then judgment has to come.

God is holy. God hates sin. God will bring in his kingdom. And if his new creation is going to be brought in, then sin and sorrow and suffering, tyranny, has to be obliterated.

That's what we're going to be looking at this evening. And through this story in 2 Kings 8 verses 7 to 15, you must have been wondering what is there in this story for us.

Now, as I said last week, these stories are primarily about God. Primarily, what is this story saying about God? I want to suggest there are two streams that flow through this story.

[5 : 53] There is the public and the private. Now, it's not so much you have the public followed by the private. It's that these two streams intermingle throughout the story. These are my two broad points.

First of all, God's word rules the nations. That's the first thing I want to talk about. God's word rules the nations. And the second thing I want to talk about is that God's word challenges the individual.

So, first of all, God's word rules the nations. Now, it's obvious that Elisha has gained enormous respect in the Syrian capital.

We don't know why. Probably not least through Naaman. Remember the story of Naaman back in chapter 5. The great general who had gone to Israel had been cured through the ministry of Elisha.

No doubt he had come back and told everybody about it. Also, there's the story we read a few weeks ago about the Syrian army. It was blinded and Elisha brought them to Israel and then set them free.

[6 : 57] He was obviously a big player. And the king, Ben-Hadad, was in awe of him. Take a present and ask if the Lord shall I recover from this sickness.

If you have good memories, you may remember 2 Kings chapter 1, where the king of Israel, Ahaziah, Ahab's son, is faced with a similar situation, does not send to the Lord, but to the demon god, the idol god, by Elzebub, the lord of the flies, the king of Ekron.

At least this king of Syria has some respect for Elisha and somewhat in awe of him. So, the prophetic word is now working at the Syrian court.

And if you read the later prophets, the so-called writing prophets, you'll find in them many, many chapters that are sometimes called the oracles against the nations. Isaiah has a whole 13 chapters addressed to the big nations like Babylon and the Syria, to the Philistines, to Egypt, and so on.

And that means, surely, that God is the Lord of all the nations. That's our mandate to evangelize, isn't it? Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations.

[8 : 11] We'd have no right to evangelize unless God were Lord of the nations. There are many different nations in this building this evening. God is Lord of all the nations that we come from.

There is no part of this earth that does not belong to him. Because there is no part of this earth that he did not make. There is no part of this earth that Jesus Christ did not die for.

So, the mandate to preach the gospel is that God is Lord of the nations. The mandate for Elisha to pronounce that Hazael will be king of Syria is that the Lord has said it.

Now, I want to notice two things here. First of all, this man, Hazael, is to be God's instrument of judgment. I'm sure you shuddered as I did as you read verse 12.

Look at verse 12. Set on fire their fortresses, kill their young men, dash in pieces, and rip open their pregnant women. That is horrific. Well, he said this morning, the Bible is a realistic book.

[9 : 17] And here, once again, is an example of its almost unbearable realism. This is war. This is violence. This is the horror of war. And when we look around the world, who can doubt this is still happening?

This is what happens when nation wars against nation. But there's a very important point to make here. God does not underwrite brutality.

It gives God no pleasure when these kind of things happen. God is totally good.

His purposes are totally loving and totally gracious. But in this fallen world, he uses human means to carry out these purposes. And once again, throughout the prophets, this is the theology of history, if you like.

God raises up nations to punish other nations. Like Isaiah says, Assyria is the rod of God's anger, the rod to beat his own people with.

[10 : 20] But of course, Assyria became so arrogant that itself then was destroyed. Habakkuk says the same thing about the Babylonians. I've raised up the Babylonians to punish my own people.

This is the doctrine of providence. Nothing lies outside the will of God. And he works everything, however bad it may be in itself, for ultimate good.

But please don't read a verse like verse 12. And we'll come back to this because it's an important point. As if God approved of this. As if war was something that gave God pleasure.

As if the burning of cities and the murder and the rape and the torture were something that he was pleased with. That's not the case. But he is working everything for good.

So Hazael is to be God's instrument of judgment. But the second thing to notice about this public thing is the prophetic word in verse 13. Sorry, first of all, verse...

[11 : 26] Yes, sorry, verse 13 it is. The Lord has shown me you are to be king over Syria. Now if you were Hazael listening to that, you would probably feel this was some kind of magic on Elisha's part.

Some kind of particular foresight. After all, we've seen already prophets were common at the unbelieving courts. And they were part of the whole occult magic establishment.

Almost as if Elisha is giving Hazael his horoscope. You shall be king of Israel. But the reality is that this is not Elisha's foresight.

It is not Elisha's clever guessing what's going to happen at the court of Damascus. This is the prophetic word being carried out. Back in 1 Kings 19 once again, the Lord says to Elijah, Go and anoint Hazael king of Damascus.

Elijah is not able to do that personally, but his successor Elisha does this because it is the word of God which is raising up kings and setting down kings.

[12 : 42] This is the king behind the kings. The king who sits enthroned in Zion. We have here a glimpse behind the realities of world history.

The prophetic word points to the throne of God controlling history. Now that is still true. Whatever kind of a regime we live in.

We live in a democratic regime. Nobody in biblical times had a vote. Now ultimately, there is ultimately governments come and go.

And ultimately, behind all our voting and all the rest of it, tactical voting or whatever it may be, it is God who raises up kings, raises up governments and sets them down.

Which does not mean that every government is good, every government is God. We know that is not the case. But it does mean that God is controlling the events of history.

[13 : 39] Why indeed do the nations rage? The Lord has said, I have set my king on my holy hill of Zion. And one day that kingdom will finally come.

We are going to be singing at the end of the service. Your kingdom stands and grows forever till all the world you will rule obey. You see, this is public truth for the whole world.

The establishment, the media, the skeptics want us to believe that what we do in places like this is a little group of fanatics and weirdos who get together with some kind of private ideology.

This is not private ideology, private term. This is public truth for the whole world. The Lord reigns. Let the nations tremble, says Psalm 96.

And Psalm 98 says, the Lord reigns. Let the nations rejoice. You see, there is both trembling and there is rejoicing. Because when you think of it, if a kingdom is following a godless and indeed anti-god policy, then they may well tremble.

[14 : 52] But surely we rejoice as we look beyond that and see the coming of the kingdom. This is public truth for the whole world. That's why in the 19th century, the great missionary movement, hymns were sung with words like this, the whole wide world for Jesus.

This shall our anthem be. In city and in prairie, to him shall all men bow. That vision of Jesus reigning where e'er the sun does his successive journeys run.

This was the vision that inspired those people who went out into the, and still do, into the ends of the earth, planting the banner of King Jesus in every part of the world.

Public truth. But we can't leave it there, can we? Because if we do, then it's awfully easy for us to ignore the private thrust of this. See, the gospel is never either public or private.

The gospel is always both. The gospel is a call to the nations, to repentance and faith. It's also a call to the individual. And that's the second thing I want to talk about.

[16 : 03] Now, God's word challenges individuals. God's word speaks to the nations. God's word challenges individuals. I've talked about the providence of God.

The fact that who reigns, who is in, who is out, if you like, ultimately is the action of the Most High, who rules in the kingdoms of men. That does not mean that human beings are robots and have no responsibilities.

There are two truths that run through the Bible. Both of them are absolutely true. First of all is that God works out everything according to his purpose.

The second is that human beings always have responsibility. Now, the Bible doesn't tell us how these are reconciled. And sometimes, in our desire to have a neat theological system where everything is tied up, we try and reconcile these.

Now, both are true. It is 100% true that God reigns. It is 100% true that we have responsibility. And 100 plus 100 equals 100, not 200.

[17 : 15] Now, it's not very good maths, but I think it's good enough theology. Both are absolutely true. That's why I remember often Willie's dad preaching on the doctrine of providence and election would say, the question each one of us must ask is, not am I one of the elect, but will I believe?

That always seemed to me a very helpful way to look at it. That is the question each of us has to ask. Will I believe? Not am I one of the elect? Now, God's kinship over the nations is emphasised, but God's challenge to individuals is also emphasised.

I want us to look at the two individuals around whom this story revolves, because they both react to God's providence in totally different ways. First of all, there is Hazel.

Now, I'm sure as we read the passage together, you must have been rather puzzled at verse 10 and also at verses 14 and 15. Because in verse 10, let's read it again.

Elisha said to Hazel, Go say to him, that's Ben-Hadad of Syria, you shall certainly recover. The Lord has shown me that he shall certainly die. Is Elisha being dishonest?

[18 : 29] That's the obvious question that arises. Is Elisha more or less telling Hazel, look, I know the kind of man you are, I know what you're up to, just go for it.

But, clearly, that is not a way in which we can look at Elisha. Elisha is bringing the prophetic word.

Look at verse 10 again. Elisha says, Go say to him, you shall certainly recover. That translation, first of all, may be wrong.

The word to him could be translated actually not. Elisha could actually have said, Go tell him, you shall not recover. The word in Hebrew is exactly the same word.

And it's not at all clear what it exactly means. But, the point is, Elisha is saying two things, which are very important.

[19 : 31] One is, the first thing he's saying is, that Hazel has responsibility. And the second thing he's saying is, that the king is going to die. I wonder how Hazael took it.

I'm pretty certain he took it as meaning. As meaning, I'm going to be king, so I'll give it a helping hand. I'm irresistibly reminded of Shakespeare's Macbeth, when he heard the prophecy of the witches.

And he, when he decides to give the prophecy a helping hand, and go and murder Duncan. So, it seems to me, that Hazael is being faced with a responsibility here.

Hazael is being shown what the situation is, being faced with a responsibility. And look at verse, look at verse, 13.

We already talked about verse 12. Hazael said, what is your servant, who is but a dog, that he should do this great thing? In a sense, Hazael can scarcely believe his luck.

[20 : 41] I'm going to be king. Now, Hazael had no problem with screaming women, and burning cities, and babies, butchered. He had no problem with that at all. What his problem was, he wondered why on earth it should come to him.

And you could imagine his ambition began to swell. Like Macbeth again, to be king stands not within the prospect of belief, no more than to be caught, or rather like the kind of person who is desperate, so, oh no, they'll never give me the job.

And somebody says, I know, I'm absolutely desperate to have a job, but I don't think I'll get it. That seems to me what Hazael is saying here. Now, what I'm saying is this.

Hazael was presented with the reality of the prophetic word. The reality of the prophetic word was that he should be king. But Hazael was not forced to go and murder Ben-Hadad.

I think that's so important to realise. The word of God, the word of the prophet, did not compel him to murder the king. And I think, and that is one way of looking at the providence of God.

[21 : 50] It's possible to blame the providence of God. So I couldn't help it, God forced me to do it. And that is Hazael, it seems to me. Hazael was told he would be king.

He was not told to go and commit murder in order that he should be king. He was not forced to behave in the way he did. Here is an example of somebody who uses God's providence, God's rule, as an excuse.

Let's look now at Elisha. How did he react to the same situation? And I want us to look at verse 11. He fixed his gaze, that's Elisha, fixed his gaze and stared at Hazael until Hazael was embarrassed.

It's a difficult person, that's what it means. And the man of God wept. There are two things which mark Elisha here as the true prophet.

First of all, there is the word of judgment. Israel is sinning away its blessings Israel deserves judgment, Israel will receive judgment. That's one of the marks of the true prophet, that they are not afraid to preach judgment.

[22 : 59] See, the one thing a false prophet will never do is tell people they need to change. There is no repentance in the message of false prophets. False prophets simply affirm, simply whatever we do, they say this is right, this is good.

And we know all about this in our current situation, don't we, in the Church of Scotland. where what is clearly declared by God to be sinful is being, we're being asked to celebrate and affirm.

So that's the word of judgment. But there's more than the word of judgment. Not only does he pronounce the word of judgment, he weeps in distress at the thought of that judgment coming.

In other words, the true prophet, like the Lord himself, is slow to anger. The true prophet does not gloat, rub his hands, and rejoice at that judgment coming.

The judgment is coming. The judgment is just. The judgment is right. Like the Lord Jesus Christ himself in Luke 19, as he looks over the city of Jerusalem and weeps, O Jerusalem, I would have gathered you as a hen gathers her chickens, but you wouldn't.

[24 : 12] And he weeps over the very city which is to reject him and which is to be destroyed by the Romans. Elisha knows judgment is necessary. He knows Hazael and later the kings of Assyria are going to devastate the land.

And it's significant. The man of God wept. It's called here man of God again as he is so often. Because these tears are not just the tears of the prophet.

They're the tears of God himself. God who weeps even as he carries out judgment. The Lord is slow to anger, rich in mercy. See, this is a message of judgment, but there is a message that grace surrounds it at both ends.

The message of grace is pronounced and then the message of grace is still pronounced. So, here are two ways then of responding to the fact that God reigns.

To the fact that God is the Lord of history and the Lord of human lives. How are we to respond to that? Z.S. Lewis said once that we will all serve the purposes of God, but it will make an eternal difference to us whether we serve him as John did or as Judas did.

[25 : 28] Taking this story, you could see we will all serve the purposes of God. It will make an eternal difference whether we serve him as Hazael did or as Elisha did. So, that's what this story is saying to us.

It challenges us as individuals. If the kingdom is coming as we believe it is, if the Lord will reign over heaven and earth forever and every knee will bow, then we need to bring our lives into line with that truth.

We need to crown him as king in our lives and in our hearts. And as we finish, let me underline what I said already. This is public truth.

This is truth for the whole church to present to the whole world. And if the church does not present that truth to the world, then the church has failed in its responsibility.

I was reading the book of Ezekiel this morning and Ezekiel is told by the Lord, go and tell the guilty people so that they will respond. And Ezekiel is told, if they don't, if you tell them and they don't respond, then you're not guilty.

[26 : 37] But if you don't tell them and don't respond, they'll still be judged, but so will you for failing to tell them. If the whole wide world is for Jesus, if every knee will bow and every tongue confess, then let's be like Elisha.

Pronounce that message of grace and judgment. Weeping over the coming judgment, but welcoming people into the arms of grace.

Let's pray. Amen. Our Father, how we tremble at a story like this, seemingly so remote from us, and yet at the heart of the gospel in our day as in Elisha's day.

So give to us, Lord, the grace to live for the kingdom, the courage to spread the kingdom, and to look for the coming of that kingdom when Christ will reign forever and ever.

Amen. Amen.