

# INTRODUCTION

## PREACHING POLITICS IN 2 KINGS

I DIDN'T REALIZE IT on the day my wife and I were installed as co-pastors in Bakersfield, California, but the cross hanging on the back wall of our sanctuary would eventually come to be one of my favorite preaching tools. It was strange, I thought, to have a symbol like that so invisibly placed in the building. High above the heads of the congregation, inconspicuously centered above the media booth where no one would think to look, hung a relatively small symbol of the crucifixion built into the wall. Even in its obscurity, it was a powerful tool that went to work on me as I faced my people from week to week. It served to remind me that whatever I was going to proclaim to them needed to line up with the cross. It reminded me that the pattern of the cross was what marked the lives of the people gathered together in that building. It reminded me of how strange a group we were, gathering together week after week to do and hear and sing and see things that were all meant to make us more likely to live in the way of that cross hanging on the back wall.

Our church also had a large, outdoor cross that loomed over our building. It towered over what was already a tall, A-frame sanctuary, anchored in the middle of the patio outside the main entrance, piercing the sky through an opening cut into the patio roof. The cross beam was off kilter, rotated a few degrees diagonally. A long-time member told me that the wind had blown it sideways years ago, and it cost the church eight hundred dollars to have it straightened out—only to have the wind blow it askew again. I liked it crooked anyway. No cross should look perfect. (Especially for eight hundred dollars.) That cross signaled to the neighborhood that the people who gathered under it were a people who were gathered into its way.

The longer we served that wonderful congregation, the more those symbols worked on me. They came to shape the kind of preaching I did and the kind of pastoral ministry I offered there. The more they worked on me, the more I realized that I wasn't called to do anything other than to guide those people to be more like the One who went to the cross. His way is strange because it includes things like a cross, which isn't exactly a symbol of victory. But the sacrificial, self-giving nature of what was enacted on the cross was a living embodiment of divine love that would be willing to die. It was real life and death. It touches all aspects of life and isn't afraid to call us to death. Everything about our lives gets measured according to that cross if we are following Jesus because everything about his life was consistent with giving himself away on that brutal device. The cross is a tool that goes to work on us, and if we let it, it ends up making us more faithful to the strange way that Jesus did things.

I'm not sure how else to preach politics other than under the cross. It has its way with politics. It offers its own politics. It calls the folks who gather together in its shadow to let *it* set the political agenda, to crucify any agendas the church may have on its own. And it's incredibly different from all the other political options out there.

This short collection of sermon outlines is offered in the shadow of the cross. When it came time to tackle the tricky and difficult topic of political life in my preaching ministry, I realized that most of it was fairly simple: The way of Jesus offers us a way of salvation that is a way unto itself. The trick is that it doesn't sync well with other systems, and that's what's so challenging and beautiful about it. That often means that when our political life is claimed by a system that isn't seeking to follow Jesus, it results in a lot of confusion for the people we are called to shepherd. Often, when our people give themselves over to ways of imagining political life other than the way of Jesus, their understanding of Jesus begins to become distorted. They try to make Jesus conform to their desired party platform or agenda. But the cross of Christ resists, corrects, and crucifies that approach.

This kind of political vision has deep roots in Jewish tradition. The book of 2 Kings may not seem like the first place you'd want to turn when preaching about political life, but it's a thoroughly political book that is a lot of fun to preach. Its stories are strange—bizarre, even. But the strangeness reminds us of how strange *we* are as God's people.

Second Kings was written to a people living in exile. When this collection of stories from Israel's history—usually passed down orally—were finally organized into this book, it sent a strong signal to a people losing their way politically. That message is: *Don't forget who you are! Resist the temptation to be co-opted by a system that isn't interested in God's salvation. Don't be seduced by political systems that lead you to believe they will give you power. Trust in God's way of doing things. Trust in God's kingdom.*

If you are considering preaching these sermons, I hope you'll hear that passionate cry from the book of 2 Kings. Shawna and I wrote *Kings and Presidents* based on our own sermons precisely because we sensed that God's people are looking a little too longingly at political systems that are out of step with the strange and particular ways of the kingdom Jesus is bringing. Rather than offer no guidance on how our people should engage political life, we wanted to open these stories of our heritage to remind the church that we are a people who engage political life according to a logic of the kingdom, a logic of holiness, a logic of Jesus—a logic of the cross—for the salvation of the world.

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# SERMON 1

TEXT: 2 KINGS 4:1–7

Based on chapter 2 of *Kings and Presidents*,  
“The Upside-Down History of God’s Kingdom” (pp. 43–58)

## ★ STEPPING INTO THE STORY

A woman with two sons is about to be forced to sell them into slavery. She doesn’t have enough money to pay her debts, and her only sons are all the collateral she has left, the only hope she has of financial survival after the death of her husband. In its characteristic way, 2 Kings presents two options: Do things according to the world of kings, or do things according to the world of the kingdom of God.

The world of kings is the one encouraging her to sell her sons. Debts need to be paid, after all, and if one can’t pay, one must lose something of value. This system is what makes the financial world go ’round. This is the way it must be.

But the woman has another, surprising and unseen option—trust herself to the world of the kingdom. Coming to Elisha, a man of God, she asks for help. He asks her what she has, and he does something amazing with it that confounds the economic logic of the world of kings. There will be no retribution, no punishment. The debt will be paid because she places her trust in a different kind of kingdom.

## ★ STEPPING INTO THE KINGDOM

- This story falls on the ears of Israelites living in exile with a distinct message: *Will you sell your sons in order to survive? Or will you trust in the alternative logic of God’s kingdom?*
- The sons in this story will immediately remind the story’s listeners of the sons Israel and Judah, the kingdoms they used to call home. Will they be sold into a foreign kingdom for the sake of surviving? Can God open a way for them to remain distinct?
- Christians are living in a bit of a political exile these days. The political question we face is whether we will be willing to sell our souls for the sake of being able to function within the system of a kingdom that is not the kingdom of Jesus.
- The temptation is to join the logic of a kingdom that is not our own and to abandon who we are as the distinctive people of God for the sake of functioning well in a system that would take our souls into slavery in its system.

- Elisha asks what the mother has. She starts by saying “Nothing—except . . .” The “except” is what Elisha can use in the logic of God’s kingdom. When we as God’s people are asked what we have, it is often very little according to the world of kings. Entrusting it to God’s economy may open a possibility for faithfulness we have not seen previously.
- The oil is enough for the woman and her sons to live faithfully to the world of the kingdom—which is the point. The point is not to be extravagant or even to rebel against the world of kings; the point is to remain faithful to the unique and distinctive way of God’s people among the world of kings.
- This story signals a reminder of Matthew 15, in which Jesus takes what little is offered and produces a feast. Jesus’s fulfillment of the world of the kingdom signals that the people of God can remain distinct without selling out to a system that is not their own. God’s faithfulness will sustain those who opt to remain faithful to the kingdom of God.

# SERMON 2

TEXTS: 2 KINGS 3:4–27; 2 KINGS 4:8–37

Based on chapters 2 and 3 of *Kings and Presidents*,  
“The Upside-Down History of God’s Kingdom” and “Claiming Invisible Political Options”  
(pp. 43–78)

## ★ STEPPING INTO THE STORY

Welcome to one of the great political and military blunders of history. In this saga, the king of Israel, Jehoram (whom 2 Kings identifies as a bad king), gathers several other kings into a coalition in an attempt to capture the wealth of a neighboring kingdom. The plans are laid, the armies assembled, and the kings begin their march.

Shortly, their campaign reaches a breaking point. They are marching through the desert, they have no water, and the armies are going to die of thirst. They summon Elisha, asking why God has brought them into the desert to die. Elisha quickly sees the flaw in their plan: They never asked God whether they should go to war. They simply acted, and are now demanding that God help them now that they’re in trouble. In essence, Elisha’s response is, “God never told you to do this! Why is now the first time you’ve thought to consult God?”

Eventually Elisha tells Jehoram that God will make a way for the armies of Israel to survive, despite his bad leadership. God provides streams in the desert, and they are rescued. Those same streams appear to be blood to the defending army. Thinking the Israelite coalition has turned on each other and killed one another, they charge for the plunder, only to find an Israelite army prepared to do battle. The defending king sees this, offers his son as a sacrifice, and, in one of the more mysterious passages of 2 Kings, we see that “great wrath” falls upon Israel. They turn around, head for home, and return with no more wealth than they set out with. The story ends in futility.

## ★ STEPPING INTO THE KINGDOM

- This story sets up a major comparison between 2 Kings 3 and 2 Kings 4. Chapter 3 tells a story of what happens in the world of kings. Chapter 4 tells several stories of what happens in the world of the kingdom.
- This story is a reminder of the futility of the way the world of kings tends to operate. It begins with a thirst for more wealth, which leads to war, which leads to many deaths—and the aggression nets no profit for Israel.

- It is a classic tale of what happens when the distinct people of God begin to operate according to the logic that is not their own. They end up doing the same things as all the others who join that logic.
- To see the way God's salvation comes—to see the good news—we need to be able to have a vision for how God operates, and God's operation isn't always according to the logic of political rulers (of any party!).
- The comparison between chapters 3 and 4 issues a challenge: Will you, as the distinct people of God, trust yourselves to God's way of doing things in the world? The rest of the world may do things according to the way of kings, and that might look tempting, but you must have a distinct vision if you are going to see God's salvation.
- A large part of what God is doing to redeem the world is to offer the world an example of what it looks like to live as God's people according to God's way of doing things. That distinct people is called the Church, and the best example we have for living in full accordance with God's way is Jesus.
- Jesus challenges the world of kings by offering the world of the kingdom. We have a choice to make: Fall to the temptation of doing things according to the way of kings, or follow Jesus in doing things according to the way of the kingdom.
- Should we choose Jesus's way, prepare to be a different kind of people who offer to the world the hope of redemption, to be a holy people who operate differently, and who have a vision capable of resisting the temptation to align ourselves with kings, rather than the King of kings.

# SERMON 3

TEXT: 2 KINGS 7:3–20

Based on chapter 7 of *Kings and Presidents*,  
“The Sanctified Vision of the Kingdom” (pp. 139–155)

## ★ STEPPING INTO THE STORY

This story begins in the midst of a military siege of Samaria, a city belonging to the people of God. Samaria has been surrounded by an opposing army, and the residents are starving to death inside. Primarily, this is a story about vision—or, lack thereof. It is a story about receiving a sanctified vision.

If you have been reading through 2 Kings up to this point, you know that things in Samaria are dire. Those on the inside are eating whatever they can—and the menu is not appetizing at all. In this story, two men with leprosy decide they have nothing to lose, so they leave the city and approach the camp of the surrounding army, only to find that the army is gone. They have fled (because God caused them to be frightened away), leaving their tents, supplies, and food.

As the two men come back to the starving city, they come bearing news of salvation. They call to the guards on the city walls, who awaken the king, and immediately the king is suspicious. The story takes place at night, when there is no sunlight, highlighting the reality that the king’s vision is impaired. Immediately sensing a trap and unable to see the good news, the king cannot see the good news of God’s salvation in front of his face. He’s been a king for too long. His vision is equipped for the world of kings but doesn’t seem to work very well in the world of the kingdom.

When he relents and sends scouts, he finds that the good news is true, and the salvation God offers that day is extended to the city.

## ★ STEPPING INTO THE KINGDOM

- This story raises the question: What kind of vision do you have? Are you able to see God’s surprising and strange salvation when it comes? Has your vision been dimmed because it is accustomed to the world of kings rather than the world of the kingdom?
- Perhaps the most challenging notion in this story is that the good news is proclaimed by outcasts. It literally comes from outside the city by those who are considered outsiders in Samaria. They are delivering good news that God has prepared, and the king cannot see it. Are we equipped to hear the good news of God delivered by outsiders who are not like us?

- A sanctified vision allows us to see the good news of God's salvation, even when it is coming through unofficial channels. It is a vision that allows us to see the surprising and unexpected way that God is working to save us.
- The challenging idea here is that when our vision is clouded by the world of kings—by the logic of a kingdom other than God's kingdom—we have trouble seeing salvation. Outsiders are more likely to see it than those on the inside if being on the inside has obscured our vision.
- This passage suggests a connection with Jesus's healing of a blind man in Mark 8:22–26. Jesus attempts to heal his vision once, and it doesn't work all the way; he cannot see clearly. On a second attempt, his vision is healed completely. Mark places this healing right next to Peter's declaration of Jesus as the Messiah (8:27–29). While Peter can see clearly enough to affirm that Jesus is the Messiah, his vision is not yet clear enough to see what that means—suffering, sacrifice, and death. Peter rebukes Jesus for suggesting that the Messiah must suffer because his vision is only half healed.
- The question for us is whether we have a vision that has been healed (sanctified) by the strange way God is choosing to save us. God uses outsiders to deliver good news and a suffering Messiah to make the world new. This is the strange and unexpected way God's kingdom works. Will we be able to see clearly according to the world of the kingdom?