

# Sermon 47, A Place in the Promised Land, 2 Kings 8:1-6

Read Micah 2 or Joshua 14

**Proposition:** The Shunammite's exile and restoration stand as both an invitation to and a promise of life in the Land for all who heed Yahweh's word and seek His royal favor.

- I. Mercy in Judgment, vv. 1-2
  - A. A Prophetic Warning, v. 1a
  - B. A Divine Judgment, v. 1b
  - C. God Provides in Exile, v. 2
- II. Restoration After Judgment, vv. 3-6
  - A. The (Apparently Coincidental) Event, vv. 3-6
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## Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, dwelling in the land is a prominent theme throughout the entire Bible. Why? Because the Promised Land is an earthly stand-in for Heaven! Anyone who longs to live in the Promised Land ultimately is looking for that city with foundations whose builder and maker is God. Yet opposite to the blessing of life in the land stands the curse of exile — of being cast out of the land, forced to dwell away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power. This exile-return contrast formally dominates the Old Testament, of course, as the story of God's people begins in Babylon, only to take them into the Promised Land and then see them exiled to Egypt, brought back to the Land in the Exodus, but finally exiled to Babylon — where, in fact, the narrative comes to a close. Yet that large-scale paradigm of exile and return, of life in the land and its unholy counterpart of perishing away from God, is echoed repeatedly in Scripture in intimately scaled narratives such

as the one we just read. In these verses of 2 Kings 8, we have a domestically-scaled version of the contrast between exile and return. The Shunammite woman of chapter 4 reappears in the narrative in order to tell us about God's mercy in judgment and His restoration after judgment. Once again, brothers and sisters, I hope to show you the deeper resonances of this text with the larger Biblical narrative. What we will see tonight is that the Shunammite's exile and restoration stand as both an invitation to and a promise of life in the Land for all who heed Yahweh's word and seek His royal favor. Did you hear that? This story is not just about someone else's return from exile. It is an invitation to you to heed Yahweh's word and seek Yahweh's royal favor so that you too can dwell in the land. As Jehoram and the Judahite exiles in Babylon were asked, so this text demands of you an answer to the question of how you will respond to the relentless stories of God's power over every threat that assaults His people. But that's the conclusion of this sermon, not the introduction. Now I want you to see our God.

### **I. Mercy in Judgment, vv. 1-2**

The first thing we see about Him is that He shows mercy in judgment. God remembers to be merciful to those against whom He has a complaint!

#### **A. A Prophetic Warning, v. 1a**

Notice how the chapter begins. It begins with Elisha delivering a warning to the Shunammite to get up and leave Israel. Wherever you can find a place to sojourn, the prophet says, find it. Don't play around; don't stick around. Just leave!

Now, this doesn't sound very nice, right? Yet it is the voice of God's mercy speaking, as Elisha quickly demonstrates.

#### **B. A Divine Judgment, v. 1b**

He warns the Shunammite that God has called for a seven-year famine. You thought the 3.5 year famine that Elijah prayed down was bad? This famine is twice as bad. This is the perfect famine. This is a famine of Biblical proportions. This is a famine as bad as the famine that put the whole land of Egypt into Joseph's hands. And this, presumably, is the famine that stands behind the famine of chs. 4 and 6-7. Why was there no food in Samaria? Not just because of the siege, but because of the direct judgment of God. Why was the gift of 20 loaves to the sons of the prophets so significant? Because of this famine. Indeed, famine has been a significant theme in the text the last several weeks.

I want to take just a moment here to say that we are so well-fed that we can hardly even understand this relentless concern with famine. Famine are something that happen to other people. Needing to miss a meal, or even to get up from the table unsatisfied because there just isn't enough food, is totally foreign to our experience. That means that we're missing a crucial element of fear, horror, and even hunger when we read the word "famine." To the original audience and to most readers throughout history, this word has been all too real. But to most of us, it is all too distant.

When you see that God sent famine, you need to think about something unpleasant you've actually experienced and multiply it across an entire country. Here in Gillette, we don't

deal with traffic — but we do have icy roads most years. Imagine God sending a judgment of roads that were slippery for weeks or months at a stretch. Or imagine wildfires that burn for years and just keep on destroying property and killing people, fires that are totally out of control and impossible to tame. When you see the word famine, relate it to something you know. Feel the fear in your gut as you think about telling your kids that there isn't any more cereal, and won't be for days or weeks. Feel the pain inside that reminds you that you are part of a nation under judgment.

By the way, brothers and sisters, we do live in a nation under judgment. The moral decay and loss of social cohesion that we see all around us in a judgment of God. He is letting us receive in ourselves the due penalty for our error. How do you respond to that reality? How do you behave when you're living in a place that's under judgment? By now you should know what the answer is: When God judges, keep trusting Him!

### **C. God Provides in Exile, v. 2**

And indeed, that is the lesson that the presentation of this famine teaches us. God showed mercy by warning this woman and He provided for her in exile. In the land of the Philistines there was food.

This is the ultimate reason that you can't "allegorize" this text, and why I don't think I am allegorizing it. If the Promised Land is read as a code for Heaven pure and simple, then Elisha was telling this woman to leave Heaven for heathendom for the sake of material prosperity. What kind of spiritual advice is that? No. The reality is that the Promised Land is a *type* of Heaven — that is, a historical reality showing us something of what the greater reality of Heaven is like. But Israel is not itself Heaven, and Philistia is not Hell. David himself sojourned in Philistia. Does that imply that Christ descended into Hell to find safety when a rogue monarch made Heaven too hot for Him? The very idea is absurd. So please don't here me as saying "We should read this story allegorically. Israel stands for Heaven, the woman stands for the individual soul, and Jehoram stands for Christ giving the soul a place in Heaven." That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying that the pattern of exile and restoration seen here echoes and points to the macrocosmic pattern of exile and restoration that will be ultimately consummated in restoration to Heaven. This microcosmic story is a promise of ultimate life in the land, and an invitation to experience that life. But the way to access that meaning is not by "allegory" as we understand that term, but rather by close attention to this story's place in the larger story of the Bible.

I hope that clears things up for some of you!

So we see that God provides in exile. Again, just as famine doesn't mean much when you've never been hungry a day in your life, so the truth that God provides in exile doesn't mean much when you've never been an exile! But think about it. Heaven is your homeland now. You are seated with Christ in the heavenly places, as we've heard recently in the morning sermons. You are away from your true home. But God provides for you, even here on this earth, even in this nation whose moral condition can sometimes make us feel like we are in a prison (as Thomas Manton said about post-revolutionary England). Of course, if you've lived abroad, then

you have an earthly analogue for this idea of exile. My sister, for example, has lived in three other countries besides the U.S., and I can promise you that the truth that God provides for exiles and sojourners is a comfort to her. And if you understand your identity in Christ, then you too feel like something of an exile, someone who has not yet returned to his homeland. Fear not! God's provision is for you.

## **II. Restoration After Judgment, vv. 3-6**

Yet not only does the narrative describe God's mercy to this particular woman and her son in the judgment of famine; it also describe her full restoration.

### **A. The (Apparently Coincidental) Event, vv. 3-6**

The woman had lost her property during her seven years of absence, and she went to appeal to the king to get it back at the same time that her story was being related to him.

#### **1. A Woman's Petition, v. 3**

Her request is for a place in the land — specifically, for her place. Because land could not be permanently alienated from its possessors in Israel, her legal claim was ironclad. God had given this land to her in trust for her family line.

#### **2. A King's Interest, vv. 4-5a**

The king, meanwhile, was eagerly listening to Gehazi relate the events of chs. 2-7. The king had been present for some of the works of Elisha, of course, but he had not seen the ax head float. He was greedy to hear about the mighty works of Yahweh, yet it appears that he had no desire to personally put his faith in Yahweh.

How was Gehazi rehabilitated? Perhaps this event took place before the events of ch. 5. Or perhaps Gehazi was not afflicted badly enough to be excluded from human society. Regardless, he "happened" to be talking to the king on this particular day.

#### **3. A Resurrection Verified, v. 5b**

Just as the story of the resurrection was being related, here came the woman and her son! In case Jehoram doubted the ability of Yahweh to raise the dead, here was living, breathing proof standing in front of him.

#### **4. Land and Livelihood Restored, v. 6**

The king asked about the story's bona fides, and it was all true! So the king actually put a caseworker in charge of getting all of her property restored to her.

God's hand was in this apparent coincidence, of course. God provided for His woman when she was in exile, and He restored her after the judgment was over.

But where's the spiritual meat in this story? What are we supposed to take away?

### **B. The Promise**

We need to see that the story implies a promise because it tells us something about the character of Yahweh God.

#### **1. Mercy in Judgment**

Our God shows mercy in judgment. He didn't have to exempt this woman, just as He didn't have to exempt the widow of Zarephath or the poor widow whose sons were going to be sold as

slaves. But He did! Notice, too, how wide God's mercy is. We've seen in these books of Kings that it is for Jews and Gentiles. It is for poor and rich alike. It is for men and women and children. God's mercy is not limited by who people are. So right here, for anyone who's suffering, for anyone who's hurting, is a reminder that our God is merciful in the midst of judgment. He is just; He is most terrible and fearsome in His judgments. He has indeed "swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms," as Aslan says in *The Silver Chair*. The mercy of God came in the midst of a famine in which women were eating their sons. But it still came. He is both just and merciful. Can you not worship this God, fearing His judgments but glorying in His mercy?

## **2. Provision in Exile**

Our God provides in exile. We talked about that already. The fact that He took care of this Shunammite in exile is a promise that He will take care of any of His people who are in exile.

## **3. A Place in the Promised Land**

And finally, God is the one who gives a place in the Promised Land and who ensures that its possessor can keep it. His promise is not just provision for this life, but for the life to come as well. His promise is of forgiveness now and Heaven later!

### **C. The Invitation**

But what God did for this woman is not just a promise. It's also an invitation. Brothers and sisters, think about it.

#### **1. To Jehoram**

First of all, this event, and really the whole complex of events in chs. 2-8, was an invitation to King Jehoram to no longer follow Baal, who can't provide, and to turn in repentance and begin to follow Yahweh, who can and does provide for His people! Notice how Jehoram loved hearing about Elisha's mighty acts. Yet he had no desire to know the God whose power ultimately performed them. Jehoram was content with the flash and showiness of the power of God; he didn't actually want to be converted. He wanted to see the drama, but he didn't want to be changed. He didn't want to submit to God. He walked in the sinful ways of Jeroboam ben Nebat, and he did not depart from them (2 Kings 3:3). This account of how God saved so many was an implicit invitation to Jehoram. Just as God offered mercy to his father Ahab, so God offered mercy to him!

Think about this incident in particular and how it applied to this wicked man. Imagine Elisha preaching the gospel to him: "Jehoram, you've been sojourning in heathendom, away from the riches of the commonwealth of Israel. You've been a stranger to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world! Yet in your royal prerogative to restore to this woman her land, don't you see a shadow of God's royal prerogative to restore you to the true purpose of the Promised Land — which is fellowship with God?"

"Jehoram, you've seen with your own eyes someone who was dead a decade ago. You've seen the power of God to kill and make alive. You saw what happened to your father and your brother. Yet there is hope. Turn, turn from your wicked way! Why will you die like they did?"

Jehoram heard everything we've just heard, from 2 Kings 2 onward. Not only did he hear it; he lived it! Yet his heart was hardened against it. When it came right down to it, not even the miracles of Elisha could change his heart. Surely this warns us not to long for miracles. Miracles don't save. Only the Holy Spirit saves. God's saving might was available to Jehoram, but the king missed it.

## **2. To Israel in Exile**

But think with me about the original audience of this book in its final form. They were exiles in Babylon, driven out of the Promised Land and away from the presence of God. What message did this account have for them? It told them that God provides for exiles, that He cares about those who have been driven from their ancestral land by divine judgment. To them, it was an invitation to trust the God who had brought one of His people through a mini-exile. And thus, really, brothers and sisters, it is an invitation to you and me as well.

## **3. To You**

Yes — this text is an invitation to you. You too have read and heard chapters 2-8 preached. You have seen God's mighty works through Elisha. You have seen how His mercy is available. In particular, I'd like to highlight two particular promises that this pericope holds forth.

### **a) Restoration for those who heed Yahweh's Word**

First of all, it promises restoration to those who heed Yahweh's word. Remember, it was through God's word that the Shunammite was sent into exile — yet God provided for her from that point forward. His provision, protection, and restoration were for this woman who listened to His word through Elisha.

You have been confronted with God's word tonight. You've seen His power to take care of His people in judgment and restore them after judgment. You've seen His resurrecting power. When you're confronted with Christ's resurrection, how do you respond to it? When you're confronted with this long section displaying God's power and grace in the face of debt, danger, death, and even politics, will you respond by fully committing yourself to trust this mighty God? Will you live based on His favor? Will you unreservedly entrust yourself to Him and His word's promise of protection and provision?

Such a commitment is easy when you have everything you need and you feel pretty safe. Sure I trust God for provision when I have no need of provision! Yet when you lose something, when you lack something, when the reality of exile hits you, will you continue to trust God's word? Will you seek the restoration only He can give?

### **b) Life in the Land for those who seek Yahweh's Favor**

And more than that, will you seek His royal favor? The Shunammite had to seek Jehoram's royal favor to retain her place in the Promised Land. And you will need to seek God's royal favor to attain your place in the heavenly Promised Land.

Do you want to dwell there, in Heaven, partaking of Christ? Then heed God's word and seek His favor. Approach Him in worship, in prayer, in the sacraments of the church and the

preaching of the word. God offered life in the land to Jehoram, to the Babylonian exiles — and He offers it to you. Take it. Seek it. Live it. And I'll see you in Heaven. Amen.