

# *What the heck, why not?*

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

April 18, 2010

©2010 Scott L. Engle

### *2 Kings 7:3–15 (NRSV)*

[In the mid- 9<sup>th</sup> century BC, for the second time, the king of Aram-Damascus has laid siege to Samaria, the capital city of Israel, the northern kingdom of the Israelites. It is a bad siege, so bad that the starving people are resorting even to cannibalism. To illustrate, a woman comes complaining to Jehoram, the king of Israel, that her friend reneged on a deal the two had made to eat each others' sons – but only the son of the complaining woman had been made into a meal. That's how bad it was! Jehoram grows so angry over waiting for God that he seeks vengeance on Elisha, God's prophet. But Elisha says things are about to change in a big way.]

<sup>3</sup>Now there were four leprous men outside the city gate, who said to one another, "Why should we sit here until we die? <sup>4</sup>If we say, 'Let us enter the city,' the famine is in the city, and we shall die there; but if we sit here, we shall also die. Therefore, let us desert to the Aramean camp; if they spare our lives, we shall live; and if they kill us, we shall but die." <sup>5</sup>So they arose at twilight to go to the Aramean camp; but when they came to the edge of the Aramean camp, there was no one there at all. <sup>6</sup>For the Lord had caused the Aramean army to hear the sound of chariots, and of horses, the sound of a great army, so that they said to one another, "The king of Israel has hired the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Egypt to fight against us." <sup>7</sup>So they fled away in the twilight and abandoned their tents, their horses, and their donkeys leaving the camp just as it was, and fled for their lives. <sup>8</sup>When these leprous men had come to the edge of the camp, they went into a tent, ate and drank, carried off silver, gold, and clothing, and went and hid them. Then they came back, entered another tent, carried off things from it, and went and hid them.

<sup>9</sup>Then they said to one another, "What we are doing is wrong. This is a day of good news; if we are silent and wait until the morning light, we will be found guilty; therefore let us go and tell the king's household." <sup>10</sup>So they came and called to the gatekeepers of the city, and told them, "We went to the Aramean camp, but there was no one to be seen or heard there, nothing but the horses tied, the donkeys tied, and the tents as they were." <sup>11</sup>Then the gatekeepers called out and proclaimed it to the king's household. <sup>12</sup>The king got up in the night, and said to his servants, "I will tell you what the Arameans have prepared against us. They know that we are starving; so they have left the camp to hide themselves in the open country, thinking, 'When they come out of the city, we shall take them alive and get into the city.'" <sup>13</sup>One of his servants said, "Let some men take five of the remaining horses, since those left here will suffer the fate of the whole multitude of Israel that have perished already; let us send and find out." <sup>14</sup>So they took two mounted men, and the king sent them after the Aramean army, saying, "Go and find out." <sup>15</sup>So they went after them as far as the Jordan; the whole way was littered with garments and equipment that the Arameans had thrown away in their haste. So the messengers returned, and told the king.

*Have you ever had a trip down Breakthrough Boulevard, when you found yourself propelled into a life that you had never imagined possible?*

*This is the story of just such a breakthrough.*

Pressure. Always pressure. This was the life of ancient Israel, positioned between two highways that every king, emperor, or pharaoh worth his salt wanted to control. To the east of Israel sat the King's Highway, linking the Arabian riches with the caravan city of Damascus. To Israel's west, alongside the Mediterranean, sat the Intercoastal Highway, linking Egypt to Damascus and the great Mesopotamian civilizations. The land that God had given his people was strategically important and coveted by all.

Whether Israel was united, as it was under Saul, David, and Solomon, or divided into the rival Israelite kingdoms of Judah in the south and Israel in the north,<sup>1</sup> the people of God were under constant pressure on their borders. For century after century, land was taken and lost, cities were besieged, burned, and rebuilt. There was never a time when enemies did not lurk at the Israelites' door and often these enemies succeeded in smashing it down.

In the mid-ninth century BC, Israel, the northern kingdom, faced a looming threat posed by the Arameans.<sup>2</sup> They were a Semitic people who had coalesced into several kingdoms over the previous couple of centuries. The strongest of these kingdoms was to the northeast of Israel and was centered upon the city of Damascus, and, hence, was known as Aram-Damascus.

The story of the Israelites' struggles with the Aram-Damascus kings from this time is told in 2 Kings 6-8. The chronology of these chapters poses some problems. We can't be sure exactly which Aramean king is being referred and it is also possible that the stories are not told chronologically but for dramatic purposes. We learn that in addition to fending off a threat on the northern border with Aram-Damascus, the Israelites must deal with an Aramean siege of the capital city, Samaria. The Israelites would have understood that the loss of their capital city would mean the loss of their nation and independence.

#### *Four lepers*

For much of human history, sieges were the preferred and sometimes the only means of capturing a city. Cities were built on elevated hills or mountaintops that were easily defended and then surrounded by sturdy walls. So long as a city had a large supply of grain and a source of fresh water within its walls, they could hold out for longer than many besiegers were willing to wait.

Samaria, however, was such a prize that the Aramean king was willing to wait a long time. As the siege dragged out, famine set in. There was so little food, we are told (6:24), that a donkey's head was selling for about \$400, despite it being the least edible portion of an "unclean" animal. There were even stories of cannibalism circulating around the city (6:28-31). When all seems lost, the prophet Elisha reassures the Israelite king that God has not abandoned them but that on the next day(!) seven quarts of flour would sell for \$5 – everything was about to change.

After informing us of Elisha's astounding promise to the king, the writer draws our attention to four lepers<sup>3</sup> sitting near the city gate. Things in the city are so bad that the

---

<sup>1</sup>After the death of King Solomon, in 922BC the united kingdom of Israel split in two: Judah in the South with its capital (and the temple) in Jerusalem and Israel in the north with its capital in the city of Samaria. Samaria was located inland roughly halfway between Jerusalem and the Sea of Galilee. The northern kingdom, Israel, was overrun by the Assyrians in 721BC and was never a viable nation again, as many of its people were exiled and dispersed by the Assyrians. The city of Samaria would give its name to the area between Judea and Galilee in the time of Jesus. The inhabitants of this area, known as Samaritans, were despised by the Jews of Jesus' day. Most travelers from Galilee to Jerusalem chose to go south via the Jordan River valley rather than pass through the area of Samaria.

<sup>2</sup>The Arameans and the Hebrews were ethnically related, as Abraham was from the area later known as Aram in southern Turkey. The Arameans' language was a Semitic dialect very similar to Hebrew. Aramaic was adopted by other people of the region and became the major language of the western Persian empire, which stretched down into the Nile River valley. Thus, Aramaic became the everyday language of the Jews in Judea and Galilee.

<sup>3</sup>Though the traditional way to translate the Hebrew here is "leprosy" most scholars agree that the Hebrew is only referring to skin afflictions of some kind, not necessarily leprosy, "Hansen's disease." Nonetheless, we are meant to grasp that these men suffer not only from a physical affliction but also social ostracism. These men are among society's low and outcast, the last ones whom any Jew would expect God to use. Like

lepers assume they are bound to die whether they go back into the city or simply remain where they are. They are already outcasts among their own people, so perhaps they figure they ought to go ahead and make their estrangement official. In any event, they decide to turn themselves into the Aramean camp (as if the Arameans will want them?!).

But when they get to the Aramean camp they find it deserted. The Arameans had dropped everything in their haste to flee. Why? Because they heard a mighty army coming across the hills and were so terrified that they ran fast and far. The Israelites had mounted no such army, so what did the Arameans hear? They heard the LORD (7:5). This was God's work and God's alone.

When our four lepers enter the abandoned camp, they do what most of us would do. They eat and drink their fill. They also pick up some of the Aramean treasure and hide it. But one of them has a pang of conscience and a stab of fear. It is wrong for them to keep this good news<sup>4</sup> to themselves (the conscience); when the Israelites find out what happened the four men will be found guilty (the fear). So the four men return to Samaria and tell the gatekeepers what has happened. When word gets to the king, he is naturally enough suspicious, fearful that the Arameans have set an attractive trap. But the king's chariots soon learn the truth – the Arameans have fled for good. As the good news spreads across the city, the price of food plummets, just as Elisha promised.

*Why not?*

It is pretty hard to tell from the story exactly what to make of the four lepers. Their decision to abandon the Israelites and give themselves over to the Arameans, though understandable, was certainly not admirable. It seems to be made out of despair; they head to the Aramean camp because they have nothing more to lose, as if saying, "What the heck, why not?!" You can't really say their heading to the camp is a virtuous act. Remember, the four lepers, though societal outcasts, were among God's covenant people. Leaving the covenant to seek safety among the Arameans was a faithless act.

Yet, after a brief time of self-indulgence they returned to Samaria. In the text, their motives are ambiguous – is it conscience or fear that drives them back the city?

Despite all this ambiguity and the impious motives, the lepers experience a breakthrough, as does the entire city. This story isn't so much about the men, as it is about the truth that God is faithful and that God is the creator and sustainer of life-changing breakthroughs. I've experienced such a breakthrough myself and have come to see that it was all about God's work, not mine. The lepers' breakthrough, Samaria's breakthrough, my own breakthrough was all about God's grace, God's limitless, surprising, ever amazing grace.

Elisha simply trusted that God would cause to happen what God had promised – the price of food would plummet in a single day. The "how" . . . well, you can bet even Elisha was surprised by the flight of the Aramean army. In the end, the good news of God's salvation was delivered by four outcasts, the most unlikely of God's messengers of grace.

Truly, "grace" is the nameplate for any vehicle that can take you for a ride down Breakthrough Boulevard.

---

the rest of the ancient world, Jews saw afflictions of this sort as being a punishment from God for wrongs the person or their family had committed.

<sup>4</sup>It is worth noting that when Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, translated their scriptures from Hebrew into Greek in about 200 BC, the Greek used here for this "good news" was *evangelion*, the same word used in the New Testament for the Good News/Gospel/Glad Tidings of Jesus Christ. Salvation is always good news to be proclaimed.

## A Kingdom Divided – the basics

If you don't understand the basics of Israel's history, the Old Testament can be very confusing. The following may help.

The twelve tribes got their first king, Saul, more than a thousand years before Jesus. David took the throne from Saul and passed it on to his son, Solomon, who took the kingdom to its political and economic zenith. He used the wealth to build a great temple in Jerusalem. He expanded the borders of Israel. But Solomon also sowed the seeds of Israel's destruction.

Solomon had a thousand wives and concubines, most of whom were foreign. His wives brought the worship of foreign gods into Israel and turned Solomon's own heart away from the LORD God and toward other gods (see 1 Kings 11). Despite the building of the temple, the people would soon abandon their covenant with God.

The united kingdom had always struggled under the threat of rebellion and tribal warfare. Toward the end of Solomon's reign, Jeroboam, a leader among the northern tribes, led a rebellion against Solomon. Though Jeroboam was unsuccessful at the time, upon Solomon's death and some unwise decisions by his son and successor, Rehoboam, Jeroboam was able to split the kingdom in two in 921BC. The ten northern tribes followed Jeroboam, who became the first king of the northern kingdom, Israel. The largest Israelite tribe was that of Judah which, with the tribe of Benjamin, constituted the southern kingdom, Judah. Rehoboam was the first king of Judah (1 Kings 11).

From 1 Kings 11 forward, the book of Kings traces the history of the two Israelite kingdoms, Israel and Judah, in parallel. The successive kings of each kingdom are named and most got a report card from God! Most got a failing grade – they did what is evil in the sight of God (e.g., see 1 Kings 15:25) and Ahab was the worst of the lot. Doing evil in God's sight meant that the king had led the people away from YHWH, the LORD God, to the worship of other gods. Only a few, like Hezekiah, did what was right in God's sight (e.g., 2 Kings 22:1-2), leading the people back to the worship of the one true God.

Though the kingdoms would enjoy periods of peace and prosperity, both were on a path toward destruction and death. Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722BC. Judah and Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586BC.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

You might begin by taking a few minutes to read the whole story of the siege of Samaria in 2 Kings 6:24-7:20. There is much more than I had space for in this study: the whole story of the king's loss of faith in the power of God (6:27), his abandonment of hope, and his abdication of responsibility; the grace extended to the faithless king; and the officer who scoffed at Elisha's promise of salvation and thus lost out on the salvation when it came.

Like so many of the Old Testament stories, it can be hard to sort out what God would have us take away from the story. Certainly, we grasp the contrast the faithlessness of the king with the faithfulness of God. We also embrace God's choosing of the weak and outcast to be the bearers of the Good News, the *evangelion*. But we're not so sure what to think of the lepers themselves. They have their breakthrough, yes, but what are we expected to take away from the story? What does it say to us? Indeed, the text seems to be purposely ambiguous about their motives. But don't motives matter?

What do you see in the story of the lepers? How would you tell their story to someone else? Were they heroes? Why do you think God chose lepers to deliver the good news? Did God choose them? Or did God use their choices made in weakness to bring about God's purposes? How do you think God uses us? Would we always know it? How could we know when God is using someone else?

Perhaps the message is something like this. Life throws at us one choice after another. Sometimes the way forward, God's way, seems pretty clear to us. Other times, it isn't clear at all and no amount of praying or thinking or talking seems to make it clearer. Perhaps most trips down Breakthrough Boulevard are mostly about pressing ahead in faith. Even amidst difficult struggles, we are to remain confident in our surprising God, who can lead us where we'd never imagine we'd go. Will we remain ever-confident that, as Paul wrote to the Romans, "We know that all things work together for good for those love the God . . ." and that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, not height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:28, 37-39)?

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, 2 Kings 2:1-18</b> Elijah ascends to heaven and passes the mantle on to Elisha</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, 2 Kings 2:38-44</b> Elisha purifies a pot of stew and then feeds a hundred</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, 2 Kings 5</b> Elisha heals Naaman of leprosy</p>	<p><b>Thursday, 2 Kings 6:1-7</b> The miracle of the ax head</p>
<p><b>Friday, 2 Kings 6:24-7:20</b> The second siege of Samaria</p>	<p><b>Prayers of Joy and Concern</b></p>

**Wednesday Night Bible Study with Scott Engle  
7:00pm in Piro Hall**

**Frogs, Freedom, and Faith: the story of the Exodus**  
April 21: Moses and God at the burning bush

=====

***A Case for the Crusades?***

**The current series in Scott's 11:00 class**

Is it even possible that a case could be made *for* the crusades? Join us as we take a provocative and eye-opening look at the history of the wars to retake the holy lands.

=====

Also: every Tuesday, a lunchtime brownbag in-depth Bible study with Scott Engle from 11:45 – 1:15, Room 127. Just drop in!

=====

**Scott's Sermons and Weekly Bible Studies are available at  
[www.standrewumc.org](http://www.standrewumc.org).**

**Just go to "worship" and then "sermons online."**

**There is also an archive of all 400+ studies at [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org)**

They are posted as easily downloadable pdf files. Your browser can search the listing for studies on specific books of the Bible or Scripture passages. They are suitable for individual study and for biblically-oriented small group discussions. You will also be able to join the Yahoo group (sa\_studies) so you can get the Bible studies e-mailed to you each week.

**Sermon Notes**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---