

Sermon 48, The Tears of God, 2 Kings 8:7-15

Proposition: God raises up kings and takes down kings, but His heart for His people never changes.

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Introduction

Brothers and sisters, tonight we come to a companion text to this morning's sermon. This morning we looked together at the truth that God works all things after the counsel of His own will. Tonight we see a particular instance of that truth, as Elisha gives God's imprimatur to Hazael's rule over Syria and even delivers a riddling oracle that recognizes the reality of Hazael's planned assassination. Our text tonight is clear: while God raises up kings and takes down kings, His love and care for His people does not falter or change. In the tears of Elisha we see the weeping eyes of Jesus Christ.

I. God Sets Up Elisha's Encounter with Hazael, vv. 7-8

Our text begins with Elisha coming to Damascus.

A. God Makes the First Move, v. 7a

This is God making the first move. Just as He told Elijah back in 1 Kings 19 that Elijah should anoint Hazael as king over Syria, so now that prophecy finally comes to pass. God arranged for Elisha to be in Damascus. God arranged for Ben-Hadad to hear about Elisha's presence. And God arranged for Ben-Hadad to send his servant Hazael to inquire of the recently-arrived prophet. These events aren't just events; we are intended to see God's providential hand behind all of them — particularly since the events of this section of Scripture were already spelled out back at Sinai when God spoke to Elijah.

B. First Irony: A Pagan King Seeks Yahweh's Word of Healing, v. 8c

Nonetheless, in this scenario we see two gigantic ironies. The first is that Ben-Hadad makes exactly the same request as Ahaziah did back in ch. 1. He wants to know whether he will

recover. But whereas Ahaziah asked Baal-Zebub this question, Ben-Hadad asks it of the true God. Ben-Hadad has a greater knowledge of who's really in charge than the king of Israel does!

Brothers and sisters, the Bible talks a lot about the righteous and the wicked. But it never lets us casually assume that since we are the in-group, therefore we must be identical with the righteous. Ahaziah was an Israelite, but he knew less about God than Ben-Hadad the pagan Syrian, the worshipper of pomegranate-god, did! You may be a Presbyterian, a devout Christian — but that by itself doesn't automatically mean that you are close to God. There may be some pagan out there who knows Jehovah God better than you do. Let the one who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall!

C. Second Irony: Ben-Hadad Assures his own Demise, v. 8a-b

But the second irony here is that by sending Hazael to get inside information from Elisha, Ben-Hadad assures his own demise. If he had just sent someone else, then the rest of the events told here need not have happened!

What's ironic here is that God's providential hand is at work in the free actions of people like Ben-Hadad and Hazael to bring about the outcome God wanted all along — the death of Ben-Hadad, the enemy of His people (see 1 Kings 22, where Ahab is punished for letting go this king whom God had condemned to death) and the accession of Hazael to the throne of Syria.

Notice also the way Hazael is introduced into the narrative. Nothing is said about who he is or why he happens to be with Ben-Hadad. He's just there. Assyrian records from this era call him a "son of nobody."

II. Elisha "Anoints" Hazael, vv. 9-13

So Elisha "anoints" Hazael in this scene — not directly, but apparently with enough hints that the outcome is relatively certain.

A. The Prophet's Riddling Answer, vv. 9-10

What do we make of Elisha's answer? Was he lying? No. Rather, he was using the truth in a deceptive fashion. The point is that all other things being equal, Ben-Hadad would have recovered from his illness. In itself, it was not deadly, and had he not been assassinated, he would have been right as rain in a week or two. The sickness won't kill you, Ben-Hadad. That's Elisha's message — yet all the same, it is certain that Ben-Hadad will die. Such an answer, of course, is all the encouragement Hazael needed to boldly assassinate Ben-Hadad and seize royal power in Syria.

B. The Prophet's Blinding Tears, vv. 11-12

Elisha relays this message, but Hazael falls into something of a trance, lost in thought and staring until Elisha's tears shake him out of it.

Why did Elisha weep? Because he knew what kind of horrific evil Hazael would perpetrate against God's people. Brothers and sisters, we have seen throughout these stories that the prophet represents God Himself in important ways. And in this instance, we see what we could aptly call the tears of God. Just as Christ wept over Jerusalem and the atrocities which would be visited on His people, so Elisha wept over the knowledge of what Hazael would do.

God Himself is perfectly blessed at all times. He is not a man that He should lie or have regret. Yet nonetheless, in some sense He is grieved to His heart not only over the sin of the wicked, but even over the death of wicked. God is not changed by the accession of Hazael — but He certainly has no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

Do you grieve over the punishment of the wicked the way God grieves over it? I'm not talking about the punishment of the wicked in general, but in particular about the punishment of the wicked who have hurt you personally. If someone cheats you out of a hundred thousand dollars, are you grieved when that person goes to jail? Really grieved? Elisha was appointed to kill the people left behind by Hazael's murderous rampages, and yet he sobbed when he saw what Hazael would do.

C. The Prophet's Searing Vision, v. 13

The prophet's vision was of all the things that accompany total war. He saw the kind of atrocities that people who've actually seen them never want to talk about. His prophetic insight revealed to him the full horrors Hazael would unleash against the people of God. These horrors were deserved in many cases. We've seen how wicked Israel was under the sons of Ahab. But nonetheless, despite the justice of it all, Elisha wept. Yet even in his weeping, he gave Hazael inside knowledge that Hazael would become king. He didn't say "God will make you king" — but at some level, that's what happened. Hazael himself was amazed to hear it. But God set this whole thing up. God was the one who caused this message to be delivered to Hazael. Now, God didn't tell Hazael to sin, or force him to sin. But He nonetheless set up the situation in such a way that Hazael did sin, and in such a way that his sin was part of God's overarching plan.

III. Hazael Seizes the Throne, vv. 14-15

Indeed, Hazael assassinated Ben-Hadad the next day and managed to take over Syria. God raised him up as king and had Elisha "anoint" and indirectly commission him to the office. Just as it was God who gave victory over Israel to Naaman, so it was God who gave the power to do these horrendous things to Hazael.

IV. Application

So what do we make of this story? For those of us who have not suffered much, and for those of us who have never truly faced the reality of evil in its darkest forms, the punishment seems excessive. How could Israel really deserve the sufferings that Hazael was going to inflict? But once we understand how heinous sin is and how much God hates it, we will then see the justice of Hazael's appointment as punisher. No doubt this Syrian sinned in punishing Israel. No doubt God judged him. But the fact remains that however indirectly it was all done, ultimately it was God's initiative and planning that pushed Hazael onto the throne of Syria.

A. God's Sovereignty Will Hurt You

So really, I want to close with two points. First, God's sovereignty will hurt you. You may not suffer to the same degree that Israel suffered during Elisha's lifetime, but you will certainly receive from the hand of the LORD bitter providences that just plain hurt. The pain may be large or small, but it is coming. Those who receive good from the hand of the LORD must prepare,

like Job, to receive evil too. Brothers and sisters, you and I will lose our money, health, children, parents, jobs, and so on. We will suffer physical accidents that hurt and even cripple us. And yes, those events will come through second causes and through the evil agency of wicked men and demons. But they will ultimately come from the first cause — from God Himself.

B. God Weeps with You — and Over You

So what's our comfort? Here, after all these sermons on how God provides, have we finally reached the bitter punchline that He is an Indian giver who gives and then takes it all away? No!

You see, not only will God's providence bring suffering into your life — you can know that in that suffering God is in some sense grieved over what's happening. He does not take delight in punishing the wicked; how much less, then, His own people! I'm not saying that your suffering can cause the immutable God to change. Far from it. But I know that Elisha wept over the punishment God's people so richly deserved. I know that Christ wept over the punishment of the very same city that decided to murder Him.

Brothers and sisters, God is there in your pain. He's not there as a fellow-sufferer. He is there as Lord of your life and as Lord of your pain. But the Son of God is with you in the furnace of affliction. The tears of God are real, and so is the grievance of His heart.

Maybe when you lose a child, you have a wild thought that wishes that your best friend would lose her child too, just so that she could comfort you better. But then, in a more lucid moment, you realize that even a friend who has never lost a child can still weep for you and with you. Even a God who cannot suffer has a Son who has not only suffered more than you will, but even more than you *can* suffer.

Make no mistake. God scourges every son He receives. If you've never suffered, then you are no child of God. But He does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men. He works all things after the counsel of His own will, yet in His Son He weeps over Jerusalem.

Brothers and sisters, this analogy may be unholy. It may even be unhinged. But it helps me make sense of my world. Think about Shakespeare penning the final word of Fortinbras' closing speech in act 5 of *Hamlet*, and then putting his head on his desk and sobbing over the fate of Hamlet and Gertrude. Is such a thing possible? After all, Shakespeare was writer, producer, and director. He had full creative control over the contents of *Hamlet*. He could have made it all end differently. Do we therefore think that he necessarily enjoyed the way he ended the play? That he had no spark of pity lurking in his breast for the hapless prince? It seems to me that Shakespeare could cry over the fate of Hamlet, and that his tears could be real. We know that the one who works all things after the counsel of His own will wept, not only over Jerusalem but even over Lazarus, whose death He was going to undo in the next five minutes!

So when you suffer — not if, but when — how will you respond? Will you remember the tears of Elisha? Will you remember the tears of Jesus? Will you remember that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that He weeps for you and with you in your sorrow? So put your trust in Him. Cry out to Him, for He is Lord of your life and of your pain. Amen.