

Sermon 38, Partial Obedience, Partial Victory, 2 Kings 3

Proposition: Jehoram partially obeyed God, and God partially granted him victory.

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Introduction

Brothers and sisters, we begin to look at the final king in Ahab's line — Ahab's son Jehoram. During his time, a man named Joram or Jehoram also reigned in Judah, as if to signify that the poison of Ahab's line had spread to Judah too. Don't be confused, though. The text generally keeps the two Jehorams separate enough that you can figure out which is which. Tonight, in fact, we look at only one Jehoram — Jehoram of Israel, the son of Ahab and brother of Ahaziah, who is frustrated in his plans, rejected and rebuked over and over in our story tonight. What I hope to show you is that Jehoram partially obeyed God, and God granted him partial victory.

I. Jehoram's Partial Obedience, vv. 1-3

Our text tonight opens by telling us that Jehoram was not as bad as his parents. He did evil; there's no question about that. But he removed a particular stone or pillar that was sacred to Baal, and he did not personally worship Baal (as far as we can tell). But he maintained the devastating religious policies of Jeroboam ben Nebat. Remember, Jeroboam subordinated religion to politics.

He made golden calves in Bethel and Dan for the people so that they wouldn't worship in Jerusalem and get any ideas about returning to live under the reign of David's line. Such a prostitution of worship to political ends, combined with a worshipping of false idols, was an abomination in God's sight. Yet it was not as bad as the outright Baalism which Ahab and Jezebel practiced.

Again, we see that how you walk with God is the most important thing about you. If you are going to be faithful, then go the whole way. Partial reform meets with only partial blessing. That, brothers and sisters, is the message of this chapter.

II. Jehoram's Partial Victory, vv. 4-27

We see here the larger story of Moab's anti-Israel revolt. Moab had been a vassal of Israel since the time of King David almost 200 years previously, and it is perhaps the case the Moab actually rebelled during the time of Ahaziah. Remember that we saw this revolt two weeks ago as a warning to Ahaziah, telling him to turn away from his evil practices. It was also a warning to Jehoram, and perhaps it was a warning he partially heeded. At any rate, he made a partial reformation of religion in Israel. He also thought he had the military force to bring Moab back under his control.

A. The War Begun, vv. 4-9a

1. Israel Loses a Vassal, vv. 4-5

Moab, you may recall, is the region of today's Jordan immediately east of the Dead Sea. The land in that era was adapted for sheep-breeding, and this massive shipment of wool was important to Israel's treasuries. Imagine the tax revenue that Washington, D.C. brings in from one of its largest, most prosperous territories — Texas, say, or California. Can you imagine the outrage in Washington if California were to secede and stop paying income taxes? Well, in the same way, Jehoram was not happy at all when Moab sensed Israel's weakness and decided that it could afford to not pay tribute anymore.

2. Jehoram and his Allies Set Out to Recover the Vassal, vv. 6-9a

So Jehoram gathered his remaining vassals, Jehoshaphat and the king of Edom. This king of Edom seems to have been a vassal of the king of Judah — he's the "deputy" of 1 Kings 22:47. Historical records indicate that Mesha had strong fortifications along his northern border, so the three kings decided to approach from the south, where presumably Moabite forces would be far weaker.

B. The War Delayed, vv. 9b-19

But though Jehoram was apparently eager for war, war was delayed by God's providential hand. God had a couple of things to show Jehoram.

1. Grumbling in the Wilderness, vv. 9b-10

The king of Israel grumbled in the wilderness. He charged God with bringing the three kings out to hand them over to Moab. In this complaint, he sounds a lot like the faithless Exodus generation, which passed through this same territory. Rather than trusting God, Jehoram prefers to complain about Him. He wants to charge God with hurting them. As Dale Ralph Davis points

out, don't trust people who only acknowledge God's sovereignty when they want to shift the blame. It was Jehoram who had led the army out, apparently without even consulting God. Yet when the pinch comes, he blames God for his situation.

Do you ever do this? Do you sometimes fall back on the truth of God's sovereignty to minimize your own mistakes? Brothers and sisters, don't do it. Everything that happens is indeed part of God's plan. But the minute you pin your failings on Him, or the minute you accuse Him of trying to harm you, you have left behind both biblical truth and common sense. If God really had it out for you, would whining about it be smart? And Scripture tells us that God afflicts His children for their profit. Every little piece of suffering is at the same time an invitation from God with the words "Trust Me" written on it. If through your own folly you're lost in the desert, that's a good opportunity for you to trust God. If through your own disastrous choices you're divorced and homeless, that's a good opportunity for you to trust God. But that's exactly what Jehoram didn't do.

2. God's Verdict on the Situation, vv. 11-19

a) Elisha Is a True Prophet, vv. 11-12

Instead, it was up to Jehoshaphat to suggest that maybe God had an opinion on the situation. Yet even he didn't know whether a prophet was to be found with the army. It is only an Israelite officer who happens to know that Elisha is with the army.

Did you get that? None of these three kings had taken the trouble to find out whether prophetic advice would be available for this campaign. Even in pagan areas, court prophets were taken for granted. Ancient leaders did very few momentous things without consulting the oracles to discover whether the day was auspicious or not. Yet here the three kings might have been totally prophet-less, for all the knowledge they had of whether a prophet was among them.

Notice also how Elisha is further confirmed as God's man and Elijah's legitimate successor. We saw last Sunday several ways in which the text highlighted Elisha's legitimacy. Here we see another testimony from witnesses: Jehoshaphat acknowledges him to be a true prophet, and the three kings go to him. They don't summon him into their presence; they go find him. This tells us that even kings need to seek God's word, and that the prophet was in some sense higher than the king. Without God's word, these kings were lost. They were afraid of losing a whole bunch of animals, and maybe their entire armies.

Is the word of God important enough for you to be willing to go seek it out? Or are you too important to go to church, too wise to read the Bible, too busy to take time to figure out what God thinks? This campaign was started without reference to the word of God, and it's on the brink of disaster. Truly, God's word is our only hope!

b) God's Word Must Never be Taken for Granted, vv. 13-14

Yet Elisha is extremely harsh and negative. First he throws the idolatry of Jehoram's parents in his face (as if the man could help it!) and then says that he would not even deign to acknowledge Jehoram's presence without Jehoshaphat. Wow! These are some harsh words. We like say that if the White House calls, you answer the phone. But here Elisha says he could be in the same room

with the king all day, and that he (Elisha) would happily pretend all day that the king of Israel wasn't even there.

This kind of thing stings. I know, because my ex-girlfriend still does it to me and my mother, even though I broke up with her nearly 5 years ago.

Why would Elisha say such a thing? Had he not had sensitivity training? Brothers and sisters, the answer is that Jehoram didn't deserve the word of God. It was not a given. Its presence was not something to be assumed. If you refuse to obey God's word, you simply cannot count on its being available to you when you really need it. *Don't take the word of God for granted!*

How might you and I do that in 21st-century America? For one thing, we can let our thoughts wander during church. Doesn't that take the word for granted? "I can always tune back in when I hear something interesting. But I've heard all this stuff before and I'll hear it all again next week." If you think that, then you're by definition taking God's word for granted. You're presuming on its continued presence in your life. Same thing if you let your eyes skim over the page during your daily Bible reading, but don't take the time to think about what you just read and what it might mean. Or in parenting, you might assume that since you're a Christian and you read the Bible then your children will automatically absorb the word and live in light of it. That too is taking the word for granted!

Elisha was so rude to make a point: If you habitually, routinely ignore God's word, then it may not be there for you in a crisis. If you only go to God to hear what He has to say when times are really bad, then He may refuse to tell you anything. In short, stop presuming on God's word to you!

Notice, too, why Elisha was willing to address the king of Israel. It was because of Jehoshaphat. Only because David's descendant was there would God's word be given to Jehoram. The same holds true today. You and I don't deserve the blessing of having God's word. We are only given it for the sake of Jesus Christ, who stands beside us in the presence of God. I don't deserve God's word. You don't deserve God's word. We don't deserve any of His blessings! But if you are in Christ, then God gives them to you anyway.

c) Israel Will be Given Water, vv. 15-17

Notice the two blessings promised here. First, God will supply water — not by natural means of a rainstorm, but simply by filling the dry riverbed. Presumably the water would flow in from elsewhere, but the point is that God will supply the water just when His people need it.

d) Israel Will be Given Victory, vv. 18-19

On top of that, God promises to give victory. He describes in detail what the Israel-led coalition will do, and how it will hurt Moab. Badly. Do you see how our God works? Not only does He answer the complaint; He goes far above and beyond. He actually says that simply to provide water would be too easy. Simply watering a whole army in the desert isn't majestic enough for Him. He will also deliver the Moabites into Israel's hand. What a glorious promise! Isn't that vintage Yahweh? His generosity should stun you.

C. The War Fought, vv. 20-26

With this favorable oracle, the war finally comes to pass.

1. God Keeps His Promise of Water, v. 20

First of all, we see that God keeps His promise of water. In fact, He supplies it so abundantly in an area that even native Moabites thought would be dry that they mistake the water reflecting the sunrise for blood. So God's people are given water, and that same gift leads them on to victory!

2. God Keeps His Promise of Victory, vv. 21-26

The Moabites think that the camp of Israel is ripe for plundering; unprepared, they run into fresh Israelite warriors. The rout is dramatic, and it gives Israel time to do exactly what Elisha said they would do. Victory is very close. The king of Moab makes a last-ditch effort to break through Israelite lines at their weak point, where the vassal king of Edom is in charge. He fails.

D. The War Abandoned, v. 27

Yet Mesha has one last trick up his sleeve. He appeals to his gods the best way he knows how — by sacrificing his son, the crown prince, on the city wall right in front of everyone. Either Israel was so angry that they went home, or Moab was so angry that they totally routed Israel. The text could go either way. Personally, I think it most likely that Moab was so upset and fought so fiercely that Israel realized that the wool of one hundred thousand sheep wasn't worth it. They went home.

And so a promising war that looked like a slam-dunk victory for Israel turned out to be only a partial victory at best. The end of the chapter meshes with the beginning. Partial obedience leads to the "blessing" of partial victory. If you don't want to submit to God fully, don't expect Him to bless you fully!

III. Application

So what do we take away from this?

A. If You Want God's Blessing, Seek to Obey Him Completely!

First of all, we should invert the main thing this chapter teaches. Put positively, it tells us that if you want what the U.S. dollar claims — i.e., that God favor your undertakings — then you need to submit to Him 100%. As much as you possibly can, bow to His claims. Obey His laws. Do His commandments.

B. Don't Make Peace with the Wicked!

Second, we learn from this chapter once again not to make peace with the wicked. When you see someone wicked, don't seek that person's goal. Don't adopt the wicked's outlook on life, their values, their perspectives. We talked about this a couple of weeks ago as Jehoshaphat's folly. He made peace with Ahaziah and now with his brother Jehoram. That led him twice into wars that weren't his. He and his nation suffered because of his folly.

How might you support the wicked and tell them you approve of what they're doing? One example is giving money to organizations that promote ungodliness. Don't donate to "charities" that engage in abortion. Another example is to show up for ungodly activities. Don't go to concerts where the performers sing about breaking God's law and defying His standards.

Don't go to alleged "weddings" where two people of the same sex are attempting to parody God's design for marriage. To go is to be like Jehoshaphat and lend the assistance of your presence to wicked people doing something wicked, Indeed, it's to be worse than Jehoshaphat. Jehoram had some viable reasons to attack Moab — but by definition, no one can have any viable reasons to marry anyone other than a person of the opposite sex. Finally, don't join organizations that have a stated goal incompatible with Christ's kingdom. Things like freemasonry and the Nation of Islam come to mind. To join or financially support these kinds of causes is to at best obey partially and therefore, at the end of the day, to miss out on the blessing of communion with God.

C. Stick By David's Son

Finally, our chapter tells us to stick by David's Son. The only reason Elisha gave Jehoram the time of day was that Jehoshaphat was with him. Every blessing and benefit that you get from God ultimately comes only in and through Christ. He is generous, like His Father. He is jealous, like His Father. And He promises to save to the uttermost everyone who seeks to come to God through Him. Won't you seek Him? He promises that you will find Him. Don't seek Him halfheartedly and only find part of his blessing. Seek Him wholeheartedly, and find the whole Christ. He is wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, redemption — and victory. Seek Him, and when you find Him, stay with Him. His total victory will then be yours. Amen.