

Sermon 55, Resistible Grace?, 2 Kings 13

Proposition: Second Kings 13 displays in high relief both the resisted and irresistible saving grace(s) God shows to His people.

Textual Outline

- I. Jehoahaz ben Jehu Gets Saved, vv. 1-9
- II. Jehoash ben Jehoahaz Gets Bored, vv. 10-19
- III. Israel Gets Three Divine Gifts, vv. 20-25

Homiletical Outline

- I. God's Compassion on His Suffering People, vv. 1-9
 - A. Israel Sins, vv. 1-2
 - B. God Chastens, v. 3
 - C. Israel Cries Out, v. 4
 - D. Yahweh Saves, v. 5
 - E. Israel's Response: Impotent Idolatry, vv. 6-7
 - F. Yahweh's Response: Faithfulness, vv. 8-9
- II. God's Promise to a Wicked King, vv. 10-19
 - A. Jehoash's Formulaic Reign, vv. 10-13
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 1. The Unshakeable Promise of God, vv. 14-17
 2. The Unwavering Apathy of Jehoash, vv. 18-19
- III. God's Provision for His Beaten People, vv. 20-25
 - A. The Hope of Resurrection, vv. 20-21
 - B. The Covenant with Abraham, vv. 22-23
 - C. The Truth of God's Promises, vv. 24-25

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we Presbyterians are (or should be!) well-known for believing in irresistible grace. And indeed, the irresistible grace of God is on full display in our text this evening — yet at the same time, we see just how thoroughly God's people resisted His grace. What's the deal? Well, the reality is that we never said God's grace is *always* irresistible. We confess only that when God decides to save a man, He infallibly does so. The person being saved cannot stop it. And I want to show you that that truth is definitely and completely present in our passage tonight. Of course, tonight's passage also indicates that God's people often respond to His gracious salvation with hardened, wicked hearts. Why? Because the salvation in this text is temporal and political, not spiritual and eternal. God saves, and His

people can't stop Him from saving them — but they can certainly refuse to submit to Him or receive His grace at other times and in other ways. Grace is not irresistible across the board. Nonetheless, in our text tonight both the resistibility and irresistibility of God's grace are displayed in high relief.

I. God's Compassion on His Suffering People, vv. 1-9

Jehu dies, and his son Jehoahaz begins to reign. Like every king of Israel, he pursues Jeroboam's religious policy of making sure that the Israelites worshipped the golden calves in Bethel and in Dan, at the northern and southern ends of Israelite territory. And suddenly, as every commentator noticed, we seem to be right back in the book of Judges. We are back in the cycle of sin, judgment, repentance, salvation, and more sin.

A. Israel Sins, vv. 1-2

That's how our chapter opens. Israel sins. Indeed, Jehoahaz is careful not to vary Jeroboam's policies. He doesn't want his people getting any ideas about reuniting with the south. He wants to make it very clear that golden calves are good enough for him and for any citizen of Israel.

B. God Chastens, v. 3

So what does God do under this provocation? He delivers Israel into the hands of Syria to be chastised. He disciplines His people for their sins.

Does God still chasten? Yes! This is not retributive justice, or what we call punishment. This is chastening, whereby God sends suffering into His people's lives to teach them not to disobey. Whom the Lord loves, He chastens!

Can you see Syrian troops rampaging through your streets as a sign of love? Can you experience loss, sickness, pain, and tragedy as God's love directed toward you to help wean your heart from its calf idols? Brothers and sisters, this chapter and this whole book was written to tell us what our God is like. And one facet of His character should be very clear to us: He is God who chastens. He is a God of vengeance, as we saw two weeks ago, and He is also a God who disciplines His beloved people. His own Beloved Son was chastened with a cross; do you think you are better than Jesus and therefore that you need less suffering than He experienced?

C. Israel Cries Out, v. 4

Well, in an absolutely unparalleled move, Jehoahaz pleads with Yahweh! Yes, this bull-worshipper knew in his heart of hearts that his state religion was a load of bull. When things were really bad, he appealed to Yahweh. Now, as Davis says, we are getting all ready to fire our Prov. 28:9 missile at Jehoahaz. ("If one turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination," Pro 28:9 ESV.) Surely God isn't going to listen to this idolater! But then the unthinkable happened. The God of the Exodus who saw the affliction of His people six centuries before sees it again — and He still cares.

We've talked about where God is when you suffer. Where is He when His people are suffering? He's there, seeing their pain and caring about it. He intervened by sending Moses to deliver Israel when He saw their suffering in Egypt. And when He sees the suffering Hazael is bringing to His people, He intervenes once more.

Now, some of us are thinking, “What kind of deity is this? First He sends the pain, and now we’re supposed to think He’s so wonderful when He sends someone to help out? If He were halfway decent at His job, He wouldn’t have sent the pain in the first place!”

The problem with this objection, of course, is not that some random non-Christian makes it. The problem with it is that we hear it from our own hearts. We have all felt this way! “God, I’m supposed to worship you for saving me from distress, but you’re the one who sent the distress in the first place!” When your heart says this to you, or cries out like this to God, what can you tell it? Tell it this: “Heart, you have God’s mission all wrong! God’s job is not to make sure that your life is as comfy as possible. He does not exist to make sure that you feel great all day every day. He is in the business of making you holy, not in the business of making you happy. That’s why He chastens. That’s why He sends pain and rampaging Syrians into your life. But He also knows how much you can take, and He delivers you when He knows that that’s what you need to learn to serve Him even better.”

Can you tell your heart that? We assume so automatically, so naturally, that God exists to meet our needs and make us feel good that we have a hard time even recognizing that assumption in our hearts. But an assumption is all it is! We do indeed praise God for saving us from the pain He personally sent to us because both the pain and the salvation were for our benefit! He is working all things together for our good — and ultimately, what glorifies Him is what’s good for us.

D. Yahweh Saves, v. 5

God saw Israel’s pain and sent a savior. The word in Hebrew is “Messiah.” He sent a Messiah. Most translations try to downplay the theological significance here and turn the word into “deliverer,” but the significance remains. Who was this savior? Well, the text tells us that it was the next two kings of Israel. Look with me at 14:27, where God saves Israel by the hand of Jeroboam II. Now look at 13:17, where Jehoash fires the Lord’s arrow of deliverance. Ultimately, of course, the main point is that God saved His people. He sent a messiah — not *the* Messiah, but a messiah, a forerunner of Messiah, someone who would act to bring salvation to His people. The point is clear: Our God saves. He saves by a human agent, an Anointed One. The small-scale deliverance of Israel from Syrian oppression is like the large-scale deliverance from sin and Satanic oppression that God has granted to us in Jesus the Messiah. The result of salvation was life in the Promised Land — and the truth of the matter is that when God saves us, the ultimate result is life in the Promised Land of Heaven.

Brothers and sisters, I’m tempted to end this sermon right here, on this massive high point. Yahweh saves, and makes His people dwell securely. How exactly this looked the text doesn’t tell us. It seems to have been some rather pedestrian military and political successes taking place over the next three or four decades. It was nothing so amazing as what happened at Golgotha. But it was a salvation event nonetheless.

E. Israel's Response: Impotent Idolatry, vv. 6-7

Well, how did God's people respond? Were they thrilled to have back a place in the Promised Land? Did they rejoice with exceeding great joy and burn Jeroboam's bull-gods? Not a bit of it. Their ingratitude was extreme. God saved them, and they continued to walk right down the path of false religion blazed by Jeroboam. What was the essence of Jeroboam-religion? It was simply a bronze-age version of what we today call Civic Religion. It was a basic feel-good faith designed to be low on dogma and high on civic engagement. It was the religion of America — I mean, of Israel.

I have on my shelf a recent work by Walter McDougall called *The Tragedy of U.S. Foreign Policy*. McDougall contends that America's civic religion has driven most of our wars and political engagements with the outside world, going back to the Mexican War. Our sense that we are something special has led us to go out and kill people.

Israel, rather than walking down the demanding path of obeying God and serving Him only, preferred the broader path of a tolerant civic religion. Brothers and sisters, civic religion, whether of the right or left, remains a potent force in today's America. The right version (which is a little more popular in Campbell County) says that America is the land of freedom and opportunity, is something unique in world history, is the most righteous of all nations because it has the best form of government, and so on. The left version says that the America is the place of oppression and maltreatment for all minorities, but that it is becoming more open and affirming by the minute and may yet become a wonderful paradise where equality reigns. Right civic religion says that America is good because of where it came from, left civic religion says that it's good because of where it's progressing towards — and both can become crude but effective substitutes for a genuine walk with Jesus Christ. Both halves of America's civic religion make some true claims — but as religion, they are both bankrupt. We don't worship America, or progress, or the Constitution! We worship Jesus Christ.

That's what Jeroboam and his successors in Northern Israel couldn't see, or didn't want to see. For them, bull-worship was good enough. Religion that supports the state was fine by them. God sent a savior, an effective savior, one whose grace really did make their lives better and give them safety in the Promised Land — and they ignored him. They kept right on sinning like before. How can God's grace be irresistible in saving them, and yet so utterly resisted in making them better people? The answer is that again, this salvation was a type of eternal salvation in Christ. It was effective and irresistible in what it was intended to do, which was to provide temporal deliverance for Israel. It was not the same thing as being born again; it was only a type of that greater salvation in Jesus.

Israel's refusal to respond rightly left her very weak. Jehoahaz pretty much had no mounted soldiers or chariots left. He had a pitifully emaciated force. Why does the narrator take time to tell us this? I think the point of its juxtaposition is clear. God saved Israel; Israel couldn't save itself. And despite Israel's blase attitude, God made it abundantly clear to them that they could never have delivered themselves.

You know, this is often why God lets us keep sinning our favorite sins, even after we've been Christians for a long time. He wants to highlight to us the truth that He saves us, and that we don't save ourselves. Israel didn't deliver itself; God delivered Israel, and kept her weak just to show her that it was He who had saved her.

F. Yahweh's Response: Faithfulness, vv. 8-9

Well, how did Yahweh respond to His people's bad response? He let Jehoahaz die and his son Jehoash succeed him. God kept His promise of a four-generation dynasty that He had made to Jehu. When we are faithless, He remains faithful! Do you trust this faithful God? Do you recognize that His faithfulness will not let Him break His promises to you? Once again, we see the irresistible nature of God's grace. He put Jehu's grandson onto his father's throne, not because Israel deserved faithful rulers but because He had promised. And if He has promised to save you, then you can bank on that promise of His.

II. God's Promise to a Wicked King, vv. 10-19

And indeed, we see God's promise to another wicked king laid out in this next section.

A. Jehoash's Formulaic Reign, vv. 10-13

Jehoash reigned sixteen years — roughly the same length of time that FDR was president of the United States. Do you think you could condense FDR's four terms into four verses of text? Our narrator had no problem doing so with Jehoash. He makes it clear that Jehoash's reign hardly matters. You can say everything that needs to be said without departing from the usual formulas. The only bit of information mentioned outside of the usual formulas is that Jehoash fought with Amaziah king of Judah — something we will see in greater detail in the next chapter.

So this guy's reign was more or less ordinary, boring, routine. Oh, yes, his foreign policy broke down to the point that he fought with Judah, his natural ally. Other than that, he died and was buried in Samaria and Jeroboam his son reigned in his place.

B. Jehoash's Supreme Moment, v. 14-19

Yet the narrator is not really finished with Jehoash. In his mind, the supreme moment of Jehoash's life (as D.R. Davis puts it) was when he stood before the word of God. The encounter with God's word mediated through Elisha was indeed the defining moment of this man's life. Surely the point must not be lost on us! When God's word comes to you, how you respond defines who you ultimately are. Will you respond with faith or doubt? Will you respond with obedience or scoffing?

1. The Unshakeable Promise of God, vv. 14-17

From his deathbed, Elisha conveys God's promise to Jehoash. Jehoash is truly grieved by the passing of this great man of God, and weeps at least for the loss of military resources that the prophet's death represents. Yet Elisha sits up in the bed and guides the king through the actions of shooting "the Lord's arrow of victory" eastward toward Syria. God's unconditional promise, God's irresistible grace, is that Jehoash will have the privilege of beating the Syrians to a pulp.

2. The Unwavering Apathy of Jehoash, vv. 18-19

So (as one commentator translates the text) then Elisha hands the bow over and tells Jehoash to shoot at the Syrians. Fire some arrows out the window into the ground as though you were attacking Syria! What does Jehoash do? He fires three arrows, and then gives up. Elisha is angry. In the face of God's promise, Jehoash was apathetic. He wasn't motivated by God's promise of victory. He wasn't interested in really and truly appropriating the promise of salvation.

Brothers and sisters, is God's grace irresistible? God promised victory over Syria, and God gave victory over Syria (as we will see momentarily in v. 25). But Jehoash's limp response certainly seemed to resist God's grace. Again, the point is that God was not converting Jehoash internally, not making him a new creation, not giving him a new heart and putting the Holy Spirit within him. Jehoash heard the external call of God, but barely responded. And you and I do this too. We hear God's promise of victory over sin, and then barely react. We hear about the victorious Christian life, but do little to appropriate it. We do something, for sure — but we don't try to go above and beyond. We try to do the minimum.

As the commentators point out, it was through Syria that Assyria ended up fastening its attention on Israel. Had Jehoash actually destroyed Syria, perhaps Assyria would not have come and destroyed the northern kingdom in 722 B.C. But Jehoash was simply apathetic about the promises of God. He couldn't bring himself to care. He couldn't bring himself to do the work necessary to appropriate them. He resisted the grace of God that was offered to him. And you can resist that grace offered to you too. When we say "irresistible grace," we mean only that if God decides to give you a new heart, there's nothing you can do to stop Him. But we don't mean that you will always react appropriately to God's goodness. Jehoash didn't! He was bored with the grace of God.

Are you?

I'm serious, brothers and sisters. Are you bored with the grace of God? Are you excited enough to shoot five or six times? Or do you halfheartedly claim His promises?

III. God's Provision for His Beaten People, vv. 20-25

Well, we've been talking in the morning sermons on Ephesians about what some of those promises are. But let's see what three promises the narrator highlights here as he closes the chapter.

A. The Hope of Resurrection, vv. 20-21

The first promise he highlights is the hope of resurrection. Elisha, unlike Elijah, died and was buried. But during an emergency burial, when a corpse was thrown in on top of him, his bones brought the dead man back to life!

What do we make of this incident? Apparently some people have said that it sounds like "holy relics," and the idea that you can gain spiritual merit by being in the physical presence of the remains of some holy man or other. Is that primarily what the text is trying to say? I think not. After all, if the power of resurrection had lodged simply in the flesh of Elisha as such, that would not really reveal something to us about our God. The most we could say is that Elisha

dead is a better miracle-worker than Elisha alive. But based on what we know of the larger context of Kings, and indeed of the Bible, we know that these verses too are here to tell us something about the character of God. What do they tell us? The He, the God whom Elisha served, is the God of resurrection. This is the third resurrection recorded in Scripture, and the last one mentioned in the entire Old Testament. Elijah raised one person; Elisha raised two. “Where is Yahweh, God of Elijah?” Elisha asked after his predecessor was taken up. Now the reader can rightly ask, “Where is Yahweh, God of Elisha?” The answer is that He is still with His people, still the God of resurrection, still the one to whom they ought to turn when life and hope are gone. Our God is a God who raises the dead. Sometimes He does it through the bones of a prophet or the handkerchief of an apostle. Sometimes He does it with a word. But always, it is He who does it. Relics are not a means of grace; the shroud of Turin will not save you. Only Jesus can do that.

So here again we see an irresistible grace. The man had no choice; when God’s power touched him, he lived.

Are you excited about this truth? Do you live as one who believes in the resurrection? Do you believe that some things are worth dying for? Do you have hope and comfort in the death of believing loved ones? God raises the dead.

B. The Covenant with Abraham, vv. 22-23

But secondly, God keeps His covenant. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That covenant is almost never mentioned in the historical books. The last time the patriarchs appeared was in Elijah’s prayer in 1 Kings 18, and before that the only other place all three appear together in the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua-2 Kings, excluding Ruth) is in Joshua 24. Clearly, if they come up the mention is important. And the important truth here is that behind God’s covenant with David stands His covenant with the fathers. His promise to the patriarchs cannot be frustrated.

Do you trust His promises? Do you live by faith in what He has said He will do? How heavily do you lean on God’s covenant? How often do you appeal to it in your prayers? Brothers and sisters, this covenant is the unbreakable bond between you and God. Lean on it, because in leaning on it you’re leaning on Him.

Notice, too, when the covenant applies: When you’re suffering. When the whole church is suffering. It’s then that the covenant is strongest. In fact, the narrator can’t help but remark that even after the exile, even after everything that went wrong and everything that the people did wrong, God still refused to destroy them or cast them from His presence. Ezekiel depicts the glory of God coming to rest with the exiles in Babylon. Even when the Temple was destroyed, God did not cast Israel out of His presence.

Can you believe that God will not cast you off? Can you say, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, *for Thou art with me?*” God is with you in exile and in the valley of the shadow of death. God is there. He promised seed and land to Abraham — He promised Christ to Abraham. And He has kept and will keep that promise for eternity. Does that truth excite you, or does it bore you like it bored Jehoash?

C. The Truth of God's Promises, vv. 24-25

Finally, God sent His people confirmation of the truth of His promises. Jehoash defeated Syria three times, just like Elisha said he would. God gave Jehoash the truth. And He still gives us the truth. The book in your lap is true. The sermon you're hearing is true. The deposit of faith that the church holds is true.

Do you receive the truth as a benefit? Do you seek for what's true? Do you refuse to rest satisfied unless you have and know the truth? Or are you bored by the truth?

When God gives you a promise, how hard do you grasp it? How heavily do you lean on it? How much do you need it to be true? Those are the questions that this little vignette brings to our attention.

Brothers and sisters, these last three graces are resistible. You don't have to hope, even when God gives you clear and direct promises. You can refuse to hope in the resurrection. You don't have to accept the truth; you can choose to believe lies. You don't have to embrace the covenant; you can reject it. These graces are resistible, and Jehoash resisted them (or partially resisted them). Yes, God saves irresistibly. But if you are truly saved, you need to accept His grace. Don't resist it. Don't refuse hope, covenant, and truth. They are all offered to you in Jesus Christ. If He is yours, then so are His graces. Don't resist them; embrace them! Don't be like Israel, who went "to judgment weighted down with mercies."² Amen.

² Davis, *2 Kings*, 205.