

God Is Not Mocked

In England there are various special guards, like the Queen's Guard. They are often in ceremonial uniforms, bright red. They are found in a number of tourist spots like the Tower of London or Buckingham Palace. Because of this, some tourists think they are almost like actors, and decide to mock them, or mimic them, make faces at them. But there are a number of videos online showing what happens when people push it too far, thinking that these men are just walking mannequins. Often enough, being real soldiers, they will finally react with loud voices, their weapons pointed and tell the tourist to back off. The shock and surprise in the tourist shows they thought they could get away with just about anything and not face reprisals.

We see that scattered all through human life. The boy who thinks he can keep irritating his sister indefinitely. The child in the classroom who keeps horsing around, becoming more and more obviously disruptive. The employee who takes more and more liberties from his boss, coming later, leaving earlier, not meeting deadlines. The nation that keeps provoking another nation with border incursions, cyber attacks, harbouring terrorists, or sending money to enemies. All of these say, "I think I can get away with it! I can keep doing this! I can repay your kindness with evil, and you will do nothing about it!" Solomon saw this reality and reported in Ecclesiastes: "Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. (Eccl. 8:11)

But few things are more dangerous than to think that this is the way life works, especially when it comes to God Himself. God is not mocked, Galatians 6 tells us, nor is His patience the kind of thing that allows infinite insults to His glory.

An insult to honour and retribution for that is what we see in the life of David in 2 Samuel 10. We are here at the high point of David's reign, a place of justice, righteousness, and peace. It will begin to crumble in the next chapter. But here we have one more look at David in his glory and goodness: a good and kind king, whose kindness is insulted, whose goodwill is transgressed beyond what is tolerable. And in it, we have an illustration of the wrath of God, the retribution that God does work on those who spurn His goodness. If chapter 9 was an illustration of grace received with Mephibosheth, chapter 10 is an illustration of grace rejected.

To study this is to see not only a righteous king in David, but to consider how we are responding to the righteous King of the Universe.

The chapter can be experienced as three moments: respectful kindness, rejection, and then retribution.

I. Respectful Kindness

2 Samuel 10:1 It happened after this that the king of the people of Ammon died, and Hanun his son reigned in his place. ² Then David said, "I will show kindness to Hanun the son of Nahash, as his father showed kindness to me." So David sent by the hand of his servants to comfort him concerning his father. And David's servants came into the land of the people of Ammon.

Now notice the continuity from the last chapter. Chapter 9 began with David asking, "Is there still anyone who is left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?" (2 Sam. 9:1)

David wanted to show mercy, lovingkindness, *hesed*, to someone, anyone, who was related to Jonathan. Even though Saul had been David's enemy, David honoured his covenant with Jonathan and showed grace to Mephibosheth, the only surviving son of Jonathan.

Now David wants to do something similar. He wants to show kindness to one of the Gentile nations on his border: the Ammonites, and their new king, Hanun. Hanun's father was Nahash. He had attacked Israel during the time of the judges, and made a cruel bargain that he would cease attacking them if every Israelite man gouged out his right eye. It was Saul who then came to their rescue and defeated Nahash, without killing him. But it seems at some point, Nahash showed David kindness. It may have been when David was on the run from Saul, but it isn't specifically recorded. At least for the roughly seven years that David has been king in Jerusalem, there has been peace with the Ammonites. As we've seen, he conquered anyone aggressive to Israel on the north, south, east, and west, but up until this chapter, he was not at war with the Ammonites. This chapter explains how a war began with them, that extends well into chapter 12. In fact, the events here quite likely fit into chapter 8, but are told here in more detail, because they end up introducing the story of Bathsheba, which was the beginning of David's fall.

It began with an offer of kindness. Nahash, whose name means serpent, had died, and Hanun, was now in his place. David wanted to continue peaceful relations with them, and so makes an overture of kindness to Hanun. He sends his own ambassadors to the court of Hanun to offer official condolences, to express sympathy, and probably take the ancient equivalent of flowers: gifts that would express Israel's official sympathy and condolences.

And just as in chapter 9 we saw David's kindness to Mephibosheth as an illustration of God's kindness on those who are weak, and cannot earn salvation, so here is a similar illustration of kindness to those who should be enemies. David has more reasons to regard Ammon as an enemy, but he is extending an overture of kindness by grieving with those who have formerly been enemies to Israel.

The Bible teaches that this is how God treats His enemies.

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ "But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, ⁴⁵ "that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matt. 5:43-45)

Every day, God sends delegations of kind ambassadors to His enemies. He sends people who don't acknowledge Him food, and sunshine, and health, and comforts. He lets them enjoy the pleasures of family, love, friendship, children. He fills their lives with hundreds of pleasures, thousands of hours of good things, year after year of abilities, opportunities, experiences. The Bible calls this, common grace: God restraining evil, and allowing the whole human race to experience some measure of happiness, pleasure and joy. Beyond this common grace, there is special grace. God sends messengers to the world, to communicate His nature, His message, His will to the world. He sent prophets and preachers and messengers, and finally, His own Son. He sent His ambassadors to the world to say to us what David's ambassadors would have said to Hanun: "Shalom. I want you to be well. I want to soothe your pain. I wish death were not with you."

Unfortunately, Hanun had advisers around him that remind us of the young advisers who gave Solomon's son, Rehoboam, such terrible advice.

II. Rejected Kindness

³ And the princes of the people of Ammon said to Hanun their lord, "Do you think that David really honors your father because he has sent comforters to you? Has David not *rather* sent his servants to you to search the city, to spy it out, and to overthrow it?"

These men cannot believe that David has sent comforters. They cannot believe that things like love, grace, and mercy exist. To perverted minds like this, everyone always has some hidden, selfish agenda. In this case, they are sure that the agenda is to send spies. Ancient walled cities often had tunnels, underground conduits, or some other hidden weakness which an enemy could exploit during a siege. These Ammonite princes are sure that these are spies, looking for weaknesses, not comforters here to soothe grief.

We know why they were like this. Paul tells us, ¹⁵ To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled. (Tit. 1:15). The impure cannot even see goodness as goodness. It goes through their skewed filter and comes out as devious intent. They think of themselves as savvy, smart, too sharp to be duped, but all they are is suspicious. The Bible regards this as wicked. First Corinthians 13:7 tells us that one of the marks of love is that it thinks no evil. If you are always putting the most cynical construction on what others are doing, always looking with negative suspicion on what others do, the Bible calls that loveless. It is graceless, the kind of way Satan views all things.

And coming from that loveless, graceless view of life is their act of shaming David's ambassadors.

⁴ Therefore Hanun took David's servants, shaved off half of their beards, cut off their garments in the middle, at their buttocks, and sent them away. ⁵ When they told David, he sent to meet them, because the men were greatly ashamed. And the king said, "Wait at Jericho until your beards have grown, and *then* return."

To shave off half the beard was to mock their masculinity, and to disfigure them, like shaving one half of your hair. By cutting their garments vertically was further shaming, exposing them. The garments here are not normal clothes, but a Hebrew word for official clothes, special uniforms given to them as ambassadors. Such is their shame that they do not want to return to Jerusalem, so David has them spent some weeks at the city closest to where they would have crossed back over from Ammonite territory, Jericho.

Now this is a virtual act of war by the Ammonites. They did not kill the ambassadors, which would have been open war. But they have dishonoured the men, and therefore David, and therefore Israel, and therefore Israel's God. They are doing the equivalent of the man who spits in your face without hitting you. He is really saying, "I won't throw the first punch. But maybe you're such a coward that you're okay with me spitting in your face."

But the Ammonites know that they have basically kicked the hornets' nest, so they begin preparing for war. They don't have the strength to conquer Israel, so they hire an army of 33 000 to complement their own.

⁶ When the people of Ammon saw that they had made themselves repulsive to David, the people of Ammon sent and hired the Syrians of Beth Rehob and the Syrians of Zoba, twenty thousand foot soldiers; and from the king of Maacah one thousand men, and from Ish-Tob twelve thousand men.

In the Ammonite actions we have a perfect illustration of how man responds to God's acts of kindness. Romans 1 tells us the whole human race is indicted for a basic lack of gratitude.

²¹ because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Rom. 1:21)

Every human has an innate God-consciousness. They know God exists, because they know they exist, and they know other persons exist. And they sense their own immortality, and they recognise that the world is set up for life. Or to put it another way, humans wake up in a world made for them.

It is all gift: from the air, to the temperature, to the water, to the distance from the sun, to the miracle of the human body, to the provision of thousands glorious sights, sounds, smells, tastes. It is all gift. But the Bible says, the very first sin of mankind towards God is exactly that of Hanun to David's messengers: ingratitude.

Ingratitude combined with suspicion. Why does God keep telling us what to do? Why does God keep interfering with our lives? Maybe the serpent was right: He has a secret plan to stop us from becoming gods in our own right. He is secretly spying out our freedom, trying to bring us into bondage.

And in fact, in another place, Jesus told a parable of what we have done with God's messengers.

Mark 12:1 Then He began to speak to them in parables: "A man planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a place for the wine vat and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country.

² "Now at vintage-time he sent a servant to the vinedressers, that he might receive some of the fruit of the vineyard from the vinedressers.

³ "And they took *him* and beat him and sent *him* away empty-handed.

⁴ "Again he sent them another servant, and at him they threw stones, wounded *him* in the head, and sent *him* away shamefully treated.

⁵ "And again he sent another, and him they killed; and many others, beating some and killing some.

⁶ "Therefore still having one son, his beloved, he also sent him to them last, saying, 'They will respect my son.'

⁷ "But those vinedressers said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.'

⁸ "So they took him and killed *him* and cast *him* out of the vineyard.

⁹ "Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others. (Mk. 12:1-9)

As God sent angels to speak to man, then dreams, visions, then prophets, then prophets with miracles, prophets who wrote the Scriptures down, and finally, His own son, what has been the response to them? Rejection. Scorn. Vilification. And finally, the crucifixion of the Son of God. All of this evil was in God's plan, but none of it unnoticed or unmarked by God.

It is no small thing to respond to kindnesses like this with such ingratitude. As Proverbs 17:13 puts it: ¹³ Whoever rewards evil for good, Evil will not depart from his house. To return evil for good is bad, no matter who you do it to. But the greater the person that you do it to, the worse of an idea it is. Indeed, the higher the honour of the one you insult, the greater the offence. Had Hanun insulted the average Israelite, nothing might have happened. Had Hanun insulted one of David's soldiers, there might have been a minor skirmish. But Hanun insulted David's court, representing David the king, who represented the whole nation, which in turn represented the name of God. And so the high-handed rejection and repulsing of David's kindness then led to the third thing in this passage.

III. Retribution

Retribution is not petty revenge. This is not impulsive lashing out. This is righting the wrongs after an injustice has been committed. Israel's honour has been injured, and now restitution will be made.

David essentially sends a punitive expedition to answer the reproach of Ammon, to restore the honour of God. This is not a war of conquest, but an act of justice. Moreover, it seems this was a winter expedition, because it would be followed up later in the springtime.

⁷ Now when David heard of it, he sent Joab and all the army of the mighty men. ⁸ Then the people of Ammon came out and put themselves in battle array at the entrance of the gate. And the Syrians of Zoba, Beth Rehob, Ish-Tob, and Maacah were by themselves in the field. ⁹ When Joab saw that the battle line was against him before and behind, he chose some of Israel's best and put *them* in battle array against the

Syrians. ¹⁰ And the rest of the people he put under the command of Abishai his brother, that he might set *them* in battle array against the people of Ammon. ¹¹ Then he said, "If the Syrians are too strong for me, then you shall help me; but if the people of Ammon are too strong for you, then I will come and help you.

Joab arrives at the capital city of the Ammonites, Rabbah. But the Ammonites come out of the city to meet him. But then, to Joab's surprise, here arrive these 33 000 mercenaries on the other side. Israel's army is about to get caught in a pincer movement.

And here we see that Joab was a seasoned and brilliant military commander.

He takes the very best soldiers, the elite corp, and makes them the rearguard, fighting these mercenary armies of Syrians, with him in command. He then puts the attack on the Ammonites just outside the city into the hands of his brother Abishai. Abishai was the head of the Three Mighty Men, so he was no also-ran when it came to military bravery. And as Joab and Abishai's forces fight their enemies, as it were back to back, they are to keep looking out to see if the other is struggling and needing assistance.

And then Joab says what is perhaps his greatest recorded words:

¹² "Be of good courage, and let us be strong for our people and for the cities of our God. And may the LORD do *what is good* in His sight."

Notice Joab does not seem to be saying the words of a bloodthirsty man seeking vengeance, but of a man pursuing justice for the name of God.

They are facing overwhelming odds. Joab says, let us be courageous and strong. Let us do everything we can for our people, and for the cities of our God, for the towns and villages of Israel that belong to God. And may Yahveh do what pleases him. Here is an elegant balance between doing your part and trusting God. We must take responsibility, we must fight, it depends on us. But the outcome will be decided by our God, and we can trust in that.

¹³ So Joab and the people who *were* with him drew near for the battle against the Syrians, and they fled before him. ¹⁴ When the people of Ammon saw that the Syrians were fleeing, they also fled before Abishai, and entered the city. So Joab returned from the people of Ammon and went to Jerusalem.

Joab's crack forces are so intimidating that once they begin fighting, these Syrian mercenaries decide the money isn't worth it and beat a hasty retreat. And once the Ammonites outside the city see that their hired soldiers are experts in retreat and not in attack, they quickly hasten back into the city.

Joab is not ready for an all-out siege, especially if this is in the winter, so he returns to Jerusalem, and will come back in the spring, as we'll see in chapter 11 and 12.

¹⁵ When the Syrians saw that they had been defeated by Israel, they gathered together. ¹⁶ Then Hadadezer sent and brought out the Syrians who *were* beyond the River, and they came to Helam. And Shobach the commander of Hadadezer's army *went* before them.

But these 33 000 hired soldiers apparently get some of their courage back, and decide to gather additional forces and stage an invasion of Israel. Maybe they were encouraged by the fact that Joab didn't pursue them. Maybe they were hungry for revenge.

¹⁷ When it was told David, he gathered all Israel, crossed over the Jordan, and came to Helam. And the Syrians set themselves in battle array against David and fought with him.

Now David himself comes out. This time it is not simply the active-duty army that is called up, but the entire army, all able-bodied fighting men. First Chronicles 27 tells us that David divided the

reserve army into twelve divisions of 24 000 men each, one division from each tribe. Each division would be called up to serve for one month out of the year. If he had activated all of them, this was a force of 280 000 men, a massive army. We can see the result of the confrontation in verse 18.

¹⁸ Then the Syrians fled before Israel; and David killed seven hundred charioteers and forty thousand horsemen of the Syrians, and struck Shobach the commander of their army, who died there. ¹⁹ And when all the kings *who were* servants to Hadadezer saw that they were defeated by Israel, they made peace with Israel and served them. So the Syrians were afraid to help the people of Ammon anymore. (2 Sam. 10:1-19)

David handed them a crushing defeat. This time no retreat is permitted. But as terms of surrender, the Syrians are to become servants of Israel, tributaries and under Israel's authority.

God is the one who shows us kindness, and makes overtures of mercy towards mankind. But that does not mean God is a passive, weak God. God is not some celestial punchbag upon whom we pour our ingratitude, our scorn, our rejection.

For I, the LORD your God, *am* a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth *generations* of those who hate Me, (Exod. 20:5)

Deu 7:10 "and He repays those who hate Him to their face, to destroy them. He will not be slack with him who hates Him; He will repay him to his face.

Like David just response to Hanun, the Bible records in 2 Thessalonians 1 the truth that one day God will act in retribution: ⁶ since *it is* a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, ⁷ and to *give* you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, ⁸ in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, ¹⁰ when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed. (2 Thess. 1:6-10)

William Gurnall, an English Puritan wrote in 1660 about how the abused goodness of God will finally ignite into anger:

When I consider how the goodness of God is abused by the greatest part of mankind, I cannot but be of his mind that said, The greatest miracle in the world is God's patience and bounty to an ungrateful world. If a prince has an enemy got [in] one of his towns, he does not send them provision[s], but lays close siege to the place, and does what he can to starve them. But the great God, that could wink all His enemies into destruction, bears with them, and is at daily cost to maintain them. Well may He command us to bless them that curse us, who Himself does good to the evil and unthankful.

But think not, sinners, that you shall escape [in this way]; God's mill goes slow, but grinds small; the more admirable His patience and bounty now is, the more dreadful and unsupportable will that fury be which arises out of His abused goodness. Nothing smoother than the sea, yet when stirred into a storm, nothing rages more. Nothing so sweet as the patience and goodness of God, and nothing so terrible as His wrath when it takes fire (William Gurnall, 1660).

So what should we do with this good God's overtures? Do not for one moment act like Hanun's princes. Do not suspect God of ulterior motives. Do not look cynically and with disdain upon your life. Do not grumble or complain. See the common grace of God to you in giving you life and health and peace. See the special grace of God in preserving the nation of Israel, and sending His prophets and messengers and then recording and preserving that in His Word, and above all in

sending His Son to die for our sins. As the book of Hebrews puts it, don't neglect so great a salvation, don't refuse Him who speaks, don't harden your heart, don't insult the Spirit of grace. God is not mocked. No one cheats God, flouts God, insults God, rejects God and ultimately gets away with it.

Instead, see this infinitely great God sending His ambassadors of peace and kindness your way. Lift your eyes to the heavens with gratitude. Receive His overtures, by receiving Him.