

The anointing of Hazael

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Date: 01 January 2000

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[0 : 00] Now let's turn back to 2 Kings chapter 8. 2 Kings chapter 8. And as we continue with the life story of God's servant Elisha, we reach verse 7 in this chapter.

And Elisha came to Damascus. And Ben-Hadad, the king of Syria, was sick. And it was told him, saying, the man of God is come hither.

Now when you read that small phrase, Elisha came to Damascus, it would be very tempting to let your imagination run riot.

The reason being that it was from Damascus, the same city, that some years before Elisha had received a very distinguished visitor. None other than the commander-in-chief of the Syrian army, Naaman.

Naaman, we know, was a leper. There was no hope for him in Syria. But he heard that in Israel, there was a man of God who could do great things.

[1 : 11] And so Naaman, with all his mighty train, and all his precious presents that he was to offer to Elisha, he came to the land of Israel. And we know the story. We know how Elisha told him to dip in the river Jordan.

And when he did so seven times, his flesh came again as the flesh of a little child. But that wasn't all. There was not only an outward change in Naaman, there was an inner change.

And the narrative shows us that Naaman came to be a worshipper of the living God. He was not only cleansed in body, but cleansed in soul.

He came to faith in the true and the living God. And Naaman went back to Syria, back to this very city of Damascus. The years have passed.

There have been further invasions of Syria into the territory of Israel. And it's rather striking that you don't read of Naaman on the previous occasion, for example, when Ben-Hadad and Persson headed the Syrian army.

[2 : 15] And you wonder what happened in Syria. Was Naaman dead? Had Naaman retired from his post? Or had Naaman, now a worshipper of the true God, managed to persuade his royal master that he should not lead any more armies into Israel, where he had found recovery of body and of soul?

We don't know. That's why I say the temptation is to let your imagination run riot. You find Elisha coming into Damascus. And if Naaman is still alive, we know that he is still a child of God.

And perhaps there in his own home, perhaps he has been able to witness to his wife and children and servants. And perhaps they have there, in that home in Damascus, a meeting place, a church of the living God.

And what about the little Hebrew girl who had told Naaman that there was a prophet in Israel? When he came home, out of gratitude, did he perhaps give her her freedom? Did he allow her to return to the land of her fathers?

Or did the little girl, when she realized that Naaman was not only her loved master, but now also a brother in God, did the little girl say, as slaves often said in Israel, I love my master.

[3 : 39] I will not go out free. And was there perhaps the worship in that pagan land of the living God? Before Christ came, but still through Christ, was it being held there in Damascus?

And could it be that when Elisha went to Damascus, that he went to that home, and he was able to bring to that worshiping company of people a message from God?

We don't know. Maybe it was so. We can be sure that the Spirit of God was at work there in Damascus, as elsewhere. But we've got to keep to the facts as we have them here.

And the facts tell us that Elisha went to Damascus. Now it wasn't a very safe thing for Elisha to do, because Ben-Hadad was king of Syria. And it wasn't so long ago that Ben-Hadad had gone into

Israel and had been furious at the ministry of Elisha, the man of God.

For Elisha, guided by the Holy Spirit, had told the king of Israel of all the ambushes and all the plans that the Syrian king had. And time after time, Israel was delivered out of the hand of the Syrians.

[4 : 48] And when Ben-Hadad knew this, his anger knew no bounds. And you remember how he sent a battalion of soldiers there to the city of Dothan, that he might take Elisha alive.

And then, no doubt, after having humiliated him, put him to an ignominious death. So it wasn't very safe for Elisha to go to Damascus. If Ben-Hadad, not so long ago, in Israel, had tried to capture him and put him to death, what of Syria?

There on home territory, isn't he even more likely to do it? Isn't Elisha taking his very life in his hands when he penetrates into the enemy territory of Damascus?

Well, indeed he was. But you see, there was a big difference. And the difference lay in Ben-Hadad and his condition. For no longer do you have the proud monarch strutting throughout the ancient world, confident that none can oppose his will.

What you have is Ben-Hadad flat on his back. Ben-Hadad sick unto death. And he's a man now who has to face reality. Oh, it was all very well before to live in the fantasy world of human conquest, imagining that by what he did he could stamp his will on the world.

[6 : 10] But now he's face to face with things as they are. He's face to face with his own frailty. He's face to face with the fact that his life must draw to its end and it's going to be very soon and he must meet his maker and Ben-Hadad is afraid to die.

And that changes your perspective. It changes all our view of things when we are brought in our weakness and in what may be and what is presented to us perhaps as a terminal illness or maybe just old age and the knowledge that there isn't long to go.

When we're brought to that position don't we see things differently? We certainly ought to. It should change our whole view of life and of death and of eternity.

And it certainly did with Ben-Hadad. Oh he's not going to put Elisha in prison now. He wants to hear a word from God. Perhaps some of you some months back heard the report on the news of the funeral service of the famous television personality Donny B. McLeod.

And if you did you may have heard an extract read from a letter that he wrote while he was in hospital in Aberdeen. He was taken in for cancer treatment.

[7 : 28] The condition was serious but as it happens it was a successful operation and he died shortly afterwards of a heart attack. But while he was there in hospital without any coercion or pressure he wrote a letter that he wanted people to know about.

And the letter or part of it was quoted at that service and it fits in perfectly with what Ben-Hadad must have felt. as he too lay near the gates of death.

Let me just read a sentence or two. Donny B. McLeod wrote this I don't expect to die under the surgeon's knife but I would be a clod if I didn't give the possibility some thought.

Nobody who passes through the valley of the shadow of death comes out at the other end unchanged. I have changed. My priorities are now very different.

I realize that so much of what I thought important is mere dross. Every day and night I have been here I have prayed to God for the strength to face whatever lies ahead.

[8 : 34] I am afraid like a child in the dark shivering in the dark but I am warmed by my faith in God the love of my family and the care and dedication of the staff.

So here is a man ready to admit what many of us perhaps ought to admit but won't that as death draws near he is afraid and there is only one way to look and Ben-Hadad is looking that way no longer is he the proud ruler he is a man trembling on the edge of eternity and he sends to Elisha and he says Elisha have you got anything any hope any message for a man who is afraid to die any word for a man who is on the brink of the valley of the shadow and wants to know which way to go and may I say that as we look at Ben-Hadad and as we look at the man I've quoted Donnie B. McLeod or many another may I say this don't wait don't wait till then don't wait till you're trembling on the brink now the Lord is offering assurance now he offers a light through the valley of the shadow and he offers it through Christ who died and rose again that those who are in him might not be afraid and when that day comes won't have to cry like Ben-Hadad and say is there any hope is there a message

I'm so afraid but will be able to say I am not afraid yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for thou art with me but let's leave Ben-Hadad let's look at Elisha

and the work that Elisha had to do when he went there to Damascus and there are several things that are very important lessons for us to learn through Elisha's actions that day and the days that followed and the first is this you see in Elisha here the continuity of the Lord's work God's work going on and on and on unbroken and victorious now long before God had commissioned Elijah to do this work that's why I read way back in 1st Kings many years before God had said to Elijah choose Elisha anoint him as prophet anoint Hazael as king of Syria anoint Jehu as king of Israel well the first had happened

Elisha was now the prophet of God but nothing had happened about the other two and Elijah had gone and you might be tempted to say well what happened was Elijah disobedient he didn't anoint these two men to be kings as he had been told to do or had God forgotten had God's plan somehow come unstuck now that doesn't happen with God God's work continues God is a sovereign Lord who decrees what is to come to pass according to his own glory and fulfills it it may not happen immediately it may not happen through the instruments that we think it should happen it may not happen when we feel it ought to take place but God's work goes on and he does not have to make contingency plans and it was all in the purpose of God that although Elijah had gone had left this earthly scene there was another man of God and he was to take up the task and now many many years later you find Elisha doing what Elijah had not done but it is still part of the plan and the purpose of God because there is an unbroken link in the work and in the purpose of God there is Elijah he disappears but Elisha takes up the challenge you might be tempted to say well the line broke didn't it when Elisha servant Gehazi out of envy and jealousy and covetousness lost his place and there was no other successor oh the line didn't break it didn't follow the line the way that we might have thought the servant of God who should have stood in Elisha's shoes certainly he failed but as God said to Elijah his ministry his work was carrying on

I have 7,000 he says who have not bowed the knee to Baal you won't find it perhaps in the prophet's home you won't find it in the school of the prophets or in the palace of the kings but go to the humble homes of Israel go to the homes of the peasants and the workmen and go to the homes of humble priests who are not seeking their own ends and there you'll find the presence of God and the work of God and so it goes on Israel is bashed and battered in many ways goes into exile humiliated and disgraced but the work of God goes on and God maintains his cause and God brings back his people and then as the centuries pass and Israel is finally shattered as a nation for many many centuries still the work of God goes on and God's people are there and you find them in a humble home in Nazareth there is the cause of God continuing the continuity of his work he has been preparing for this moment

[14 : 01] God is not defeated God is not put out by our mistakes or by the doings of the rulers of this world the continuity of the work of God it must have seemed or it could have seemed let me put it that way when the last of the apostles died John in exile in Patmos and then it seems restored to his people but as a very old man he eventually died must have seemed to many in the church well how are things going to go there's nobody left who actually saw the son of God in the flesh it must be different we can't go on oh but it didn't work out like that because God's work did go on and the church even when they lost the last of the eyewitnesses became stronger and greater and the work of God prospered for God's work continues in God's way and to God's glory even when it seems at its very lowest depths there's a very striking interview in the history of the church that you may perhaps have heard about or read about on one occasion in the days of the reformation there in the land of France

God was beginning to work and he began to work among people in the established church the Roman Catholic church and here and there there were priests and other humble people teachers in the universities as well who were being touched by the spirit of God and among them there was a man a very famous learned man called Jacques Lefebvre and for many years there in Paris in the University of Paris under the shadow of the Inquisition there this man taught justification by faith and there were those who heard and believed in Christ and the years passed Luther arose the church was split the reformation took place and Lefebvre never left the Roman Catholic church he stayed in it to his dying day but he was a man of God and then God raised up in France other witnesses and among them a young man a young lawyer called John Calvin and John Calvin was a gifted man whom God used well there were there was persecution in Paris the funeral pyres were lit there and many of God's children were burnt to death but Calvin fled he was warned and was able to flee because God had worked for him to do and on his way south he paid a visit to this old man

Lefebvre he was an old man couldn't really get out anymore pretty decrepit but there he was for many years he had preached justification by faith although he had never left the Roman church and the two of them met the only time and you have Lefebvre Grant giving his blessing to young Calvin and saying you have done the right thing you have come out and stood out against the church that I stayed in for the truth of God may God bless you young man and may God use you and God's work went on the chain unbroken and still it is today well we see the continuity of the Lord's work as Elisha takes up the task left unfinished by Elijah but you also see here the complexity of the Lord's purposes now in one sense God's purposes are not complex because God has a very straightforward plan his plan is that good will triumph and evil will be conquered that's what God's doing and as this world continues he has kept it going only out of his long suffering and his mercy to give the generations opportunity after opportunity to repent and also for the ingathering of his elect people bought through

Jesus Christ that's a very straightforward and a clear purpose but when you and I look at God's purposes they're very complex indeed they seem very confused it must have seemed so confusing to Elisha and to others what was happening here God says to Elisha go to Syria and anoint Hazael king over Syria well Hazael was a second in command in the land of Syria or so it seems but he was already forming plans in his mind he saw that Ben-Hadad was getting on in years that he was getting ill and Hazael had dreams of grandeur and he had already formed the idea somehow of assassinating King Ben-Hadad and taking his place no one knew about it just in Hazael's mind and so he goes to Elisha sent by his master with the message will my royal master Ben-Hadad recover of his illness he gets there to Elisha and Elisha gives him this very strange message he says to him there in verse 10 go say to Ben-Hadad you will certainly or you may certainly recover but the Lord has shown me that he will die now isn't that strange he's going to live but he's going to die totally contradictory confusing complex what does it mean well of course

Ben-Hadad knew perfectly well sorry Hazael knew perfectly well what it meant Elisha looked at him stared at him kept staring at him and it tells us that Hazael became ashamed he couldn't face the glance or the gaze of Elisha because he knew that Elisha had found him out he knew that the man of God had penetrated to his dark secret that he was about to murder his own master it wasn't through his illness it was through the hand raised against him by his own servant that Ben-Hadad would die and then you have as you go through this dialogue you have Hazael's response now our version here the Bible the translation we have unfortunately does not give the right idea it says in Hazael's words what is thy servant a dog that he should do this great thing and that would give the idea of a tender conscience that Hazael is saying oh I couldn't I couldn't murder people set their strongholds and fire slay their young men dash their children

[20 : 36] I couldn't do that do you think I'm a dog that I would do such terrible things but that's not what Hazael's saying at all Hazael is saying he's looking at this and saying that's a tremendous thing I don't know if I'm up to it I don't know if I'm capable of doing such a great thing let me give you for example the NIV translation how could your servant a mere dog accomplish such a feat that's a marvelous thing to be able to kill so many Israelites there was no tender conscience there there was just the feeling that he wasn't up to it and so Elisha tells him that although he will be king yet it is through his own evil intents and purposes and yet and here's the complexity of it it's God who's overruling it and when you read the next chapter and you see Jehu being made king over Israel we just haven't time to enter into all the details of who Jehu was in some ways he was better than Hazael he knew that God had judgment to perform on the house of Ahab for their wickedness and he was aware that he was an instrument of God you can read all that in chapter 9 but again he was a man of great cruelty a man who went about his exercising God's judgment with gusto according to the flesh in order to please his own lusts and his own desires and yet here is the holy God anointing these men in order to carry out his holy tasks there's the confusion for us there's the complexity for us but you know the scriptures teach this and teach it very clearly it's the same lesson the children were getting with regard to

God's providence his holy wise and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions even those who are evil Habakkuk read the prophecy of Habakkuk you find the same thing he says God how can you permit such injustice and oppression and when God says well I'll put an end to it and I'll use the Babylonians Habakkuk is even more flummoxed and he says but the Babylonians they're the most wicked people who've ever lived how can you who are righteous of pure eyes and to behold iniquity how can you actually use these wicked men to effect your

purposes but that's what God does because God overruling in his providence and wisdom is not touched or tainted by human sin and yet he is able to use it for his own glory now this is put very succinctly in our Westminster confession of faith just one sentence that tells us sums up this profound biblical teaching of the providence of God God controls even sin for and I quote his own holy ends yet so as the sinfulness thereof proceeds only from the creatures and not from God who being most holy and righteous neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin you and I we cannot unravel all the purposes of God but they're still holy and still wise and still good and still effecting his great purposes let me just give one example in the history of well I was going to say of our own nation but it was of England before the union God was working at the time of the reformation as I've been said as I've said in the hearts of men and women in England the seed of the word of God was taking root and there were many who were coming to faith but still there was the oppression of the ancient regime the oppression of the pope and so on so how did God bring liberty to England and here's a very strange thing he used King Henry VIII who was a cruel tyrant who was an obnoxious kind of person and yet

God used him it was he who broke with Rome it was he who said the pope will have no more sway in England it was he who said let the people read the word of God and gave a command that in every church in England there should be a copy of the scriptures how amazing a wicked man wicked in his personal life wicked in his dealings with the people of his nation and yet God used them there is the complexity of God's purposes and although we may not understand let us accept and rejoice that he does all things well and finally as we sum up this incident we have the continuity of the Lord's work we have the complexity of the Lord's purposes we have also the certainty of the Lord's judgment now if we were to read the whole of chapter 9 it would be grim reading indeed there is a great deal of judgment that is slaughter now why well the reason is given to us just some chapters back in fact as mentioned again in chapter 9 and it is this

Ahab the wicked king who lived in Elijah's day Ahab sold himself to do evil in the sight of the Lord and God pronounced judgment on Ahab and all his house who were along with him agreeing with him in all the evil that he did and especially were told out of all the evil things that Ahab did there was the murder of Naboth Naboth an honest hard working farmer in the land of Israel who refused to sell his vineyard to the king and paid for it with his death well God said the blood of Naboth is calling out for vengeance and so God's judgment rested upon the house of Ahab justly so but the house of Ahab they were in power Joram the son of Ahab was king and so he and his brothers and their wicked mother Jezebel the wickedest of them all they gloated there in

[26 : 39] Israel who is Elijah who is Elisha let them pronounce their threats they can do nothing to us but God's judgment is sure and certain for God is a God who hates sin God is a God who will not suffer the wicked to go unpunished though hand join in hand and the day came and you have it here when Jehu anointed by Elisha or by another of the prophets sent by Elisha when Jehu ascends the throne and God's judgment is carried out now you might feel as you turn to the New Testament that it's all different you don't have the same kind of judgment but you do and that's the whole point of Calvary God is a God of righteous judgment who hates sin God is a God who would not say to Ahab and to his family oh it doesn't really matter let's forget about Naboth doesn't matter that you murdered him God is a God of righteousness and of holiness who cannot who cannot condone sin so what happens at Calvary oh the eternal son of God he ascends the cross and that same judgment that fell upon Ahab and his family because of sin it fell upon

Jesus Christ for he there bore in his own body the judgment of God upon the sins of all his people and those who are in Christ Jesus who by faith come to him they are protected from this judgment of God but if they're not in Christ then the judgment can only fall on them for God is a God of holiness even as he is a God of mercy and of grace they're part of the same pattern of the same God oh what an encouragement to come to Christ and to receive through him the averting of God's wrath as we sang in Psalm 85 at the beginning and to know that in him we can face death without the fear of judgment with the assurance that God's anger is taken away and he comforts us my dear friends as we think of these things and of the certainty of the Lord's judgment let's not do what Jezebel and Ahab's family did let's not try and set

God's clock by ours he works in his way and in his time there is no other way and at the same time he offers his mercy in Christ may he add his blessing and he goes to entrap and also and he goes to the another goal to rape