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Can't Win for Losing II Kings 3:1-27

Intro: Ch3 recounts the story of a misguided military campaign that leads to an undeserved deliverance and an incomplete victory. The fascinating part of the story is that we will see 3 politicians turning to spiritual matters to resolve a physical dilemma. The overall lesson of the text teaches us that our only hope is in the Word of God

1-3 – Jehoram is the new King of Israel. He is the son of Ahab and the younger brother of Ahaziah, the clumsy king who fell through the 2nd floor lattice work. It can be a little confusing during this period of the history of Israel and Judah because Jehoram is also the name of one of King Jehoshaphat's sons as well. Today, we'll be considering the Jehoram of the northern kingdom and right away, the author presents us with his most crucial characteristic – his spiritual state. First, we see that he did evil in the sight of the Lord but... not like his father and mother. Apparently, he was not as committed to Baal worship as they were but that's not to say he completely eliminated its practice from the realm. That feat won't happen until Jehu comes on the scene.

What we can accurately say about Jehoram was that he wasn't as wicked as he could have been but he also wasn't as righteous as he should have been. He might not have been a champion for Baal but he was certainly committed to Jeroboam's old bull cult. This was the false worship of Yahweh devised by Jeroboam as a means of preventing his people from traveling down to Jerusalem to worship. He set up golden idols in the form of calves or bulls in Bethel and Dan and told the Israelites to go to those locations to worship Yahweh. This was clearly a political strategy, not an honest religious move. Strangely enough, the Israelites still believed they were worshipping the Covenant God of Israel even though they were actually breaking the 2nd Commandment to do it. It was to this misguided religious system, this thoroughly pagan belief system that the author says Jehoram clung to.

Notice the authors implied disappointment in his "Nevertheless..." It seems the Bible is never satisfied with anything less than total submission to the

Lord. It's not enough to go around saying that Jehoram wasn't as bad as he could have been because anything less than whole-hearted, faithful 1st and 2nd commandment obedience just won't cut it. It's possible to successfully resist atrocious forms of evil while still clinging to evil anyway. Just because we give up on a more depraved form of idolatry doesn't automatically mean we are free. This impatience of the Bible that refuses to accept anything less than complete faithfulness is just a reflection of the intolerant God of the Bible who insists on having all of our affections.

4-14 – The death of Ahab emboldened Mesha of Moab to check out of his longstanding responsibility to the king of Israel. Mesha had served as a vassal king under Ahab and as such, he was required to pay a yearly tribute of 100K lambs and the wool of 100K rams. This costly demand put a huge strain on Moab's economy but was a boon to the Israelite economy. Mesha had had enough of this and saw the ascension of Jehoram to the throne of Israel and his serious lack of military experience as his opportunity to rebel and tell Israel to go pound sand. Jehoram's response to Moab's rebellion was a determined, "Not on my watch!"

Now, Jehoram was a royal novice but he wasn't stupid. He knew he was severely lacking in military expertise but he knew someone that had some. In fact, he was now related to Jehoshaphat by marriage and he also knew the king of Judah had some recent experience with stomping on Moab and handing them a solid military defeat. So Jehoram sets about building his own coalition army to take the fight to Moab and bring them back in line. Jehoshaphat is his usual compliant self although, instead of being rebuked for aligning with Jehoram, Jehoshaphat turns out to be the very reason Jehoram survives. They also bring in the king of Edom, which was probably just a vassal king of Judah.

It's quite possible that Jehoram's turning away from Baal worship might have been nothing but a calculated political move to gain the approval of the godly Jehoshaphat; to make himself appear to be more acceptable to the King of Judah's covenantal scruples. It's difficult to say but we will see that Elisha is less than impressed with Jehoram's turning from Baal worship. Regardless, Jehoram allows Jehoshaphat to determine the best course of action to follow in this military campaign. He's either acquiescing to Jehoshaphat's extensive experience or just trying to stay in his good graces. But Jehosh decides to attack Moab from the south. This would allow their

coalition army to bypass the heavily fortified cities in the north part of Moab but it would also require them to travel through the dry as a bone desert of the Edomites.

This army had a great general in Jehoshaphat but they obviously had a terrible quartermaster because it looks like someone forgot to bring the water truck. You would think that if you know you're going to be marching through the desert, someone would have thought to bring enough water. Nope, somebody dropped the ball and troops and pack animals alike were plodding straight into disaster. They had exhausted their water supply and there was no water to be on site. It was clear that they weren't going to make it to Moab and they had traveled too far to turn back. There was no human way possible that they would ever make it out of that desert alive.

Notice the different responses of Jehoram and Jehoshaphat. Jehoram lets it slip that he has at least a working knowledge of Yahweh's sovereignty as he is quick to blame the entire mess on Him (10). Was Jehoram just naturally a pessimist? More likely it was his guilty conscience that convinced him that this calamity was the judgment of God. His own persistent sin made him think that everything that happened against him was God punishing him. Many people live with that same mindset and it results from the same problem: stubborn, unrepentant sin. Beware of those who are quick to cite the sovereignty of God in order to accuse or excuse but never to worship and adore.

Jehoshaphat has a different response. His first thought is not to blame the Lord but to consult the Lord for assistance and direction. This response flowed from a heart that was not only faithful to the Lord but obedient to Him as well. The King of Judah had learned to trust Yahweh long ago and had seen His deliverance, provision and characteristic goodness many times in the past so it was only logical to believe in it and look for it in this moment of need. Both Jehoram and Jehoshaphat believed there was a spiritual, divine element to this current crisis but Jehoram believed God should be avoided because of the crisis while Jehoshaphat believed God should be sought because of it. Just between you and me, it would have been better if they had sought the Lord before they started out but, that's just me

These 3 kings probably felt like they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, but it turns out Elisha the prophet was right where he needed to be.

We don't know how or when or why Elisha joined this campaign but none of the kings knew he was there. One of Jehoram's servants mentioned that he was close by and the trio tromped off to go find him. 2 points of interest: 1) Clearly, Elisha was so well known that even the King of Judah was familiar with his reputation. 2) Normally, kings send for people, they go off looking for them on their own. This reveals the true desperation of their crisis. They are willing to forgo normal royal protocol to find that prophet. This is one parade that was fervently praying to be rained on.

When they finally find Elisha though, it's not all roses and clover. This is not the happy meeting the King of Israel may have been expecting. It looks like Elisha was not willing to entertain Jehoram's sin anymore than Elijah was of Ahab. Elisha's response to Jehoram lacks "sympathy" (13). "Whoa, Bubba! If you got a problem, go cry on someone else's shoulder; like those prophets that your mom supported or those that your daddy kept around the royal court!" Apparently, Jehoram never sought Yahweh's guidance before this ill-fated military excursion. Now that he's in a jam, he needs Yahweh's help. Again, he declares his belief in the sovereignty of God but not to God's glory.

Elisha's next response is both carefully solemn and painfully blunt (14). He sounds a lot like old Elijah right there. But what is Elisha really saying here? He's saying that Jehoram would be beyond the help of God's Word – if it weren't for Jehoshaphat. That's a horrifying implication, or at least it should be – to know that you can place yourself in a position to be beyond the point of receiving help or direction from God. How would you know if you are in danger of doing that? If your habit is to seek God only for your convenience then, like Jehoram, you're just playing with God. If you're only interested in God as an escape from trouble but not discipleship, then you're trifling with God. Jehoram just wanted to use the word of God for the moment, not submit to it over the long-term. For him, Yahweh was nothing more than the airbag for the disasters of life, something you hope you never have to use. If that's your pattern then you may well be placing yourself beyond the help of God's word. That's the alarming danger of the word of God.

15-25 – After his confrontation with Jehoram, Elisha needs to get his mind centered back on the Lord so he asks for a musician. We don't know what type of instrument was played; I doubt it was bagpipes or banjo. But, it encouraged an attitude of worship and the word of the Lord came to the 3

kings through Elisha. Yahweh's word was a double promise of water and victory! The dry river bed will be filled with water and, although they will hear no wind or see no rain, there will be an abundance of water for both the army and the livestock. If that weren't already enough, God says He will put Moab under their power so completely that **v19** will be their Moabite mop-up strategy.

The author then goes on to flesh out the double fulfillment of this double promise. In the morning the water was there and in the morning the victory began. We could speak at length about the significance of the ditches. This water came from an intense downpour up high in a nearby mountain range and it caused a flash flood in the desert of Edom. This flash flood would disappear as quickly as it appeared so the blessing of water would only be available to the army to the degree that they were obedient in digging the ditches. The ditches collected the water from the flood.

What we would never have guessed from Elisha's prophecy is that the water and the victory are connected. Israel's water brings Moab's defeat. God uses these ditches in a completely unexpected way to supply the need and defeat the enemy. The ditches caught the water that saved the army from dehydration. They're also the means of confusion and defeat for the enemy of God's people. When the Moabite army saw the sun shining on the pools of collected water they assumed it was blood from the 3 kings fighting each other. They took off at a sprint towards the camp of Israel hoping to cash in on some Israelite souvenirs but all they found were Israelite swords and slings. Their victory seems to take shape just as Elisha had predicted (**19**) and Moab seems to be in the last throes of death (**25b**).

What does this section teach us? Does it not reveal to us the typical tendency of a gracious and giving God? **V18** tells us that miraculously providing enough water to save a dying army in the desert was small potatoes for God. Oh, He's going to do what you asked, sure! But, He won't limit Himself to such trivial work so He'll hand over Moab too! This is the typical tendency of our God: to not only address our immediate dilemma but also do far more than we asked for. This is classic Yahweh. You come to Him seeking grace and you get grace on top of grace! God's goodness towards us tends to lean in the direction of extravagance. Water and Moab to boot! It points directly to the generosity and omnipotence of our God. Watering an army just wasn't grand enough or lavish enough for Him!

This is an encouraging principle but it also presents a disturbing problem. Curiously, despite his normal wickedness and his complete and continual disregard for the Covenant God of Israel, Jehoram doesn't receive the expected punishment of God's judgment. Instead, he has both the mercy and blessing of God extended to him in the double promise and fulfillment of both water and victory. This is a bit unsettling! I mean, in what universe does this evil, idolatrous rascal ever deserve such blessing and benefit from God? The answer: in no universe because Jehoram didn't deserve anything good from God!

But let's remember why he received these benefits – it was because of Jehoshaphat, the godly King of Judah, the king who was a direct descendent of David. Once again, it's God's covenant with David that introduces the grace of God and brings about God's rescue of His people. But we need to understand that Jehoram received all of these blessings because of another and it is the same with us today. What was Jehoram's spiritual state: not a evil as he could have been; not as righteous as he should have been. Do you know anyone like that? I do! I've known him all my life and I see him every morning when I look in the mirror. We are all in the same position as Jehoram. If we receive any benefit from God it will only be because we stand next to the last Davidic King, Jesus Christ – the Son of David, the direct descendent of Jehoshaphat. We don't deserve even the crumbs from heaven's table but yet we receive heaping helpings of God's mercies and that's only because Jesus, the Davidic King, stands beside us.

26-27 – About this time, Mesha's probably wishing he'd had just turned over the lambs and the wool. He's literally back into a corner and running out of options. Not to say he didn't have any, just not any good ones. His 2nd to last option was to take 700 crack troops and try to break through to the king of Edom – either to flank the attacking army or convince the Edomite king to switch over to his side. This option failed miserably so his last option was a desperate attempt to wake up the Moabite god Chemosh, to get his attention and hopefully convince or cajole him into finally coming around to lend his people a helping hand. "Is that too much to ask after all these years of faithful service? You think you could maybe help us out here, maybe throw us a bone?" It seems like that would be the least he could do but I think the Moabites were already all too familiar with the least that their false god could do.

What does Mesha do? He sacrifices his first-born son, heir to his throne, as a burnt offering up high on the city wall for everyone to see. He's pulling out all the stops, holding nothing back in worship of his capricious, demanding and rarely attentive god. What was the result? It seems that the Israelite army, brazen idolaters themselves; were so shocked and disgusted by this heartless display of infanticide that they packed up and went home without realizing total victory. The Israelites were probably saying, "Sure, we're wicked idolaters but we're not that wicked!"

V27 is what "seeking god" looks like in paganism. You have to coerce and manipulate them, sometimes in the most costly manner. Even unfaithful Israelites were repulsed and horrified but did they get the message? God is revealing a sobering truth to them: this is the shocking lengths pagans go to in their desperation; this is where paganism ultimately leads. Do you recognize all the matchless gifts you have in a God who lives, hears, speaks and delivers without bribery? It's as if the author is pleading with rebellious Israel to realize the absolute treasure that they have in Yahweh, a God with whom they would never have to resort to such horrific lengths. In Moab you can beat your head against a wall or sacrifice your son on it; both are equally pointless and futile. But Yahweh has given Israel prophets like Elisha, through whom they can receive the guidance and help that they need.

This is the easy yoke of the Word of God. What a relief biblical religion is. If you don't believe it, just try paganism!

Someone out there might be thinking that Jehoram experienced the best of both worlds: he did what he pleased and when he got in a jam, God bailed him out. Nice thought – but not accurate. Apparently, like Chemosh, you weren't paying attention. If you look at [ch3](#) from Jehoram's viewpoint, you will notice a pattern of repeated frustration for him. He comes to the throne only to have Moab rebel. He plans a retaliatory assault but his army ends up high and dry at death's door. He gains access to the prophet, the bearer of Yahweh's word, but is severely rebuked. He receives a double promise and fulfillment but is forced to withdraw from the battlefield before realizing total victory. Jehoram should only be used as a model for life if your life's goal is to be a royal loser.

Jehoshaphat is the one to emulate. He believed in God, trusted in God, was faithful to God and because of this, he was blessed physically and spiritually. That should be the pattern of every believer's life. 😊