

II Kings 2:19-25 Grace and Judgement

Introduction

In pastoral ministry I have met over the years probably close to the full range of people with respect to their attitudes to themselves and others and to God. At one extreme are the hard-line atheists so full of themselves and so proud to insist that you must know what they think and proceed to tell you at the top of their voices, no matter how public and inappropriate their comments might be, to the other extreme where some individuals are so broken by their own past failures that they believe they are beyond help from other people and from God. Of course, such people are a small minority, with the vast majority of people in society somewhere in between. The Christian Gospel which we are called to proclaim has a message for everyone in whatever state we are at the present time and invites us all to put our faith and trust in the God who created us in His own image and who invites us to follow Him each day of our lives.

In the current day in the media it is the extreme voices that get a hearing, rarely is it the moderate considered opinions that are expressed. How happy are the television companies to focus on the fanatics looking for their moments of fame or the extremists who wish to terrorise the rest of us into joining their dreadful causes. As I am speaking these words you will have in mind individuals and groups that fit so well into these categories. Yet sadly humanity too often seems to have a morbid attraction to that which should repel us instead of focussing on that which is wholesome and good. II Kings 2:19-25 is a section of God's Word that I have never heard anyone preach on and in fact it is omitted from comment in some of the commentaries as those particular authors clearly did not know what to make of the incidents described here. However, what they failed to spot was that these particular incidents from another era were not events we should seek to replicate, but to learn from the significance of what happened in these particular locations at that time in history. When we find out about the historical context of these stories we quickly spot that there is a clear message here about both the grace and the judgement of God. Some people get confused today and express views such as: 'The God of the Old Testament is a God of judgement and the God of the New Testament is a God of love'- with the assumption that the former is not good and the latter is very good and to be highlighted! However, this description is a caricature of God. He does not change. In both the Old and the New Testament there is clear evidence of both aspects of His character in operation. This passage before us is a good example of both displayed in close proximity in the life of Elisha, with respect to two well-known locations in the Holy Land. The case studies are of extreme situations not typical incidents in the life of Elisha, but there are lessons for us to be learned from them for our own lives today. The apostle Paul in I Corinthians 10:6, after listing some other events that took place in Israel's history made this observation: *Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.* Here the challenge for us as Christians looking back at these events that took place roughly 2,850 years ago is to ask what can I learn from these incidents for my spiritual benefit today? How can I know God better through how He has acted in these situations all those years ago? How much better it is to learn from the actions – and failings- of other people, than to make the same mistakes ourselves! As I reflected on these passages it was clear that there were principles about God's character that might be helpful to share with other people –even if there were easier passages of the Bible to use to make the same point. What is so important to grasp is that God does not change. How He acts in different contexts and with each individual will vary, not least over the centuries, but also in the light of particular circumstances. Each earthly parent likewise will interact

with their children in the light of their age, maturity and particular personal circumstances when choices have to be made. What happened in these two incidents and what can we learn from them?

1. The wonder of the grace of God (II Kings 2:19-22)

¹⁹ *The people of the city said to Elisha, 'Look, our lord, this town is well situated, as you can see, but the water is bad and the land is unproductive.'* ²⁰ *'Bring me a new bowl,' he said, 'and put salt in it.'* So they brought it to him. ²¹ *Then he went out to the spring and threw the salt into it, saying, 'This is what the Lord says: "I have healed this water. Never again will it cause death or make the land unproductive."'* ²² *And the water has remained pure to this day, according to the word Elisha had spoken.*

(a) **The historical context** The location for this incident is the city of Jericho, on the Israel side of the river Jordan, at the northern end of the Dead Sea. The city was the Canaanite fortress that guarded the entrance to the Holy Land at the time when first Moses and then Joshua were leading the Israelites out of Egypt into the Promised Land. The people of Israel in Moses' day had decided upon the advice of the majority of spies who had gone on a reconnaissance trip that it was mission impossible to go forward. In Numbers 13:27-31 gave a summary of the public discussion: ²⁷ *They gave Moses this account: 'We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. ²⁸ But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. ²⁹ The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan.'* ³⁰ *Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, 'We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.'* ³¹ *But the men who had gone up with him said, 'We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are.'* It was seen as a symbol of the strength of the old Canaanite religious system and the remarkable collapse of the impressive city walls as the Israelites marched around them in the time of Joshua was viewed as a remarkable miracle from God (Joshua 6). After the destruction of the city, something most unusual happened. Joshua made a solemn declaration in Joshua 6:26: ⁶ *At that time Joshua pronounced this solemn oath: 'Cursed before the Lord is the one who undertakes to rebuild this city, Jericho: 'At the cost of his firstborn son he will lay its foundations; at the cost of his youngest he will set up its gates.'* The site of the city was left deserted for years, despite the promising location, until the reign of Ahab and Jezebel. In deliberate defiance of the prohibition, a man called Hiel who came from the city of Bethel rebuilt Jericho. There is a simple record of what happened in I Kings 16:34: *In Ahab's time, Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of his firstborn son Abiram, and he set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, in accordance with the word of the Lord spoken by Joshua son of Nun.* Hiel, a devout pagan, was deliberately challenging the authority of the God of Israel and defying Him in his actions. In effect saying, nothing will happen if I go against His commands. It was not so much what he did, but why he did it that was significant and why the consequences of his actions followed. The author of I Kings 16 makes no comment beyond the simple statement that what Joshua proclaimed centuries earlier came true. To live life without reference to God and especially to live life in deliberate defiance of God is a very dangerous place to be. Remember Paul's words in Galatians 6:7-8: *Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. ⁸ Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.*

The events of the past were felt keenly by the people living in Jericho since it had been rebuilt. The outward signs of relative material prosperity could not compensate for their fears. There are people today who feel their current circumstances are overshadowed by things that they or other people have done in the past. On some occasions there are genuine grounds for

acknowledging that past events have a bearing on the present. We are familiar, for example, with medical issues for some people because of exposure to alcohol or illegal drugs while in the womb. There are a small number of cases of genetic challenges where a gene for a serious condition is carried or passed on in a family and in a few cases couples have chosen not to have children because of the risks of passing on a serious medical condition.

(b) **The current problem** ¹⁹ *The people of the city said to Elisha, ‘Look, our lord, this town is well situated, as you can see, but the water is bad and the land is unproductive (II Kings 2:19). It is probable that the last few words are better translated in the New Jerusalem Bible ‘the water is foul and the country suffers from miscarriages’ (Dale Ralph Davis, 2 Kings, p. 35). The assumption on the part of the local people was that as a result of some problem with the water supply there were health implications leading to a higher than average miscarriage of babies. It is unclear whether this was related to people, animals or both in that community. Scholars have speculated on a number of possible causes of contamination of the water supply, which may or may not be correct and we have no way of knowing if there was a causal link between the foul tasting water and the health problems observed in the community. What is clear is that in the light of the history of that city local people interpreted their current problems as caused by what had happened in the past. Therefore, it is not accidental that Elisha the leader of the Jewish faith community was invited to Jericho to help resolve this situation. Or more accurately, they wished to invite the God whom Elisha served to resolve their predicament. This was a positive step to take the matter to God – whatever it may have been. The same principle applies to us today. No matter what our circumstances, we should bring our praise and thanks as well as our problems and struggles to the Lord. Both then and now people’s understanding of their own circumstances may be accurate or far from accurate, but bringing things to God is prayer is the best thing we can do. It goes without saying that if there are difficulties we are facing that we can resolve ourselves then we should do so and not expect someone else to do it- which can become a matter for praise and thanksgiving. However, there are many problems that people face that are complex and are far from easy to resolve which was how these residents of Jericho felt at that time.*

(c) **The outcome of Elisha’s intervention** ²⁰ *‘Bring me a new bowl,’ he said, ‘and put salt in it.’ So they brought it to him. ²¹ Then he went out to the spring and threw the salt into it, saying, ‘This is what the Lord says: “I have healed this water. Never again will it cause death or make the land unproductive.”’ ²² And the water has remained pure to this day, according to the word Elisha had spoken (II Kings 2:20-22). The particular details of the story of what Elisha did were symbolic actions to give a visible sign of the miraculous intervention of God in cleansing the water supply of whatever had been the problem. It was similar to the events at Marah during the wilderness journey of the Israelites, recorded in Exodus 15:22-26. In that desert area the Israelite community were struggling to find suitable water to drink. At Marah the water tasted very bitter and Moses was asked to pray for God to intervene and make the water drinkable. Exodus 15:25 records what happened. *Then Moses cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became fit to drink.* The symbolic action of the object thrown into the water was the visible sign of the supernatural intervention of God to resolve their situation. The good news for these residents of Jericho was that they were not bound by their past. God deals with us personally. The prophet Ezekiel, a leading pastor of the Israelite exile community in Babylon (Iraq), was particularly clear about that. His message recorded in Ezekiel chapter eighteen emphasised this truth. It is a two-sided message. First of all past blessings and successes do not guarantee that the same will happen in the future. This is a lesson many football managers know to their cost. What happened last season is history! But it is equally true for us as Christians and as churches. We may have seen great blessings in the past, but it is not automatic that this will happen today. Scotland as*

a nation has seen many amazing Holy Spirit-led revivals over previous centuries, but it is sobering how little of that we have seen in the last century. On a more localised scale a church or family may be blessed in particular ways, but if we stop seeking the Lord and depending on Him then we may limit future blessings. We want to thank the Lord that over the last twenty-five to thirty years there has been significant growth in numbers attending the church and in the amount of work that is being done in our local community. But we must not diminish our serious commitment to prayer and depending on the Lord if we wish it to continue. We cannot presume on the blessing of God. It is a very personal matter. We need to ask ourselves about our own hearts. Am I right before the Lord? Am I depending on Him as I should? Do I regularly come before Him in prayer seeking His guidance and wisdom with a sense of expectancy of His input into my life and circumstances? For many of us as Christians the honest answer is that some years we are more dependent on the Lord than others. There are other times when we drift in our priorities and need to get back on track recommitting to giving Him the first place in our lives. The sins of presumption and complacency are some of the biggest dangers facing Western Christianity. In the eighteenth to twentieth centuries it was from the Western world that the great missionary movement went out, but prior to that era and increasingly in the present day the centre of gravity in the Christian world is shifting to the global south. We need as Western Christians to work harder to establish closer ties with our African and Asian mission partners in the work of building God's kingdom and promoting His cause.

However, the major encouragement from this passage is that the past negative history of Jericho was not allowed to define the future of the current population of the city. They were set free from past problems and enabled with joy to go forward into the future without fear. It is this fact that is so encouraging today. There are many men and women who live overshadowed by past failures. They need to hear loud and clear from God that past mistakes can be forgiven and forgotten. There are of course consequences of past mistakes with which we have to live. People who have served time in jail for various crimes may never be able to work in certain forms of employment, for example. Those who have abused their bodies with dubious substances may have to live with some of the health consequences of their choices. Sometimes our past relational failures can have a devastating impact on our families. God forgave David for His sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah. But despite seeing the painful consequences that resulted from his actions, some of David's sons chose to copy their father's foolish choices with tragic consequences (II Samuel 11-12:10). What might it mean for someone who is genuinely sorry for past mistakes? The grace of God not only forgiving sin confessed to Him, but also erasing it from our record before Him, allows us a fresh start. There are many people who live with guilt from terminating healthy pregnancies, from acts of unfaithfulness in their marriages or from rebellious attitudes in their youth that caused such heartache to their parents and so many more similar scenarios, but no matter what the situation when sin is truly and genuinely confessed to God, it is forgiven. I John 1:9 declares: *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness* (I John 1:9). In Psalm 103:10-13 there is this wonderful assurance from God. *He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. ¹¹For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him; ¹²as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. ¹³As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him;* Whatever your particular circumstances are today, I pray that no-one leaves this place today without grasping the wonderful liberating grace of God that can set us free from our past failures and sin and equip and enable us to go forward with Him. Do you need to hear that today?

2. The seriousness of the judgement of God (II Kings 2:23-25)

²³ From there Elisha went up to Bethel. As he was walking along the road, some boys came out of the town and jeered at him. 'Get out of here, baldy!' they said. 'Get out of here, baldy!' ²⁴ He turned round, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the Lord. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys. ²⁵ And he went on to Mount Carmel and from there returned to Samaria. If the Jericho incident of that day pointed to the wonderful grace of God, the second incident at Bethel showed the danger of living life in conscious rebellion against God.

(a) The historical context Bethel, the name means 'House of God'. It was chosen following an encounter with God by Jacob the self-centred younger son of Isaac and Rebekah. He had stepped over the line in his choices too many times and now needed to leave home in a hurry. Sleeping under the stars on the outskirts of a town called Luz he had a dream of a stairway to heaven and angels ascending and descending to earth, and in the dream he heard God challenging him to trust Him and to seek the blessings God had for him with patience at the right time. Although, his confession of faith was a kind of conditional agreement with God, it was the start of his faith journey (recorded in Genesis 28). After many tough knocks in life more than two decades later he returns and rededicates his life to God again at Bethel (Genesis 35:1, 14: *Then God said to Jacob, 'Go up to Bethel and settle there, and build an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau.'.. Jacob set up a stone pillar at the place where God had talked with him, and he poured out a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it.* ¹⁵ *Jacob called the place where God had talked with him Bethel.* In time the town's name was changed from Luz to Bethel and reflected a community of people dedicated to living for God. However, it didn't last. After the death of King Solomon, an official named Jereboam rebelled and took over the ten northern tribes and set up alternative places of worship on two sites, with the main one being at Bethel approximately eighty years earlier. I Kings 12:28-38 records his actions. *After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, 'It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.'* ²⁹ *One he set up in Bethel, and the other in Dan.* ³⁰ ***And this thing became a sin; the people came to worship the one at Bethel and went as far as Dan to worship the other*** (I Kings 12:28-30). The passage is explicit that Jereboam built shrines in places where they ought not to have been built; appointed as priests individuals not entitled to hold that office and invented new religious festivals to be observed. It was a conscious rebellion against the God of Israel. A man of God prophesied that in the future a King of Judah by the name of Josiah would execute God's judgement on that place, which duly happened two centuries later (I Kings 13:1-3) II Kings 23:15-17 recorded the fulfilment of the prophecy. *Even the altar at Bethel, the high place made by Jeroboam son of Nebat, who had caused Israel to sin – even that altar and high place he demolished. He burned the high place and ground it to powder, and burned the Asherah pole also.* ¹⁶ *Then Josiah looked around, and when he saw the tombs that were there on the hillside, he had the bones removed from them and burned on the altar to defile it, **in accordance with the word of the Lord proclaimed by the man of God who foretold these things.*** ¹⁷ *The king asked, 'What is that tombstone I see?' The people of the city said, 'It marks the tomb of the man of God who came from Judah and pronounced against the altar of Bethel the very things you have done to it.'* Bethel had become a place defined by a wilful rebellion against the God of Israel inhabited by a community of people comfortable with that choice. If Jericho was inhabited by a community of people who wanted to honour God and serve Him and be released from its past, Bethel, by contrast, was in a very different place. Then and now there are people who consciously and wilfully stand for convictions that directly oppose the good news of the Christian gospel.

(b) **The current problem** *From there Elisha went up to Bethel. As he was walking along the road, some youths came out of the town and jeered at him. 'Get out of here, baldy!' they said. 'Get out of here, baldy!'* ²⁴ *He turned round, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the Lord. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the youths.* ²⁵ *And he went on to Mount Carmel and from there returned to Samaria (II Kings 2:23-25).* This incident is shocking. To the first hearers they would be appalled at the young men's behaviour. The disrespect to a community leader was a disgrace and the fact that they suffered as a result would have been viewed as their own fault. What happened was not a spontaneous act of immature children being foolish, but young men who engaged in deliberate planned ridicule of the most respected religious leader of the day. They had to find out where Elisha was and effectively ambushed him on a roadside. How many there were is unknown but in excess of forty-two hostile individuals shouting unexpected sustained hateful abuse must have been a frightening experience. An alternative translation of their words is: '*Go up Baldy...*' –if this was what they said then it is likely a reference to the remarkable departure to heaven by Elijah and them telling Elisha to do them a favour and leave the country in the same way. It was an attack on the God of Elisha, but targeted on His most visible representative. Elisha's response was to ask God audibly to judge them for their attack on Him. It is a solemn moment as the prophet calmly asked God to take charge of the situation and punish those who ridiculed Him. The first hearers of this story would have been aware of the punishments listed in the early books of the Old Testament for God's covenant people –if they turned away from honouring God. In Leviticus 26:21-22 it states: *If you remain hostile towards me and refuse to listen to me, I will multiply your afflictions seven times over, as your sins deserve.* ²² *I will send wild animals against you...* The events that day would have been seen as God vindicating His servant Elisha.

(c) **The outcome of Elisha's intervention** What happened next is that in that wooded area two bears appeared –possibly frightened by the noise of the mob? But a number of the hostile mob suffered significant injuries. Some people could say it was a coincidence – bears lived there until the Middle Ages. However, in this context and by the writer of this text, it was certainly viewed at the time as evidence of divine displeasure of their appalling behaviour. The principle that God punishes wrongdoers is clear. The question for us all is this: Do I honour the Lord in my attitudes, speech and conduct as I should? A holy reverence for the Lord is a given – am I living this way? When we look at the messages sent by the risen Lord Jesus to the seven churches of western Turkey, recorded in Revelation chapters two to three, there is a clear challenge to maintain our standards. The church at Ephesus –commended for its orthodoxy in beliefs, nevertheless was warned about its lack of love (Revelation 2:4-6). God is amazingly gracious to forgive the sins of those who humbly repent and given them a fresh start, but those who are arrogant and wilfully oppose Him will be judged. May God help us in all we do to honour and glorify His name, Amen