

Sermon 59, How to Forfeit Blessings, 2 Kings 17:1-23

Proposition: The fall of Israel warns us that the same God who showers us with copious blessings will judge us when we despise them.

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I. Introduction: Does 2 Kings 17 “Blame the Victim”?

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come tonight to the fall of Israel. The events we just read about took place in the year 722 B.C. Northern Israel had endured for just over two hundred years, but it fell with a great crash. The final words of our text are haunting, and intentionally so: “They are still there” (NIV). God’s people are still in exile. His promise has failed, His blessings are forfeited; the people He redeemed from Egypt have definitively chosen sin.

Our text tonight sets out to provide an explanation for what happened. Why did God’s people go into exile? Why did Israel fall under the hammer-blows of Assyria? The answer, of course, is that they sinned. They worshipped the wrong gods and in the wrong way until God unleashed His wrath upon them in the form of Assyrian soldiers.

Is this the correct answer? One commentator I read (Marvin Sweeney) commented that the text simply blames the victims. Israel suffered great devastation from the Assyrians; this chapter summarizes untold suffering on the part of the ordinary Israelite citizen. But according to the text, they had asked for it for two hundred years. God’s people *deserved* everything that happened to them. That’s the clear message of the text.

Now, those of us who believe that the text judges us and not vice-versa understand that yes, this text does blame the victims because they did in fact deserve it. If “blaming the victim” is a valid category in this case, then it certainly fits. But can a criminal in the electric chair say that society is blaming the victim? Can a mentally unstable person who pulls a gun on the cops, acts threatening, and gets shot dead for his pains claim that law enforcement officers “blamed the victim”? I don’t think so. Brothers and sisters, Israel was not simply minding her own business when suddenly Assyria came and victimized her in brutal ways. Israel was doing her level best to provoke God, to despise His blessings — and at some point, His patience was exhausted and He punished her for her sins. That is the message of this text. If you think that Israel is an innocent victim, you’ve been asleep since 1 Kings 12. Israel truly did deserve everything that happened in this chapter — and that is terrifying because it tells us something about ourselves. The God we serve has not changed. He still punishes those who persist over centuries in despising His blessings. In the history of Israel under Hoshea we see a warning of what our own fate might be if we persist in idolatry like theirs.

II. Blessings Lost, vv. 1-6

We see this truth first in vv. 1-6, the brief regnal account of Hoshea ben Elah, the last King of Israel.

A. Meet “Jesus,” the Best King of Israel, vv. 1-4

Notice this man’s name. His name “Hoshea” is etymologically the same as “Yeshua.” It means “Yahweh saves.” The Greek form of the name, which is how we know it best, is Jesus. Do you think that’s significant? The king whose name means “salvation” presided over destruction. The irony is overpowering. There was no salvation in this particular Israelite.

1. He Did the Best, vv. 1-2

Notice that he was the best of all the kings of Israel! He was still evil, of course, but not like his predecessors. Something about him was better. We aren’t told what, of course, but we are still told that of all the kings of Israel, he was the best.

2. He Suffered the Worst, vv. 3-4

But that counted for nothing in the eyes of Assyria. The text is emphatic. “Against *him*, against this best of all the kings of Israel, Shalmaneser king of Assyria came up.”

Do you see an echo of Christ here? You certainly should. If you missed it in the name, it’s in the story. Jesus was the true King of Israel who did the best and suffered the worst. Jesus is the one who was perfect, yet was despised and rejected and crucified for the sins of the world!

But Hoshea is no perfect Christ figure. He has something of Judas in him too. For rather than keep his alliance with Assyria, he betrayed his promises. He tried to ally with So king of Egypt, and stopped his annual tribute payment to Assyria. He was hauled off to an Assyrian dungeon for his pains.

How do you think this man died? It’s a fascinating topic for speculation, of course. Maybe someone will write a historical novel about it, as they have about Hoshea’s better-known

contemporary Hosea ben Beeri. Regardless, what's recorded here is enough for us. Israel perished under its best monarch. Its time was up.

B. Kingless, Northern Israel Forfeits Life in the Land, vv. 5-6

The people were carried off — some 27,000 of them, according to Assyrian records. The whole point was to completely destroy all local elites and any possibility of resistance to the new Assyrian regime. Life in the land was over. God had promised His people a land forever, and here that all came crashing down. What happened?

What happened, as we know from the New Testament, is that the land promise was relocated into a distant future. Heaven is the ultimate promised land! But for Joe Israelite, whose theological education was pretty weak, this was the ultimate disaster. The people of Israel no doubt felt like victims. They no doubt felt that Yahweh had betrayed them, giving them a promise and then pulling the rug out from under their feet. How did this happen?

Well, the narrator says, I'm so glad you asked.

III. Blessings Despised, vv. 7-23

It happened because you people despised the blessings of God almighty! The people despised five major blessings, huge things that God did for them and in their lives. These blessings are important; they loom large on our horizon even today. Israel totally failed to care about them, though. Like Esau, they preferred other things to their birthright.

A. The Blessings of God's Redemption, vv. 7-12

The first blessing they despised was the blessing of redemption. God had rescued them from Egypt, redefining their identity. They were redeemed! They had been Pharaoh's slaves, and God had brought them out to be a people for Himself. No longer did they serve under the harsh taskmasters of the King of Egypt. They were a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. They were carried on eagle's wings to God Himself. They were given an identity and privileges greater than any that had been given to any other people. And they despised that new identity. They feared other gods. They worshipped those other gods in all kinds of places and all kinds of ways. They built shrines in tiny frontier outposts called watchtowers. They built them in major cities. They built them in every kind of structure in between. They were mad over idols! Every hill and every tree had its own little shrine, its own little place to offer worship to these false deities. Can you imagine? We live in a land from which these sorts of public monuments to idolatry have been long cleansed. In other nations of the world, you can still see things like this on every high hill and under every green tree. Here we still worship idols, but they are more abstract, more intellectualized. What Israel did was exactly what God had said not to do. Does that sound like the contemporary American church? Does that sound like you and me at times?

B. The Blessings of God's Word, vv. 13-15

They also despised the blessings of God's word. He spoke to them by prophets and pointed them back to the instruction which He had given through Moses. He had told them what they needed to know to flourish as His people. And they despised it all! Is this not the case today in a land where most households have multiple Bibles, yet few people know the difference between the

OT Joseph and the NT Joseph? Israel had the blessing of God's word, but they counted it as a light thing indeed. They acted just like non-believers. They wanted so badly to be like the nations around them rather than like what God had called them to be like.

C. The Blessings of God's Worship, vv. 16-17

On top of that, they rejected the blessings of God's worship! They preferred bull-gods, Asherah poles, and all the host of heaven. They worshipped with the sacrament of abortion; they consulted with devils. Brothers and sisters, if you reject true worship you will still end up worshipping something. And the way you worship will be nasty, evil, and degrading. You will begin by denying God and end by denying your own humanity and slaughtering your own children in gruesome ways. This is why the Bible warns us to flee from idolatry. It is the most colossal offense against God and therefore it destroys humans as well. Yet Israel despised true worship. Make sure you don't, people of God!

D. The Blessings of God's Presence, vv. 18-23

The people of Israel also despised the blessing of living in God's presence. Notice how three times in these verses this blessing is emphasized. God removed them from His sight, from before Himself. We were made to live with God, to be in His presence — but Israel forfeited that, despised that, and ended up by being cast out of God's presence.

The application to us today is obvious. Don't despise God's presence! Don't ignore and neglect private worship, family worship, and corporate worship. Don't despise opportunities to come into God's presence. If you do for long enough, you will be permanently cast out of it. God rejected them (v. 20) because they rejected Him (v. 15). This, brothers and sisters, is the prelude to Hell. This is a typological picture of it. If you reject God, then He will ultimately reject you back. That's all there is to it. Do you want to submit to His covenant, or reject it?

E. The Blessings of God's Anointed King, vv. 21-22

God had given to Israel a particular blessing called the Davidic King. But Israel He had torn away from David's house. He had given Israel to Jeroboam, and Jeroboam had driven them all into idolatry. He had taught them to worship the bulls. He had led them away from worshipping God rightly. The parallel for us, of course, is found in the rule of Jesus Christ! He is our Davidic king. God has given Him to us. And if you don't love Christ and serve Him, the point again is that you will lose Him. You will be given over to the kingship of a half-baked idolater like Jeroboam. You might even be given over to the rule of a piece of nastiness like Shalmaneser king of Assyria. Brothers and sisters, do you value Christ as your ruler? Do you want to submit to Him, to follow His government, to obey His laws, to keep His commandments, to live in the way that He commands? Do you realize that this Davidic king is the greatest blessing that you have? Or does some other ruler who offers an "easier" life seem more attractive at the moment? Would you rather serve the god of popular acclaim? The god of being right? The god of personal peace and affluence? Or some other ruler who makes life seem pretty nice? Brothers and sisters, you can see where that line of thinking ends up. You can see the disastrous results. If you refuse the Davidic king, you will be ruled ultimately be no less than Satan himself.

So was the historian who wrote this chapter blaming the victim? It seems rather that he was simply explaining why God punished His people. They despised five of the greatest blessings in history.

IV. Application: Make Your Blessings Count!

And do you know what? Those blessings are yours, but in an even more heightened way. You are the recipient of these promises and blessing if you are sitting here tonight. You have God's redemption, word, presence, worship, and Davidic King. You may only have their outward husk, but you can at least see something of their majesty. If you are a true believer tonight, you have all of these things in fullness. My exhortations to you are two:

A. Stop Taking God's Blessings for Granted

First, stop taking God's blessings for granted! They are His gifts, which He could just as well withhold. You didn't deserve them; you didn't even (in many cases) ask for them or know you wanted them; you didn't think that God would give them to you! And yet He did. He blessed you with these five things, and with many many others. He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ. I exhort you, as I exhort myself, to stop taking these things for granted and especially to stop despising them! You see, if we are honest with ourselves we will admit that we have thought poorly at times of every one of these five blessings. We have raced through worship to get on to something more exciting. We have been bored with God's presence and gone off to watch a movie that didn't exactly honor Him. We have despised His word, not listened to it, thought that it would be there for us later so we don't need to worry about paying attention to it now. We have gone days at a time without even mentioning Jesus or anything He did for us. We have not rejoiced in His redemption, and have consciously imitated the world and not wanted people to know that we are Christians. Brothers and sisters, these things ought not to be! As Voddie Baucham says, whenever you're reading the OT and see "Israel," put your own name in there. Israel despised God's blessing; could it be that Harvest Reformed Presbyterian Church, and the people in it, have at times despised God's blessing too? I know I have.

B. True Worship Is the Proper Response to Blessing

So with that said, how do we make our blessings count? We make them count by responding to them with true worship! We must really and truly ascribe greatness to God. We must really and truly put away our idols. We must definitively decide that whatever anybody else does, we are going to worship God in the way He commanded, even if it kills us. That's what we need to do. We need to respond to God's benefits of redemption, worship, presence, word, and anointed king with genuine delight and thankfulness, coming into His presence and declaring how awesome He is. I am so glad that you are here, worshipping God with me. Let's commit to continue to worship Him, to continue to be with Him, to continue to value all His blessings at their true worth. Brothers and sisters, if bad things happen to us, may they truly be undeserved. Let's make His blessings count. He acted first to give us the blessings, especially the blessing of redemption

and the blessing of His Son. But woe be to us if we despise them. Rejoice in His goodness to you; worship Him, now and always. Amen.