

Politics and Providence

2 Kings 13-14
October 16, 2016

This morning I am going to preach a political sermon.

Go ahead and groan. I understand. I don't blame you. We are all tired of politics. Week after week, day after day, and tweet after tweet all we have heard about is politics. You come to church hoping to hear something encouraging and inspiring. Instead the preacher has the nerve to announce that he's going to preach on politics!

Please don't walk out on me just yet. This is going to be a political sermon. But the politics that we are going to concentrate on are the politics of eighth century B.C. Israel. I have checked the Old Testament text carefully, and there is no mention of Donald or Hillary. No Clinton! No Trump! Go ahead and breathe a sigh of relief.

A couple of years ago I was reading in 2 Kings 13 and 14, and some things struck me. I was compelled to think about God and how he works in this world of his. Even though we must not draw a strict parallel between how God worked in ancient Israel and how he works in modern America, there are nonetheless some lessons that we can glean for ourselves from Old Testament history.

How does God work among all the nations of the world? What is God doing in the United States today? What role is God playing in our Presidential election? And how should you and I go about living for God in our present political situation? Those are important questions. We should think about them long and hard.

The History

Let's take a look at the history we find in 2 Kings 13 and 14. We are going to cover a lot of history, but I will try to make it as easy to follow as I can. We will start with King Jehoahaz, who reigned from 814 to 798 B.C.

¹In the twenty-third year of Joash son of Ahaziah king of Judah, Jehoahaz son of Jehu became king of Israel in Samaria, and he reigned seventeen years. ²He did evil in the eyes of the LORD by following the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit, and he did not turn away from them. (2 Kings 13:1-2)

To say that Jehoahaz followed "the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat" was shorthand for saying that Jehoahaz worshiped idols. Jeroboam son of Nebat was the first king of Israel, and he deliberately turned away from the true God. He introduced and promoted idolatry in his kingdom. Jehoahaz followed his example. Jehoahaz was not a good or godly king. "He did evil in the eyes of the Lord." But look what happens.

³So the LORD's anger burned against Israel, and for a long time he kept them under the power of Hazael king of Aram and Ben-Hadad his son.

⁴Then Jehoahaz sought the LORD's favor, and the LORD listened to him, for he saw how severely the king of Aram was oppressing Israel. ⁵The LORD provided a deliverer for Israel, and they escaped from the power of Aram. So the Israelites lived in their own homes as they had before. ⁶But they did not turn away from the sins of the house of Jeroboam, which he had caused Israel to commit; they continued in them. (2 Kings 13:3-6a)

Let's stop and think about what we have just read. Jehoahaz is an idolatrous king just like Jeroboam the son of Nebat. He has broken the first and most important of the Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3). Verse 6 tells us that it was not only the king who practiced idolatry. The people did too. Yet when Jehoahaz prays to God, God listens. God listens to this idolatrous king and saves this idolatrous people from their enemies.

Doesn't that surprise you just a bit?

Let's think about the next king of Israel. His name was Jehoash. His reign started in 798 B.C. and continued down to 782 B.C.

¹⁰ In the thirty-seventh year of Joash king of Judah, Jehoash son of Jehoahaz became king of Israel in Samaria, and he reigned sixteen years. ¹¹ He did evil in the eyes of the LORD and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit; he continued in them. (2 Kings 13:10-11)

Here we have a brand new king, and he too is labeled as someone who was like Jeroboam son of Nebat, that idolatrous first king of Israel. This new king is just as evil and idolatrous as his father, Jehoahaz. He breaks the first and most important of the Ten Commandments by worshiping idols. So what does God do?

²⁵ Then Jehoash son of Jehoahaz recaptured from Ben-Hadad son of Hazael the towns he had taken in battle from his father Jehoahaz. Three times Jehoash defeated him, and so he recovered the Israelite towns. (2 Kings 13:25)

Here is another example of God protecting an evil and idolatrous king and his kingdom. And God does it not just once but three times!

Doesn't that surprise you? God uses an evil king in order to accomplish something good. Is that the way that God is supposed to act?

Let's go on to the next king of Israel. His name is Jeroboam. This Jeroboam is not Jeroboam that we have already read about. That was Jeroboam the son of Nebat or Jeroboam I. This is Jeroboam II. He sat on the throne of Israel from 793 to 753 B.C. ¹

²³ In the fifteenth year of Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel became king in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. ²⁴ He did evil in the eyes of the LORD and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit. (2 Kings 14:23-24)

Is this beginning to sound like a re-run to you? Let's read on.

²⁶ The LORD had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering; there was no one to help them. ²⁷ And since the LORD had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash. (2 Kings 14:26-27)

God once again saves the nation of Israel by using an evil and idolatrous king.

Two years ago when I got to this passage in 2 Kings 14 and read about how God used Jeroboam II, I wanted to say, "Come on, God! That is not the way it is supposed to work. The good should be

¹ Jeroboam II was co-regent with his father, Jehoash, for eleven years. That is why their reigns overlap.

rewarded, and the evil should be punished. God, this is not the way that you are supposed to do it!" I realize that is kind of blunt. I want you to know that I do not make it a regular habit of questioning and challenging God in such a direct way, but sometimes we do wonder what God is doing, don't we? I sure did when I read these passages in 2 Kings 13 and 14.

The Lessons of History

What can we learn from this history of ancient Israel? I want to suggest that there are three lessons here about how God works in this world of his.

First, God rules the nations. God rules! He ruled over ancient Israel and all the other nations of the ancient world. There is nothing in the Bible that suggests that he does not do that today. God has not grown old over the last three thousand years. He hasn't grown forgetful or feeble or senile. He knows exactly what is going on in the world and in our country. He will accomplish his purposes. He may choose to use evil people and tragic events to accomplish his purpose, but he will accomplish his purposes. God rules!

Here's the second lesson: God rules with compassion. When you read these historical accounts in 2 Kings 13 and 14, it is astounding to see how compassionate God was with these people who had rejected him. They had blatantly disobeyed the first of the Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other gods before me." Yet God still listened to their prayers and rescued them from their enemies.

Please understand. God also rules with justice. The history of ancient Israel should not lead us to conclude that God never judges. God was compassionate and extraordinarily patient with the kingdom of Israel. For two hundred years he had put up with Israel's disobedience. He had sent them prophet after prophet urging them to give up their idolatry and to return to worshiping him alone. For two hundred years! But for two hundred years they had refused to turn back to the one true God even though God had been so persistently patient with them. But then—just thirty years after the end of Jeroboam II's reign—in 722 B.C, God judged Israel. He brought the Assyrians to Israel. They conquered the kingdom and carried the people off into exile.

God rules the nations with compassion. Thank God that he does! But he will eventually judge. He will eventually judge every nation. He will judge the United States. That judgment may come in the form of some immediate and devastating catastrophe, or it may come from the consequences that slowly and gradually result from sin's corrosive journey through our nation. It's often been said that nations tend to get the leaders they deserve. That too can be a form of God's judgment. This presidential election may very well be a statement about our country at large and not just about the candidates themselves.

That is not a message that any of us want to hear, but we should take it to heart. It's been said that God is more eager to delay judgment than we are to beg him for mercy.² Thank God that he so patient and compassionate, but we need to be sure that we as individuals and as a nation do not take it for granted. God rules with compassion *and* justice.

God rules the nations. God rules the nations with compassion and justice. Here is the third lesson: God rules the nations in ways that are beyond our ability to comprehend.

The theological term for this is providence. Providence is the idea that God uses the everyday choices of people and the ordinary experiences of life in order to accomplish his divine will.³ Because

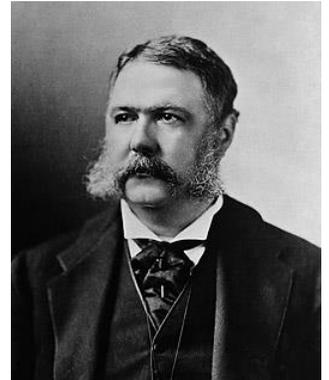
² D.A. Carson, *For the Love of God*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), December 29.

³ A more precise definition of providence is: "God is actively and incomprehensibly involved in every aspect of the preservation, operation, and rule of his world, but in such a way that human choice and responsibility are never abolished or minimized."

God uses the everyday and the ordinary to accomplish his purposes we usually don't see what he's doing. As the famous hymn puts it, "God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform."

Imagine what it would have been like to have lived during the reign of Jeroboam II. You are one of the faithful remnant. You have resisted your country's spiritual complacency and its practice of idolatry. You have remained true to the living God. If that's who you had been in ancient Israel, would you have ever imagined that God was going to use Jeroboam II to save your people?

History contains all kinds of surprises. That's true from even a secular point of view. Think about this man. Do you know who he is? He was the twenty-first president of the United States. He was also one of the most forgettable presidents that our country has ever had. Most of us can't say anything more about this man than that he had an impressive set of mutton chops! His name was Chester Arthur.



Here is his story. In 1880 James Garfield ran for president, and he ran on a promise to reform the civil service system. No longer would appointments to government positions be made on the basis of who you knew. Garfield promised that people would be appointed to public service based on their ability instead. But there was one problem: Garfield needed to win the support of the strong political machine in the state of New York. He knew that without the support of the key politicians of that state he did not stand a chance of winning. Garfield needed to make some kind of concession to the New York political machine. That's where Chester Arthur enters the picture. He had never run for public office, but he was part of the machine. He was the consummate insider who had gotten rich due to his connections with the dominant politicians in New York. So Garfield chose Chester Arthur as his vice-presidential running mate. What could it hurt? He was just running for vice-president, and vice-presidents don't do anything anyway.

Garfield won the election, but just four months after he was inaugurated he was shot. Garfield did not die right away. He lingered for two months before he succumbed to his wounds. Then Chester Arthur became president. All hope for reform of the civil service system was gone. After all, Chester Arthur, the very embodiment of machine politics, had become President of the United States. But something had happened to Arthur during those two months after President Garfield had been shot. The reality of being President had sunk in. He started to take his responsibility seriously. Much to the surprise of the machine politicians, Chester Arthur did not make the appointments that they expected him to make. Even more importantly, it was during his term of office that the first major piece of legislation reforming the civil service system became law. Nobody expected that!

When President Arthur died a few years later, one journalist made this observation: "No man ever entered the Presidency so profoundly and widely distrusted as Chester Alan Arthur, and no one ever retired . . . more generally respected."⁴

Who of us knows what the future holds? None of us do. That's true from a secular point of view. How much more so for those of us who know that God rules in ways that are beyond our ability to comprehend.

The Application of History's Lessons

So how should you and I apply these lessons in our own lives? How should we live in light of God's compassionate and just and mysterious rule over the nations of the world? What does this say about our attitude toward next month's election?

⁴ Quoted in "Chester A. Arthur," <https://www.whitehouse.gov/1600/presidents/chesterarthur>, Accessed September 24, 2016.

I think of a poster that I saw last December. Berta and I were in England visiting our daughter and her family who are living there. We saw this poster. “Keep Calm and Carry On.” I have to tell you that I did not think much of that slogan when I first saw it. I thought that it was just another shallow cliché. That impression of mine was reinforced when I saw some of the spinoffs of the slogan. Right here in Bemidji I saw a man on Paul Bunyan Drive wearing a t-shirt that said, “Keep calm and ride motorcycles.” I went into a restaurant once and saw a sign that said, “Keep calm and enjoy free Wi-Fi.” I found a refrigerator magnet that read, “Keep calm and call Batman.” Like I said, I was not impressed.



But then I learned the history behind this slogan, and it started to grow on me. The more I thought about it the more impressed I became with it. In fact, I learned to appreciate it so much that I asked my daughter to buy me a refrigerator magnet with this saying. And listen! I am not a refrigerator magnet kind of guy! I don't ask people to buy me refrigerator magnets! That's not in my DNA. But we have one on our refrigerator now.

The story behind this slogan begins in late 1939 after the start of World War II. The British government designed three posters that were intended to boost the people's morale. The first two posters were distributed throughout England, and they were displayed at bus stations and in shop windows and on notice boards. But the third poster—the one with “Keep Calm and Carry On”—was to be displayed only if Germany actually launched a ground invasion of Great Britain and succeeded in occupying the country. That was a real possibility back in 1939, but it never took place. Two and a half million posters had been printed, but they were never used. They were eventually recycled because there was a shortage of paper in England, and they were forgotten.

They were forgotten until the year 2000. That's when the owner of a bookstore discovered one of those posters in a pile of dusty old books that he had bought in an auction. He put that poster up in his shop, and it caught on like crazy.⁵

I think about this slogan: “Keep Calm and Carry On.” What would it have meant to you if you had lived in England at that time and if Germany had launched that ground invasion? What if they had succeeded in conquering Great Britain? Notice the crown on the poster. Here is a message from King George VI. What does your king want you to do if Germany invades and occupies the country? “Keep Calm and Carry On.” “Keep Calm.” Don't give into fear or give up your hope. Don't sink into despair or surrender to cynicism. “Keep Calm.” “And Carry On.” Do everything you can to resist the Nazis. Do not collaborate with them. Fight them any way you can. Remain loyal to your king! “Keep Calm and Carry On.”

I think that slogan applies to us today. We live in a nation that seems to be increasingly occupied and controlled by the Enemy. But we also have a king. His name is Jesus. What does he want us to do? “Keep Calm and Carry On.” “Keep Calm.” Don't give up your hope. No matter what happens in this election--don't sink into despair or surrender to cynicism. (I know that is the temptation I feel.) Fight that cynicism! “Keep Calm” and continue to trust the Lord who rules the nations. “And Carry On.” Don't neglect your opportunities to make an impact. Continue to participate in the electoral process even if you don't like the candidates that are presented to you. The Bible says that we are to pray for those in authority (1 Tim. 2:1-2). Will you do that—no matter who gets elected next month? “Carry On.” Don't be hesitant to live each day for Jesus Christ. Be prepared to tell others about Jesus and the hope that *he*—not some politician--provides you. Make it your goal to always glorify God and bring honor to his Son. Do not lower your ethical standards. Do not shy away from what God says in his Word about right and wrong. And if voices within our culture continue to grow stronger and declare with increasing

⁵ “History,” Accessed January 3, 2016, <http://www.keepcalmandcarryon.com/history>; “Keep Calm and Carry On,” Wikipedia. Accessed September 24, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keep_Calm_and_Carry_On.

vehemence that obedience to Jesus Christ is not just old-fashioned but discriminatory and oppressive, then remember that your Lord tells you to take up your cross and follow him! Be ready to pay the price!

God rules! So remain loyal to your king. "Keep Calm and Carry On."

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on October 16, 2016 by Dr. Frederic M. Martin.