

# Sermon 52, The Lady Who Saved Christmas, 2 Kings 11:1-3<sup>1</sup>

**Proposition:** God's promise of a Messiah is fully exposed to the accidents and attacks of history — which means that His people's faithfulness to their ordinary callings really does make a difference for His Kingdom.

## Outline

- I. God's Promise in History, vv. 1-3
  - A. Background: The Disastrous Results of Marrying an Unbeliever, v. 1a
  - B. The Mad Fury of Yahweh's Enemies, v. 1
  - C. The Huge Significance of Ordinary Believers, v. 2
  - D. The Subversive Presence of Yahweh's Kingdom, v. 3
- II. The Implications of God's Promise in History
  - A. God Keeps His Promises
  - B. God Plays by the Rules
    1. Human Actions Actually Impact His Kingdom
    2. That Impact Will Be Positive or Negative
    3. No Human Action Is Neutral
    4. Therefore, No Line Can Be Drawn Between Big Things and Little Things, Important Things and Irrelevant Things, in the History of the Kingdom of God!
  - C. Therefore, God's providential government and our faithful obedience and submission to His rule are both maximally operative at every stage of the progress of the Kingdom!

## Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, I want to acknowledge at the outset of tonight's sermon my heavy dependence on Dale Ralph Davis' exposition of these three verses. My four points under point I are taken directly from his book with minor variations in wording but no real variations in substance.

What we see in our text tonight is the historically conditioned promise of God. The promise of the coming of the Messiah through the line of David drives the entire OT. From Genesis to Malachi, the most prominent theme is not just the progress of the fortunes of God's people, but within those people the progress of a specific line that stretches from Abraham to David and then on through the kings of Judah. In tonight's text, that line is almost destroyed.

---

<sup>1</sup> I am, once again, heavily indebted to Dale Ralph Davis (*in loc.*) for the title and the four subpoints under point I. of my outline. I cannot recommend his *2 Kings: The Power and the Fury* (Fearn, Ross-Shire: Christian Focus, 2005) highly enough!

Davis compares the vulnerability of this line of David to a white plastic pipeline running on top of the ground from Nova Scotia to Mississippi — so many miles long and so vulnerable to anyone wanting to attack it. Well, in tonight's story the line is almost cut entirely. Only one scion stands between God's promise and failure. We will see the line reduced to a similar low point at the end of Kings, but tonight, the emphasis falls equally on the threat to David's line and on the swift action of God's ordinary people doing their duty as the way in which the line is preserved. Indeed, what I hope to show you tonight is that God's promise of a Messiah is fully exposed to the accidents and attacks of history — which means that His people's faithfulness to their ordinary callings really does make a difference for His Kingdom.

### **I. God's Promise in History, vv. 1-3**

To begin, then, let us look at the account these few verses give of God's promise in history. We approach this story with the understanding that David's line is the most important line in the world — that on it hangs not merely the destiny of nations but the destiny of creation itself. Yet, in between the slaughter of 42 kinsmen of Ahaziah in the previous chapter and the slaughter of his remaining descendants in v. 1 of this chapter, the line of David has been reduced to the thickness of a nanotube.

#### **A. Background: The Disastrous Results of Marrying an Unbeliever, v. 1a**

Now, before we even look at the text as a whole, let's pause here on the words "Athaliah the mother of Ahaziah." On New Year's Eve Alexa and I held a party at our home. All of Harvest was invited. One of the games we played was a Bible character guessing game, and one of the characters to be guessed was Athaliah. Not a single guest at the party knew who she was, or had even heard of her. Brothers and sisters, that is a ruinous reality. It was, perhaps, at that moment when I first realized the full weight of pastoring Christ's sheep and the incredible inroads Biblical illiteracy has made into the conservative church! Let me put it this way: You can be a Christian without knowing who Athaliah is. But if you don't think it's important to learn who she is, then your idea of what's important is very different than God's. He wants us to know what His word says, and to understand not just the husk but the kernel, not just the bare words but also their significance, their far-reaching implications. Who is Athaliah?

Athaliah is the daughter of Ahab — and possibly of Jezebel too, though it seems very likely that Ahab had other wives. Certainly Athaliah's actions are highly reminiscent of Jezebel.

Years before, Jehoshaphat had made a marriage alliance between his son Jehoram and Ahab's daughter Athaliah. At the time, it looked like a perfectly ordinary piece of foreign policy — an attempt to firm up relations with Israel's nearest neighbor and most natural ally. Yet look at the consequences. Because Jehoshaphat had brought a daughter of Ahab into the line of David, from this point forward the corruption that brought judgment on Israel will also bring judgment on Judah.

Brothers and sisters, *don't marry an unbeliever*. Don't date an unbeliever. Don't form a romantic connection with an unbeliever. And if you have done so, *break it off immediately!* I cannot emphasize this truth too strongly. If you marry an unbeliever, then you can be virtually

certain that the seed of unbelief will taint your children and especially your grandchildren. You will likely lose your children even if you keep your own faith. So beware! The seemingly inconsequential choice to make a marriage which was to all appearance dynastically advantageous had ruinous consequences for Jehoshaphat's descendants. And in the same way, your choice of a marriage partner today will have enormous consequences for your descendants.

### **B. The Mad Fury of Yahweh's Enemies, v. 1**

Notice as well the mad fury of Yahweh's enemies. Brothers and sisters, what kind of woman murders her own grandchildren? Yet that was what Athaliah did. She hated the promised Messiah more than she loved her own seed. One commentator tries to explain her murderous rampage by saying that as long as Ahaziah was the king, or the late king, Athaliah had a powerful position as queen mother — but as soon as one of her grandchildren ascended the throne, *his* mother would become the queen mother, booting Athaliah out. While the historical evidence for such an idea is not totally conclusive, it can certainly explain part of Athaliah's rage. But nonetheless, the only way someone can come to hate his own flesh and blood so much is through settled opposition to Jesus Christ and His Kingdom. The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the LORD and against His Anointed One. It happened in David's time, it happened in Joash's time, and it happens still in our day. People do crazy, stupid, evil things because they hate Jesus Christ. My mother was passing out tracts in downtown Ft. Collins one day. She offered a tract to a woman who angrily refused. Moments later, this woman came driving by Mom's street corner. Rolling down her window, she bellowed obscenities at my mother, slowing almost to a stop before driving away. Mom, shaken, told me, "I had no idea how much people hated Jesus Christ until I witnessed that with my own eyes."

Brothers and sisters, our Lord Jesus is set for a sign that is opposed. He is the most polarizing figure in human history; by His own testimony, whoever is not with Him is against Him. No one can be neutral about the claims of Jesus Christ! But the lesson I want you to take away from this story of a woman butchering her grandbabies is that hatred of Christ is fundamentally and utterly irrational. Don't look for those who hate Christ to behave with common decency. Don't look for those without faith and hope to display the slightest glimmerings of love. Sometimes it happens through the mercy of God. But in general, people who are committed to evil and have an opportunity to strike at God's Kingdom and God's people will take full advantage of that opportunity. We must not be surprised by their behavior. We shouldn't expect unbelievers to be good people! Those who burn Bibles, who slaughter innocent humans, who deny and distort their sexuality into a blasphemy of God's good design, are harming themselves most of all. Yet they keep doing what they're doing because they are motivated by a passionate hatred for Jesus Christ and all that He is.

### **C. The Huge Significance of Ordinary Believers, v. 2**

Yet even in the midst of this slaughter (v. 2 may add the horrifying detail that it took place in the bedroom — think of a grandma loose in the nursery with a long bloody knife!), Jehosheba managed to grab an infant and smuggle him away. Perhaps she claimed him as her own, hiding

him in plain sight. Perhaps he was tucked away in some inner chamber of the Temple for six long years. The text is a bit difficult at this point — though it is attractive to think that one could hide anything from Athaliah 100 yards from her front door inside the Temple of Yahweh because she would rather die than have anything to do with the presence and power of the true God!

But the point here is that it wasn't Benaiah the son of Jehoiada who saved Israel and David's line. It wasn't some impressive military figure or political elite who engineered this salvation. It was an ordinary Israelite. Now, yes, she was of the royal line. Yes, her husband was the high priest and her dad was the king. She was not exactly a peasant running a few goats on a rocky hillside on the Moab border. But this is the only place (here and the in parallel in 2 Chronicles) where she is mentioned. As Davis points out, she doesn't make into the text or the index of John Bright's *History of Israel*. Yet she is the lady who saved Christmas. The line of David was at its most vulnerable, chopped down to a single infant who had his head on the chopping block. But Jehosheba did what she needed to do in order to save this little one.

This text has had profound resonance for Alexa and me as we think about adopting a little one who would otherwise be aborted. Are we special, extra-admirable Christians? No! We are simply, in our own way, trying to imitate Jehosheba. We want to save a little one whose life is endangered. Her contribution made Christmas happen. Her action on this day of massacre is responsible for all the Christmas albums, all the wreaths, all the trees, all the presents, all the songs, all the paintings, all the creches, and all the nativity plays. Her action is responsible for the fact that Jesus Christ came into the world at all!

Brothers and sisters, if you love Jesus Christ tonight, then thank God for Jehosheba. If you wonder about your role in the Kingdom of God and what a little person like you can do in it, thank God for Jehosheba. What can a little person like you do? Only save the Messiah. Only make redemption happen. Only be a piece without which God's entire plan for history would fail. That's all.

But wait! you say. The Messiah has already come. God is no longer making use of that vulnerable white plastic pipeline. His method of operation is no longer embedded in history, is no longer subject to the attack of crazy evil people.

Do you really believe that? If so, then your faith is not the Christian faith. God's work is not and never has been done in the domain of supra-history. Even now, His plan for this world is concentrated in a visible group of people called the church. Even now, those who are working on behalf of the Kingdom of God are an identifiable and even institutional group with real names, faces, addresses, and taxpayer identification numbers. The work and growth of the Kingdom of God depends in a very real sense on what the people in this room do with themselves. Yes, Christ's second coming is not historically conditioned in quite the same way that His first coming was. Yes, we already know that He will conquer. But Jehosheba too already knew that He would conquer. It was precisely because of her faith in God's work in the world, her faith in the Messiah coming through the line of David, that she risked her life to save her baby nephew. Think about it. Your mom (or stepmom) is attempting to wipe out all of her own descendants.

You already have a gigantic target painted on your back. But, at least in Israel, creative dynastic reconstruction through the female line was not practiced. (Interested readers may wish to compare the way William III was brought to the throne of England in 1689.) In order to be proper royal material, you had to be a son's son. So Jehosheba may have been a target, but because she was safely married to a priest whose sons couldn't hold royal power anyway, she was probably relatively safe. But the moment she was caught with a royal son's royal son, she was dead. Can we expect anything less from a woman who calmly slaughtered the rest of her grandchildren?

Brothers and sisters, Jehosheba did the right thing when it could have cost her her life. How often we omit to do the right thing because it might cost a little money, a little time, a little pride! Yet how important for the kingdom of God this action was. Saving this baby wasn't just saving a single life; it was saving the Savior of the world.

#### **D. The Subversive Presence of Yahweh's Kingdom, v. 3**

And so, like the leaven hidden in three measures of flour, Joash grew up, hidden away in the Temple. Athaliah seemed to reign, but God's kingdom, as personified in Joash, was alive but in hiding, waiting for the time to burst out and take over. And guess what: God's Kingdom is alive but in hiding right now too. We do not presently see the dominion of Christ over everything. We don't see everything put under His feet. But He rules over all nonetheless. He is presently seated at the right hand of the Father — not waiting to reign, like Joash, but already reigning. So in moments of stress, of trial, of difficulty and danger, who is your king? To which kingdom do you have allegiance? The kingdom of this world, which seems to be on top? Or the Kingdom of God, which is hidden within the house of God right now but will in due time manifest itself in a coup that makes the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of our God and of His Christ?

When the state commands you to disobey God, for instance by refusing to try to help your same-sex-attracted son obey God's commands with regard to his sexuality, which kingdom will rule you then? When the state tells you that it's perfectly legal to divorce your faithful wife, to murder your innocent child, to live with your girlfriend, will you listen? Or will you obey the commands of Yahweh, whose Kingdom is presently in hiding but is nonetheless the ultimate authority in the world? Answer carefully. Jehosheba lived for and obeyed the Kingdom of God. Her action saved Christmas because it saved Christ. Your life, too, and the choices you make to obey or disobey King Jesus, are of fundamental importance to the progress and growth of the Kingdom of God.

### **II. The Implications of God's Promise in History**

So let's take some time here to tease out the implications of God's promise in history. What does it mean to say that fulfillment of God's promises is and continues to be a matter of historical events taking place in this world under the sun?

#### **A. God Keeps His Promises**

The first ground rule here is that God keeps His promises. When He says that He will provide a King in David's line who will rule forever, He means it. When He says that He will make you

holy, He means it. When He says that He will put all things under Christ's feet, He means it. And when He says that you will receive Heaven, He means it. That (obviously) is not under dispute. If we didn't believe that, we wouldn't be here tonight to worship some promise-breaking God!

### **B. God Plays by the Rules**

Yet the more startling thing this text teaches us is that God plays by the rules! I used this metaphor a few weeks ago in describing God's cosmic plan to gather all things under the head(ing) of Christ, as described in Ephesians 1:9-10. What do I mean by that? Well, obviously this is a metaphor taken from the world of sports. Paul knew in his day that the only athletes who won trophies ("crowns," as they were in his time) were ones who competed according to the rules of the sport. For example, it's easy to imagine a fully automatic compressed-air powered cannon capable of firing one hundred footballs per minute through the goalposts. Yet if a team were to install such a device on the field and actually send 100 footballs through the goalposts, they would not thereby gain 700 points and automatically win the game. Why? Because the rules state that only one particular ball is relevant to the game, and that said ball has to be carried into the end zone or kicked through the goalposts by a human player! We can imagine Tiger Woods dropping golf balls into the little holes on every green at the Augusta National golf course, but he would not thereby win the Masters tournament. No. In order to win, you must play by the rules or you're not playing at all (and therefore not eligible to win). Well, in the same way, when God created this world, He built into certain realities that we can call "rules," "natures," "natural laws," or "the deep magic from the dawn of time." All of these are different ways of referring to the underlying truth that the world has been set up a certain way and runs a certain way, and both the setup and the operation were dictated by God Himself. God created both event causation and agent causation, and He allows and empowers both to operate in this world. God created good and allowed the possibility of evil. God created with Himself in charge but gave man dominion over the earth and allowed man to forfeit some aspects of that dominion to Satan through the consumption of the forbidden fruit. As God governs this world, He respects those realities! When Adam ate the fruit, God didn't hit the "undo" button. He didn't reach down out of the sky and say, "Adam, you just sinned and gave a certain amount of your dominion over to Satan, but since I'm God, I'm calling you on it. Satan, that dominion reverts to me. You may have gotten Adam to eat the apple, but I am not going to let you become prince of the power of the air. Adam, you just gave yourself into the power of sin, but because I'm God, I'm going to undo that. Sin, you can't claim the victory you just scored."

That's not how God works! Brothers and sisters, God not only agreed to be bound by the rules; *He wrote the rules and bound Himself under them!* God is the one who decided that He was going to make a promise to the first humans that another human would come from them and undo the effects of Adam's sin. He decided that that promise would be fully historical, fully subject to the attacks of wicked men, fully exposed to knife-wielding, demon-worshipping grandmothers. It was His idea! He decided that He wouldn't invoke sovereign prerogative to make everything go right immediately. Rather, He chose to send His Son after thousands of

years. He chose to let His Son suffer the full penalty demanded by sin. He chose to beat the Devil according to the rules, rather than by simply declaring “I win because omnipotence.” That is obvious in this text. God could have given Athaliah an attack of meningitis that left her paralyzed. He could have caused her to die in childbirth years before. He could have had her out traveling with Ahaziah and had her shot through the heart by Jehu like her son Ahaziah. *But He didn't*. He left it up to Jehosheba to frustrate Athaliah's homicidal mania.

### **1. Human Actions Actually Impact His Kingdom**

And so, brothers and sisters, we see that human actions really do impact God's Kingdom. God has put His Kingdom into the domain of the historical, for good or ill, from here to eternity. Our actions, like Athaliah's and Jehosheba's, genuinely affect His Kingdom. We obviously do not create or destroy it entirely — but we do impact its well-being.

### **2. That Impact Will Be Positive or Negative**

Again, the impact on the Kingdom that we make can be either good or bad. Athaliah harmed the Kingdom of God! She didn't totally exterminate it like she wanted to, but she certainly did it no favors. Jehosheba helped the progress of the Kingdom; she risked her life to save Joash.

### **3. No Human Action Is Neutral**

But in turn, the implication of this is that no human action is neutral. What did I tell you a few moments ago? “Our Lord Jesus is set for a sign that is opposed. He is the most polarizing figure in human history; by His own testimony, whoever is not with Him is against Him.” And whatever you do that is not done out of obedience to Him is a sin. Whatever you do that is not an expression of loving Yahweh your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and your neighbor as yourself is a sin.

### **4. Therefore, No Line Can Be Drawn Between Big Things and Little Things, Important Things and Irrelevant Things, in the History of the Kingdom of God!**

And so here's the point I can't emphasize enough: the next step of obedience is always fatefully charged. There is no act of obedience to God, however small, that you can safely ignore. Jehosheba saved a life, and in so doing saved God's entire plan of salvation! No more important action can be imagined. Yet in itself, the action may have been tiny, may have even been a kind of inaction. Jehosheba may have taken baby Joash out of the room for some other reason entirely, and then heard of the massacre while she was out with Joash. Rather than take him back in to be slaughtered, she may have simply kept him with her. Or there may have been a dramatic face-off with Athaliah which Jehosheba only won by switching out her own baby with her nephew and letting Athaliah unwittingly kill her son in order to save Joash. Such thoughts are obviously speculative. The point is that by doing a seemingly little action, Jehosheba saved Christmas, saved Christ, saved God's plan, and thus saved every one of us, thousands of years distant in time and thousands of miles distant in space. Jehosheba likely knew what she was doing, and obedience should be celebrated. But that equally means that you are not allowed to say, “God, this act of obedience you're calling me to is too difficult. It's not worth it. I realize that it would

advance your Kingdom, but it would advance it so minimally that I'm not going to do it." Brothers and sisters, that's precisely what you can't know! Everything you do either builds God's Kingdom or hinders His Kingdom. To refuse to build the Kingdom because the action seems insignificant, because it seems to be a "faithful in that which is least" kind of thing, is to disobey the direct command of Christ. We must be faithful in that which is least. We must build the Kingdom even in ways that seem hopelessly futile because our God plays by the rules. He submits to the way He set things up. *And we must do so too.* One of His rules is that our faithfulness and unfaithfulness have real consequences for the growth or retardation of His kingdom.

**C. Therefore, God's providential government and our faithful obedience and submission to His rule are both maximally operative at every stage of the progress of the Kingdom!**

Do you understand, brothers and sisters? God was at work in Jehosheba to protect His Kingdom. He will keep His promise to send a Messiah. But Jehosheba was at work in submission to God. There is no trade-off here, no sense that God's sovereignty lessens the significance of human choices or that human choices lessen the finality of God's work. He has chosen to build His work *in history*, and that is a sign to us that we, historical creatures, are called to participate in building with Him.

Will you give your life to save a little one? Will you give your reputation, your money, your convenience, your time to obey Jesus Christ and to work for His Kingdom? Are you willing to pledge your lives, your fortunes, and your sacred honor to this King and His Kingdom? You should never say, "That's too tiny. I will not do that for the Kingdom." And you should never say, "That's too big. I won't do that for the Kingdom." Yes, we will face the mad fury of Christ's enemies. But we must never forget that our labor is not in vain in the Lord, that our work is valuable in His Kingdom. He is building His church (Matt 16) and the church builds itself (Eph 4). Contradiction? No. The two truths are complementary. The ordinary way in which Jesus builds His church is by us building up each other. The ordinary way the Kingdom progresses is through the obedient service of its citizens. In this text, see God's hand, and Jehosheba's. In your life this week, see God's hand — and your spouse's, your parents', your children's, your brothers' and your sisters'. Work for God's Kingdom. Your faithfulness makes a real difference. Amen.