

## **2 Kings 6:24-7:20 Famine and Feast**

In ancient times, one of the most common strategies in warfare was the siege. An army would invade a territory, surround a city, and prevent anyone or anything from getting in or out. Eventually, the inhabitants of the city would starve and surrender.

That's exactly what we have in this episode of the life of Elisha. The Syrian army has besieged the city of Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. There is no more regular food in the city, and people are selling even the worst bits of food for high prices. Things are so bad that some have sunk to the level of cannibalism. It's a desperate and dire situation.

We know why this kind of thing happens to Israel. Moses told the nation centuries before this what the results would be if they turned away from the Lord and followed idols. God would curse the nation for their disobedience, and this passage from 2 Kings shows us how those curses fell on Israel. Foreign armies would invade, besiege their cities, and cause the people to be so hungry that they would eat their own children (Lev 26:29; cf. Deut 28:53-57). That's exactly what happened. God's word came true precisely as predicted.

And so this passage illustrates the importance of knowing and obeying the word of God. Cf. 7:16-17—"according to the word of the Lord...just as the man of God had said." I.e., God will fulfill his promises and make good on his threats. Israel disobeyed the word of the Lord and ignored the words of the prophets. The result was severe judgment. This principle is still true today: if we disbelieve and disobey God's word, God's judgment will fall.

This story is about God's judgment but also God's mercy. Israel deserved and experienced God's judgment, but God showed mercy to these undeserving people. As the NT tells us, God is severe in his judgment but also abundant in mercy. If you don't want God's mercy, you'll experience God's judgment.

Let's see what the text tells us about God's judgment and mercy on a nation.

I. .24-33 God's judgment on a nation can be very severe.

What kinds of things can happen to those nations that turn away from God?

A. .24 Invasion by foreigners (foreign armies). Even though Elisha had been very good to the Syrian army just prior to this episode, the king of Syria decided to invade Israel and lay siege to Samaria, the capital.

B. .25 Famine

1. In this case, the famine in the city occurred because the Syrian army surrounded the city and would not let any food in. We find out later that the Syrian army, outside the walls of Samaria, had plenty of food. So the famine in the city was caused by the siege.

a) A donkey's head would be the most inedible and least appetizing part of a donkey carcass, and it was selling for 2 lbs. of silver.

This means that things were so bad that only the wealthy could afford the most inedible part of an unclean animal.<sup>1</sup>

b) The KJV speaks of the fourth part of a cab of dove's dung selling for five shekels (2 oz.) of silver. "Dove's dung" is probably not the feces of a dove but a seed pod typically used for animal feed.

2. Food was so scarce that they were eating things normally thrown away or reserved for animal feed.

C. .26-29 infanticide and cannibalism—conditions had gotten so bad in the city because of the siege and the famine that women resorted to eating their own children to survive.

1. Can you imagine how desperately hungry you would have to be to even consider this barbaric option?

2. The fact that the Israelites had sunk to this level was another indication of God's judgment on them.

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<sup>1</sup> John Cheeseman, *Elisha: Man of Mission, Man of Miracles*, People in the Bible (Leominster: Day One, 2015), 71.

God had warned through Moses that, if the nation turned away from him, he would bring severe discipline upon the people, and under that judgment, they would eat the flesh of their sons and daughters. A sign of God's judgment against his rebellious and idolatrous people was disgusting, brutal behavior like cannibalism.

Also, these conditions showed that God would fulfill his word. He had warned that this would happen, and it did. God made good on his threats.

D. .31 Antagonism against believers

1. Blame-shifting: The Israelite king blames Elisha for the Syrian siege. It certainly was not Elisha's fault, but the king blamed him anyways.
2. Intimidation: The king threatens to kill Elisha, thinking him to be the cause of these problems.
3. Rather than dealing with the true problem—idolatry—the king blames Elisha for the siege. Instead of repenting, he's blaming others for his own sin. Instead of calling the nation to repentance, he calls for Elisha's head to be taken off.

**Quote:** Nothing recorded in human history more plainly and fearfully displays the depravity of fallen man and his alienation from God than his behavior toward the most faithful of His servants. The representatives of [God] ... are a thorn in the side of the ungodly. Though they do them no harm, but instead desire and seek their highest good, yet are they detested by those who want to be left alone in their sins.<sup>2</sup>

A common response to God's judgment is to blame others instead of admitting your own sin.

E. .33 Antipathy toward God: The king is angry with the Lord for permitting this situation.

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur Pink, *Gleanings from Elisha His Life and Miracles*. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2005), 199.

1. .30 The king is spotted wearing sackcloth, and doing that was a sign of repentance.
2. But there does not seem to be any genuine repentance going on. The king is not humble or sorry for his sin. There is no change in his behavior.

**App:** Are there any similarities between what happened in Israel 2500 years ago and what is happening in our country today? America is not Israel; God's relationship with Israel is different than that with any other nation. But I think there are signs of God's judgment on our nation right now.

People have, in large measure, turned their back on God and have rebelled against his word. We are not besieged by a foreign army, but many foreign countries have a huge influence on our nation. Through abortion, people are killing about a million babies a year in the US. Opposition to Christians and to the Gospel is growing. We haven't experienced famine yet, but we easily could. Given the right conditions, the store shelves could easily become empty, not only of toilet paper, but of food.

Psalm 9:17 *The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God.*

Proverbs 14:34 *Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.*

I believe that many of the problems befalling us as a nation are signs of God's judgment against us. Historically, we've experienced God's blessing on our nation. "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord." But as our nation has turned away from God, so God's blessing has been withdrawn.

In the northern kingdom of Israel, there was still a remnant of faithful believers. Elisha was a faithful prophet, a spokesman for God who was still calling the people to repentance. Most of the people were idolaters, but not everyone. Some people still had respect for God, but not many.

That seems to be true in our nation as well. We still have many faithful preachers and many committed believers in our country. About 70% of the population still claims to be Christian. That number seems to be declining rather rapidly. Maybe 10% of the adult population really believes the Bible and lives out the Christian life. Soon, genuine, orthodox Christians may be a very small remnant within a largely heathen and pagan population.

And our leaders, for the most part, are unwilling to deal with the real issues—immorality, greed, and irresponsibility. Instead of dealing with these root issues, our leaders want to silence those who are sounding the alarm. They want to blame others instead of themselves. They refuse to turn back to the Lord and his guidelines for living.

God is holy and punishes sin. “Sin is a reproach to any people.” Our nation was founded on Christian values/principles. As we stray from those values, we should not be surprised that God would withdraw his hand of blessing from the nation.

So like the northern kingdom of Israel, America today is experiencing the judgment of God, or at least we see the reduction of God’s blessing. We certainly deserve judgment as a nation. And we need leaders who will call our nation to repentance.

As God’s judgment increases, it remains to be seen how our nation will respond. The correct response to discipline ought always be repentance, not blaming others.

II. 7:1-20 God’s deliverance of a nation can be very surprising.

Elisha hears the word of the Lord (7:1) and declares that God is ready to deliver the city from the famine and from the siege.

- A. It’s surprising that it happens at all. There is no sign of repentance here, no evidence of turning away from idolatry back to the God of Abraham.
  - 1. Most often, when God provides deliverance for sinful people, it’s because they repented. E.g., Nineveh.
  - 2. In this case, God provides deliverance even though there is little sign of repentance. God is simply being merciful and gracious to his stubborn and rebellious people.

3. .31 Jehoram, the king, is ready to kill Elisha.
  - a) He's not truly repentant; he doesn't humble himself and admit his sin; he doesn't turn from his idolatry and lead the people to do the same.
  - b) He apparently blames the prophet for this siege and famine. He vows to kill Elisha for these conditions.
4. 6:33 is a little bit cryptic. In vs. 32, Elisha is talking with the elders at his house. The king's messenger comes and apparently delivers the words of the king. Or perhaps the king himself says this: "Behold, this evil *is* of the LORD; what should I wait for the LORD any longer?" In 7:2, we find that the king was there when Elisha made this prophecy, so he arrived at some point.
  - a) Elisha must have previously advised the king not to surrender to the Syrians but to wait for the Lord to deliver the city.
  - b) Things had become desperate in the city, and the king was just about ready to abandon Elisha's advice. "Why should I wait for the Lord any longer?" He's about ready to take matters into his own hands and give up hope that God would deliver them.
  - c) The king did not believe in the Lord. He was a great idolater. But apparently the king was following Elisha's advice to wait for the Lord to rescue them.
5. In spite of all the wickedness of the king and the people of Israel, God delivers the nation because of his own good purpose and pleasure.
6. God is by nature long suffering and compassionate. Even though the king and the people of the city didn't deserve God's mercy, God showed grace and compassion to them. For his own good purposes, he decides to save the city.

God's holiness required this severe judgment, but his grace and mercy required the deliverance of the city.

**App:** If our nations is to be saved, it's only because of God's great mercy and grace, not because we deserve it. If our people do not repent, the only hope we have is that God will extend mercy and grace to us and not give us what we deserve in spite of our great depravity.

B. .1 It's surprising in its prediction.

1. The people are starving; the food has run out. People are resorting to brutal, vicious behavior. The king is contemplating murder. So things are almost as bad as they could get.

2. In spite of all of that, Elisha makes a bold prediction that defies belief: the current situation would be entirely reversed within just a few hours. He predicts that the next day, food would be abundant and cheap.

3. .2 The "royal officer" found that prophecy utterly incredible. Elisha's prophecy seemed virtually impossible to this man.

Instead of welcoming this prediction with thanksgiving, he expresses his doubt. That was a big mistake; it cost him his life.

**App:** When we hear the word of the Lord, our duty is to accept it with thanks and believe it, not doubt it.

We should remember that all things are possible with the Lord. God can do what may seem to us to be totally unlikely.

C. .3f It's surprising in how it happened.

1. Remember in the last episode, God blinded the Syrian army; he caused them not to perceive where they were. In this case, God again caused the Syrian army not to understand reality.

The whole Syrian army runs away because it hears what it thinks is the sound of a huge force approaching. They run from the siege and leave all their valuables behind.

2. .3f Four lepers go out to the Syrian camp and find it unoccupied, with many valuables and food left lying around. After taking as much as they wanted, they decided to tell the people of the city.

3. .11-16 Eventually, the king and the people realize that the report is true, and the whole city goes out to plunder the camp of the Syrian army.
4. .18 Elisha's words come true; the merchants sell the Syrians' food at reasonable prices. The man who doubted that this could happen saw it but died before he could eat any of it.
5. So this is a very unlikely and surprising turn of events. No one could have imagined that this is the way things would turn out. For whatever purposes, God delivered the capital city of the northern kingdom from famine and death.

**App:** Things today in our nation may seem bad, but they are not as desperate as they were for the city of Samaria under siege. We are not surrounded by a foreign army. We don't have famine. People have not been reduced to cannibalism. No one is trying to kill us.

But we have recently gotten a glimpse at what could happen in our country given the right conditions—riots, looting, burning, theft, destruction of property, disrespect for authority, racism, Marxism. The entire culture of our nation could change for the worse very quickly. Some very smart people believe we are on the verge of a huge upheaval in our nation.

Many people describe what's happening in our country as a civil war. A great many people want to burn down the whole structure of society. God could certainly use these conditions to bring our country very low. It's not beyond imagination that something disastrous could happen to us if things don't change.

Will God use surprising means to deliver our nation from judgment? I don't know. I hope he will.

- D. .17 It's surprising in its severity on one who doubted the word of God's prophet.
  1. The official who was trampled by the crowd merely expressed his doubts about Elisha's prophecy. That would seem to us to be a fairly minor amount of disbelief.



2. In the midst of God's deliverance of everyone else in the city, God's judgment fell on this one man for his doubt of God's word.
3. What happened to him shows that we should never doubt the word of God.

**Quote:** The Word of God proved to be absolutely trustworthy, not only in what it said about God's deliverance from the famine, but also in the words of God's judgement on an unbelieving sceptic.<sup>3</sup>

**App:** What kind of judgment/destruction awaits those who turn away from God and his word? It will be very severe.

This episode in the life of Elisha shows the severity of God's judgment and the abundance of God's mercy.

God has not changed. Paul tells us in the NT, *Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God* (Ro 11:22). God is severe in his judgment but good in his mercy and grace.

When we turn away from God and disobey his word, we can count on God's judgment or chastisement. That's true personally and nationally. When we believe God's word and obey it, we can expect God's deliverance and blessing. God will fulfill his promises and make good on his threats. Let's pray that God will withhold his judgment and show mercy to our nation.

And we should recognize the personal application of these principles. We all deserve God's judgment because of our sins. Yet God extends mercy to us, not because we deserve it, but because God is merciful and gracious by nature. We can escape God's judgment when we repent of our sin and turn to Jesus in faith. Believe God's word is true; he will fulfill both his promises and his threats. Repent and turn to Christ before God's judgment falls on you.

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<sup>3</sup> John Cheeseman, *Elisha: Man of Mission, Man of Miracles*, People in the Bible (Leominster: Day One, 2015), 75.