

KINGS AND PRESIDENTS

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DEATH IN THE STEW

2 Kings 4:38-41

1. People of the Valley

- 2 Kings 4:1, 44; Exodus 3:14; Revelation 22;
Philippians 2:9-11

2. Know What Day It Is

- 2 Corinthians 6:2; Psalm 121:1-2; Jeremiah 8:11;
Ezekiel 13:10

3. Fix the Stew

- Isaiah 40:31; Habakkuk 2:3; Proverbs 11:11

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Kings and Presidents Death in the Stew'¹ 2 Kings 4:38-41

You know how kids always complain about food, right? Doesn't matter if it's at school, at camp, or even at home, kids like to complain about food; it's never good enough. Well when I was a freshman in college at NNC, some of my friends and I took complaining to a whole new level. Mind you, we had good reason to complain. The food really wasn't good. The food service company was called SAGA, so that's what we called the dining hall. SAGA stood for Stuart Anderson, Gary Anderson – two brothers who owned it, along with restaurants that you might recognize: Stuart Anderson's Black Angus. But whatever contract the school had with SAGA was low budget. For instance, if we had a meal that included white rice, then you could count on the next day's dessert being "tapioca" pudding. But it wasn't really tapioca; it was vanilla pudding with left over white rice in it. On Sundays we'd get roast beef, but it was more like roast shoe-leather. And then by Tuesday we would get what they called "breaded veal," which was really breaded left-over slices of roast beef. One time they even served us "Peanut Butter Soup." Don't even ask. I'll just say it looked like a bad case of stomach flu...so my buddies and I decided to stage a peaceful protest. We dressed in suits, in order to be respectful. We made cardboard signs that said things like, "SAGA gives gas," and "SAGA=Soviet Attempt to Gag America." Then we went down to the local army surplus store and purchased gas masks, and one night at dinner we burst into the cafeteria and marched around looking like this (*picture*). I won't tell you who is who, and my friends have made me swear secrecy. Fortunately for us, there was no such thing as Facebook to permanently record every stupid thing we did!

But some of you might know that feeling these days; you are tired of being force-fed bad stuff that makes you sick to your stomach!

Today we are in the last of our four part sermon series called "Kings and Presidents," a series on being Kingdom people in our world of politics. It's been our prayer that this series has helped you be able to approach the polls with a Kingdom perspective.

I'll remind you one last time that I do not feel it is my responsibility to tell you who to vote for, only to tell you *whom to live for*. And I trust that Jesus Christ – the One you live for – will inform you through his Holy Spirit how you should vote – and vote you should. In "Kings and Presidents," we've tried to gain perspective and direction by looking at examples from the history of God's people, Israel.

First, in part one, we saw Joshua's encounter with his own Commander in Chief – God – right before the Israelites crossed the Jordan River and moved into the Promised Land. God was reasserting his design that Israel would be a different people, and that their actions and their loyalties would be to God alone. The call of the people was to remain faithful to their covenant with God by obeying the commands of the Torah, or the Law.



¹ Much of the influence and content of this message comes from: Timothy R. and Shawna Songer Gaines, *Kings and Presidents* (Kansas City, Beacon Hill Press, 2015), 79-97.

In part two we saw the problems presented when the people of Israel decided to abandon God's design and instead wanted to have a king, like the nations around them. God allowed their choice, but they had to live with the consequences. Israel's desire for a king led to the eventual division of the kingdom and then the exile, as Israel was conquered and taken off into Babylonian captivity.

Then last week in part three we looked at a story during Israel's time of kings that taught us to view politics from a different perspective – a kingdom perspective. We learned that from the life of a Shunammite woman who was able to see life from a set of options that was invisible to those who relied on kings, presidents, and politics. She didn't divide reality into the world of politics and the world of God; she rightly saw that the whole world is God's and that he is at work. She put her hope in God, not in any political connections, and as a result saw a world of limitless opportunity for God to work, not the limited options of politics.

Today we will conclude with another story from that same chapter of 2 Kings. It's actually a very short story, but its location and its intention will teach us a lot about how we want to view politics. We are calling this sermon today, "Death in the Stew," or we could call it "Poison in the Pot." The story takes place after what we read last week about the Shunammite woman. Here's the story:

"Elisha returned to Gilgal and there was a famine in that region. While the company of the prophets was meeting with him, he said to his servant, 'Put on the large pot and cook some stew for these prophets.'

One of them went out into the fields to gather herbs and found a wild vine and picked as many of its gourds as his garment could hold. When he returned, he cut them up into the pot of stew, though no one knew what they were. The stew was poured out for the men, but as they began to eat it, they cried out, 'Man of God, there is death in the pot!' And they could not eat it.

Elisha said, 'Get some flour.' He put it into the pot and said, 'Serve it to the people to eat.' And there was nothing harmful in the pot." (2 Kings 4:38-41, niv)

In order to understand the value of this story for us today, we need to first understand the context of it. In many ways, all of chapter four is like a "story valley." On one side, in chapter three, you have the mountain of a story of the great battle between the team of Israel, Judah, and Edom, against the team of Moab. On the other side, in chapter five, is the mountainous story of Naaman, commander of the army of king Aram, and then goes on to talk about the war between Israel and the Arameans. But chapter four is like a narrative valley between these mountains that talks about those with very little resources or hope, and the weakest in Israelite society. Chapters 3 and 5 are about powerful political rulers, but chapter four is about weak, ordinary people. It is a story about...

1. People of the Valley

There are some interesting signs on our way into and out of chapter four. For instance, both the first and last verses of this chapter contain a reference to the name of God, Yahweh (vs 1, 44). If you are looking in your Bible, you will see that the word "Lord" in those verses is in all capitals. Whenever you see that in your Bible, it means that the original Hebrew language of the text refers to God by his holy, self-given name, which we pronounce "Yahweh." It is the name that God spoke to Moses when Moses asked God in the burning bush what his name was (Exodus 3:14). In our language, we really only have one word for God. But in the Hebrew there are several, and "Yahweh" is the highest and holiest name – so much so that when Jewish scribes

copied the Old Testament they would use a special pen just for writing that name. So the fact that this chapter begins and ends with that name tell us that what is in between is pretty important. It's like a sign that tells us we are about to walk into Yahweh's territory, and then is a sign telling us we are walking out of Yahweh's territory. So it is interesting because in Yahweh's territory, things are different. History is not written by the politically powerful up on the mountain tops, but by those who are faithful to him in the valley. In Yahweh's territory, the poor find that God is enough, and God uses the weak to be a blessing to the world. This kind of story valley would have been welcome news to the Israelites. At the time that Kings was written, the people were living in exile without a country, under the oppressive rule of a different political power than their own. They were living in the valley, and they were being reminded that where they were is where God is, if they would be faithful to him even in their exile.

So one of the valley stories is about Elisha doing some cooking. It seems strange and obscure, but it will teach us about political engagement. And I think, when we consider our political climate today, we can all relate to the feeling that there is "death in the pot!"

In the story, Elisha returned to Gilgal where there was a sort of school for prophets. This was during a famine and they were hungry, so Elisha tells them to make a stew. Since it was a famine, they had to get creative. But Elisha's assistant – probably Gehazi that we met last week – gathered up some gourds for the stew that were poisonous and terrible tasting. When the students tasted it, it was like they created cardboard signs, donned gasmasks, and began to protest: "Death in the Pot! Poison in the Stew!"

So Elisha had some options. He could have thrown out the whole pot of stew because it was just too contaminated. But that would have wasted the good ingredients, which they could hardly afford to do during a famine. He could have tried to strain out the bad stuff, but it was probably something called colocynth, which grew around that area at that time and still grows around the Dead Sea today. When they are cut open, the pulp dries into a powder. It's used as a kind of medicine like castor oil. It has a very bitter taste and if too much is eaten it is fatal. The pulp would have spread throughout the stew, so there would not have been any way to strain it out. Elisha's response sheds some light on how we as God's people can respond to politics. Elisha tells them to add some flour, or meal, to the pot. They did, and it became edible. Elisha wasn't some kind of master chef or chemist; both the story and its location indicate that this was a miraculous event.

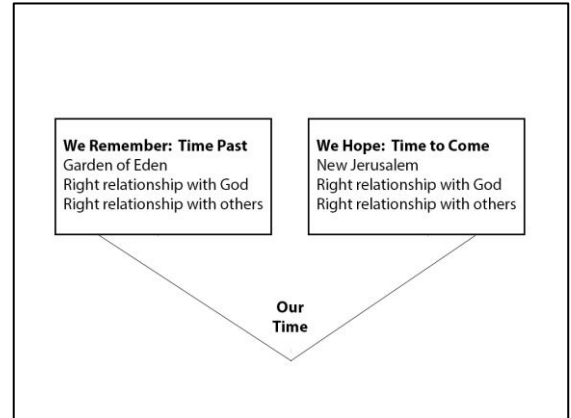
Since this is a story of the valley, it intends to contrast it with the stories of the mountains and political power.

Let me explain how this can apply to us today as followers of Christ (I might say this: if you cannot say that you are a follower of Christ, I pray you will find in what you hear today a more hopeful way of life than you are living right now!).

Remember that we said last week that all of creation and all of history is God's. All of history from the beginning to its culmination, is the story of God's love and salvation of us. As Christians, we currently live in what theologians call "The time between times." What they mean is that on either side of where we are living are events that help us remain hopeful and faithful as Christians. It reminds us of where we started and where we are going.

When we talk about where we've come from, we go back to the beginning of creation, what God originally created and intended for us. At that time everything was just the way God wanted it. There was a deep and intimate fellowship between God and all of creation. Creation lived at peace with itself; there was no violence, the animals were subservient to humans, and humans were in a personal and intimate relationship with God. We are even given the image of God walking in the garden. There was no death. That's the time we *remember*.

The time we *hope for* is the time of God’s recreating. It’s the time that we talked about in our sermon series last summer through the book of Revelation; it is the time when God will once again be all in all, and all of creation will be restored and made new. If you remember, Revelation 22 painted an incredible picture description of what that will be like. The curse against humanity because of our sinfulness, and the resulting dis-ease of sin that is in the molecular structure of this creation, will be entirely removed and God will be so pervasive that his loving presence will be the light of the entire city. In that day, Creator and creation will be in right relationship with each other and all will be as it should be, and as it was intended to be in the beginning. The Garden is the memory of our past, and the New Jerusalem is the hope of our future. We are caught between those times; we are people of the valley: we remember the time past in the Garden of Eden when we were in a right relationship with God and with others, and we hope in the time to come in the New Jerusalem when we will once again be in a full, complete and right relationship with God and with others. We are not living in Eden anymore, but we are not yet in the New Jerusalem. We remember where we’ve been, who we are and what we were created for, and we look forward to where are going. We live in between times, in the valley.



So you might be tempted to think that we should just wait it out, bide our time, and do our best to survive until that day. But that is not all what our theology is about. We believe in a God who became human flesh and stepped into this time between the times, into this valley where we live. God has not abandoned us to this time between times, but has made his dwelling among us *here*, and his Spirit here empowers us to live faithfully with him and for him in the valley between times. God raised Jesus from the dead and he is now exalted over all creation. Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has overcome the most formidable power and force in the time between times, which was death. Death was not in the garden, and it will not be in the New Jerusalem; death is in the valley. Death is in the pot! But death no longer has power over those who live in the valley and believe in Jesus.

And don’t miss the fact that after Jesus rose from the dead, he ascended into heaven. That wasn’t just a flashy exit or showmanship; the ascension declared something of incredible theological and political value. The political reality in this time between times is that Christ is Lord over all creation. One day his Lordship will be recognized by everyone whether they have believed it or not (Philippians 2:9-11), but he is Lord, *now*. Christ is Lord if Donald Trump gets elected. Christ is Lord if Hillary gets elected. Christ is Lord regardless of who fills the Supreme Court vacancies. Christ is Lord whether or not Bill and Hillary get indicted, the Russians threaten nuclear attack, North Korea goes rogue, or ISIS commits terror on US soil. Christ is Lord of the valley; God rules the mountains on both sides.

So people of God, you’ve got to...

2. Know What Day It Is

Because of what Jesus Christ has done by dying on the cross, being buried, and then rising from the dead and ascending into heaven, and giving us God the Holy Spirit until he returns, because of what Jesus Christ has done for us we must live that reality today. Our calling as people of the valley has everything to do with living now in the full hope of the New Jerusalem. We are called to live out the political realities of the New Jerusalem now, today. The Christian’s hope isn’t

wishful thinking for a brighter future; Christian hope is living now in the full and present reality of God's future. We live in ways that allow God's future to break into our present. Listen to me carefully: what we are talking about is exactly why the Bible says this:

“God says, ‘At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you.’
Indeed, the ‘right time’ is now. Today is the day of salvation.” (2 Corinthians 6:2, nlt)

Today is the day of salvation. And *tomorrow* (if the Lord doesn't return) we will be able to say it is the day of salvation. Every day in the valley is the day of salvation. So we are expected to live *today* in salvation, and declare God's salvation for everyone else in the valley who is putting their hope in their politician getting into power. Everyone who keeps thinking that a mountain of political power is the answer needs to realize they will never find their hope there. That's why the Bible says:

“I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.” (Psalm 121:1-2, niv)

Our help does not come from political mountains; it comes from the maker of the mountains, the Lord himself, today. We live out salvation *today*.

One author says, “Think...for a moment about the way life happens in the church. Every week, the body of Christ gathers to do some strange political things. We sing together. Worship of God takes priority over anything else that would divide us. We share food every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper. In many congregations, there is a time of ‘passing the peace’ by shaking hands or sharing an embrace. At every turn, Christian worship is life lived according to the patterns of the New Jerusalem. And that begins to make our worship awfully political. It means we are arranging life, sharing resources, and forming relationships according to a particular political vision. That vision, of course, is that Christ has been exalted over creation, has overcome death, and has made a way for us to be reconciled to one another. It looks, in many ways, like life in the New Jerusalem...We become God's hopeful people of the valley...people who live with every confidence that God is writing salvation history in the valley, rather than on the mountaintop. And those people recognize that if the valley is where God is writing the story, the valley is precisely where they want to be.”²

The problem is that not everyone wants to live in the valley. A lot of people do everything they can to live on the mountaintop, where people strive for political power instead of faithfulness to God. So kings and presidents who get to the mountaintop of political power have a tendency to think it is *their* day. They get to make the rules, get adoration, collect money, and control things. Those who try to get elected to the mountaintop are striving to make it *their* day. And so people in the valley pin their hopes to the candidate that they think will finally put them onto the mountaintop (or *back* onto the mountaintop if their candidate lost the last time). They get their hopes up when their king or their president declares, “This is *my* day; this is *my* time!” The problem is, they forget what day it is, because today is the day of *God's* salvation; today is *not* the day of a president's power. But we get fooled. We start to believe that their particular party platform will usher in a time of peace or prosperity; that their policies will be better than anything their opponent can offer. So the rhetoric begins to divide people, and people become hateful, and they tear down the election signs of their opponent, they start smear campaigns, and everything escalates until, well, until we arrive at where we are today. And we get all caught up in the king or president who wants to declare that today is *their* day. And that king or president doesn't want to submit to any authority higher than his or her own.

² Gaines, *ibid*, 86-87

But *we* – we have seen the mountaintops of God’s salvation story. We’ve been there before and we are headed there again one day. So we must remember that God has given to kings and presidents any authority that they have. They all fall under Christ’s Lordship, whether they admit it or not. We must not believe the candidates when they, as God says....

“They offer superficial treatments for my people's mortal wound. They give assurances of peace when there is no peace.” (Jeremiah 8:11, nlt)

...and...

“These evil prophets deceive my people by saying, 'All is peaceful' when there is no peace at all! It's as if the people have built a flimsy wall, and these prophets are trying to reinforce it by covering it with whitewash!” (Ezekiel 13:10, nlt)

Here’s the great thing: when we live in the valley where *everyday is the day of salvation*, that’s when we begin to...

3. Fix the Stew

Kings and Presidents want to secure *their* day, and impose *their* day as far into the future as they can. People of the Valley bring God’s future into the *now*. And there are some ways that we do that, which can bring healing from death into the stew.

I mentioned earlier that we don’t just sit around waiting for the New Jerusalem. That was only partly true; we don’t sit around, but we do *wait*. The Bible talks a lot about waiting and kind of makes a big deal about it. Because when God tells his people of the valley to wait, it is an *active* waiting. I know that sounds like an oxymoron, but let me explain.

God’s idea of waiting is not passive; there are many things that waiting will do in us and through us. God uses waiting to create things in us, because his priority for valley people is to help them become more like that original in-his-image that he created in us in the Garden, that Christ-likeness that is being perfected in us and will be completed in the New Jerusalem.³ God uses waiting to purify our motives; the longer we wait, the more we have to make sure our priorities and motives are right. It also builds patience in us, which is a valuable virtue to have. So waiting also transforms our character, and it strengthens our dependence on God and our intimacy with him. For those of us who live in the valley, we rely on regular conversations with God through prayer and his Word. So we are encouraged by places in the Bible like that say:

“Those who trust in the Lord will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint.” (Is 40:31, nlt) and, “This vision is for a future time. It describes the end, and it will be fulfilled. If it seems slow in coming, wait patiently, for it will surely take place. It will not be delayed.” (Habakkuk 2:3, nlt)

So waiting changes us. And as we are changed, we have an impact on the world around us. We are expected to engage in the world. Remember, our hope is not wishful thinking. It is living into the coming reality. It is living the reality of what is still coming in the midst of what’s happening right now. We do not withdraw from the present reality; we engage it by bringing God’s Kingdom into our homes and neighborhoods and communities. We are not waiting to be whisked out of the world; we engage the world by living out the kingdom values here and now. We love. We help. We serve. And we engage in political life rather than dismiss it. But we do so with the encouragement that we vote as people of the valley, rather than as people attempting

³ see <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/practical-faith/5-reasons-god-makes-us-wait>

to climb to a particular mountaintop. We vote, we protest, we campaign, we invest, we sacrifice, *but only for the sake of being a people attempting to live out the New Jerusalem here and now.* We don't work to further a candidate, we work to help Kingdom priorities become reality here and now. We never seek to empower a king on a mountaintop, we want to say to the world, "Our God is faithful, and this is what it looks like when we live out that faithfulness." And that won't usually make sense to mountaintop people and presidents.

Let's go back to our story. Remember, when there was death in the pot, Elisha could have thrown everything out and started over. Or he could have tried to strain out the bad stuff. Neither would have helped; the people were starving already so wasting it all would not have been good. But sifting out the bad wouldn't help; it was too filled with it. Some people feel like if we could just get rid of the bad politicians, we'd be okay; we'll just keep the good ones. But the whole system is too filled with the bad ones. Plus, who will decide who the good ones are? We always think our own candidate is the good one, but that doesn't help if everyone feels that way.

The only good solution to the stew is to add some kind of supernatural ingredient that will help the rest of it be good and healthy.

Guess what? Christian, *you are that supernatural ingredient.* You are the flour that gets added to the stew-pot of death. God intends to use you in your home, neighborhood, community and society to make things palatable and nutritious again. That's why the Bible says:

"Through the blessings of the righteous, a city is exalted." (Proverbs 11:11, niv)

You are the solution for the stew! You are not called to escape the world; you are called to engage the world by being poured out into the stew. You have the Holy Spirit – you are the supernatural, miraculous ingredient. You are a person of promise. You are the promise of the restoration of the Garden. You are the promise of the New Jerusalem. You have the promise in you. Live the promise. Live kingdom values in the valley. You are the supernatural ingredient. What you do matters.

Video

Prayer