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## MUCH BETTER THAN A DRONE STRIKE 2 Kings 3:1-24

If you drive east out of Bakersfield on State Highway 58 you will go over the Tehachapi mountains into the Mojave desert. It will take you through the town of Mojave and past Edwards Air Force Base and on into the desert. If you made that drive at some point along the highway you would see signs pointing to a place called California City. In 1958 a real estate developer bought 80,000 acres of desert land not far from Edwards and made plans for a master planned community that he envisioned as the next great city in California, one that would eventually rival Los Angeles.

Talk about failed dreams. That one was a whopper of a bust. What the developer, a man named Nat Mendelsohn, apparently did not notice was that his land was dry, desolate, ugly, brutally hot in the summer months and pretty far from anything. I have this memory of my parents driving us out there to see this new development when I was a kid. I recall thinking when I saw it, “Oh, yeah, this is going to be a big hit. I hope we can move here and buy a house on Rattlesnake Drive near the corner with Scorpion Street. Maybe a block away from Tumbleweed Court. That's a great location because it won't be far from the 'Die of Thirst in the Desert' Recreation Center over in Pound Sand Park. This is the dumbest thing I've ever seen. No one in his right mind will choose to live here.” It made Bakersfield look like Eden. I proved to be prophetic, because hardly anyone did want to live there. It didn't take a crystal ball to see that was never going to be appealing. The project failed badly and went bankrupt. There is a small city there today, but I still think you would have to be desperate to willingly choose to live in such a place. I know that there are people who love the desert. I am not one of them. The Palm Springs area is all right, but that's because people have prettied it up with landscaping so it doesn't look quite so much like desert. If you love the desert, I salute you. But it is way too dry and barren for my taste.

However, though I may not much enjoy the physical desert, it is highly preferable compared to the metaphysical deserts all of us will have to endure at various points in our lives. I refer to those times in life that seem arid, hopeless and barren, times that we will all experience at some points. Have you ever felt like you were lost in a featureless wilderness with no hope of relief? I really hate the experience of being out in a barren wilderness when it comes to my circumstances in life.

Unfortunately it seems that God does some of his best work out in the wilderness. We have seen that in the wilderness experiences of Moses, Elijah and also the people of Israel. Today we will look at a biblical wilderness event that is not frequently discussed. Hopefully we will learn what God wants to teach us from this wilderness incident. It's in 2 Kings 3:1-24.

### THE ARMY ENDED UP IN THE DESERT

This incident happened when the Hebrew people were divided into two different countries, called Israel in the north and Judah in the south. The north had a succession of bad kings, the worst being Ahab. After he died his son, Joram, became king. Verse 2 tells us that he was better than his parents. However, that still left a lot to be desired. Saying he was better than his parents is a bit like saying that Spam is better than no food at all. That may well be true but that doesn't mean it's good.

Joram, we are told, did evil in the sight of the Lord. He did some good things. He got rid of the Baal worship that had been the hallmark of his parents' awful regime. However, we are told he continued the same sins as Jeroboam, the first northern king. Jeroboam led the split of the northern Hebrew tribes from the south. To keep his people loyal to him he created a competing religion focused in worship centers in the north rather than in Jerusalem, which was in the south, even though God had clearly commanded his people to worship in Jerusalem. His motivation was not to encourage his people to be more diligent in their religious practices. It was purely pragmatic. He wanted to do everything he could to make them loyal to the northern kingdom and to him.

Those actions were considered grievous sins by God. Now they may not seem all that horrific to us. After all, they weren't heinous acts like sacrificing children as some of the Canaanite religions did. Sure, they weren't in line with God's commands, but they didn't hurt anyone, so what's the big deal? Jeroboam made a choice to disobey God's commands because he deemed it to be politically expedient. He decided that what was most important is that he keep his people loyal to him. So his position as king was more important than obeying God. That's what his choice said. Any time we decide that something is more important to us than doing God's will we are choosing evil. We are modeling for others that doing God's will should be sacrificed whenever it interferes with something you want. That's how evil happens.

Joram made the same choices Jeroboam did. He wanted the people of the north to be loyal to him as their king more than he wanted to obey God. There is a huge

lesson for us right there, for every temptation we will ever face is going to come down to what is most important to us, some things we want or doing God's will.

When Joram took the throne, Moab, a nation to the east of Israel, was under the rule of Israel. Moab had a kind of on again off again conflict with Israel for centuries. At that point Israel had the upper hand and Moab had to pay tribute to the Israeli king every year. Moab was in what is Jordan today east of the Dead Sea. It gets enough precipitation that it has grasslands suitable for raising animals. So the Moabite ruler had to give 100,000 sheep annually to Israel.

When Ahab died, Mesha, then ruling Moab, figured if he was ever going to get out from under Israel's thumb, this was the time. He thought maybe Joram wouldn't be as powerful as his dad. So he declared his independence and refused to send the tribute to Israel. This was a revolt against Israel that Joram knew he could not let happen. It was time to go to war with Moab and put an end to the rebellion. He invited Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, to join him in his war against Moab. Jehoshaphat jumped at the chance, hence his nickname, Jumpin' Jehoshaphat. Actually I just made that up.

Jehoshaphat agreed to help Joram, probably to create closer ties to the northern kingdom, with which there was occasional conflict, and to put down Moab, which also caused problems for Judah periodically. The kings decided to take the long way around south of the Dead Sea, going through the territory of Edom and invading Moab from the south. If you know any military history you might recall the famous "left hook" maneuver led by General Norman Schwarzkopf during Desert Storm, the first war against Iraq more than 25 years ago. Saddam Hussein's Iraqi army had invaded and occupied Kuwait and refused to budge. So coalition military forces planned to launch an attack from Saudi Arabia to drive the Iraqis out of Kuwait. However, instead of driving due north from Saudi territory Schwarzkopf pulled off a brilliant though very risky and technically extremely demanding tactic of maneuvering many of his forces through the desert way out to the west and north without the Iraqis ever suspecting a thing, thus skirting the border defense positions they had set up along Kuwait's southern border with Saudi Arabia. He launched his attack from the west instead of the south and caught the Iraqi forces totally by surprise.

This is kind of what the kings of Israel and Judah did. Moab was expecting an attack from Israeli forces and were certain they would come from the northwest, around the top of the Dead Sea. They had a stronghold in the north and heavy defensive border positions to the north and northwest. So the plan was to go south

around the Dead Sea and catch them by surprise. This involved enlisting Edom, through whose territory they would have to march, in the invasion plan, and they were eager to join in the attack. So the coalition army headed into Edom territory and began its maneuver. I wonder if as they made this plan someone said, “What could possibly go wrong?” Unfortunately they made a serious miscalculation. The territory of Edom south of the Dead Sea contains some forbidding terrain, and much of it is extremely dry. The army was going to spend considerable time in the wilderness before it ever got to the place where it could actually invade Moab. The army marched for a week, and ran out of water. Joram said in verse 10, “Has the Lord called us three kings together only to deliver us into the hands of Moab?”

Logistics is the Achilles heel of any military force, especially an army that is on the move and attacking. Late in 1944 during World War II allied commanders thought the Germans were essentially defeated. They were in total retreat. The allies were sure the Germans were incapable of mounting any kind of offensive, and then the Nazis shocked them by attacking through the Ardennes forest with three Panzer divisions. It was an ill-conceived attack that could never have accomplished the goal of ending the war. However, it did have the potential for doing serious damage to the allies and causing the war to last much longer. But it failed in its objectives in large part because the Germans quickly ran out of fuel. As fearsome as they were, Panzer tanks, the best in the world at the time, without fuel were pretty much useless hunks of metal. Logistics proved to be the problem that killed the offensive. Joram feared his coalition armies were going to fail and succumb to Moab not because it was a superior military power, but because of a logistical problem. They didn’t have water. No army is going to go very far without water.

### GOD CAME TO THE RESCUE

Jehoshaphat wisely recommended they consult a prophet to see what the Lord would tell them they should do. He was informed that Elisha, Elijah’s protégé, was nearby. So they asked for his help. Elisha initially wanted no part of Joram. He suggested he go talk to his own “prophets,” who of course would be of absolutely no help whatsoever. But Joram insisted he needed a prophet of God to get some help because at that point he thought God had hung them out to dry.

Verse 14 tells us that Elisha answered, “If I did not have respect for the presence of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, I would not pay any attention to you.” But he did have respect for Jehoshaphat, because he was a godly man who tried to obey the Lord. That proves to be an important point to note, one I will come back to. After Elisha consulted the Lord he had good news for them. He told them in verse 16 the Lord

said, “I will fill this valley with pools of water.” Some older translations have God telling them to dig trenches for the water, but newer translations reflect current thinking that was not part of the original text. God went on to say in verse 17, “You will see neither wind nor rain, yet this valley will be filled with water, and you, your cattle and your other animals will drink. In verse 18 he told them also that the Lord would deliver Moab into their hands. In other words, God would see to it that they would win.

Verse 20 says, “The next morning, about the time for offering the sacrifice, there it was, water flowing from the direction of Edom! And the land was filled with water.” As God said, there was no storm, there was just a lot of water filling up the wadis of the area. It has been suggested there was a storm in the highlands earlier and the water was a sort of flash flood that resulted. Perhaps, that’s true, but we don’t know where the water came from. God said it would come, and it came.

Caught off guard by the attack from the south Moab, in a panic, rushed all available forces to the area. They woke up early the next day and looked out on the valley where the Israeli coalition troops were bivouacked. They saw the rising sun reflected on what appeared to be red liquid. They concluded it was blood because they knew there was no water down there. With that much blood around the only explanation could be that the coalition had fallen apart, the armies had started fighting among themselves and killed each other off. All Moab needed to do was walk in and finish the job. What they didn’t realize was they were seeing the red rays of the early morning sun reflecting off water, not blood. There had been no bloodbath fratricide and the enemies of Moab were just fine. When the Moab army came into the valley the Israelis jumped them. It was no contest. Israel routed them, just as God said would happen and the victory was won.

### IMPLICATIONS

That’s a nice, if somewhat obscure history lesson, but how does that have any relevance for how we live our lives? There are two ideas that show up in this story that we can learn from. Both of them derive from this situation that seemed hopeless to Joram.

### GOD’S PEOPLE CAN BRING BLESSING

I want to draw your attention to Elisha’s comment to Joram in verse 14. He told him had it not been for the presence of Jehoshaphat he would have paid no attention to Joram. Jehoshaphat was a godly man. It was his idea to seek out a prophet of the true God. And it was his presence that was the crucial factor in how

the battle turned out. Israel won that battle because God was answering the prayers of faithful Jehoshaphat.

There is a message for us in that truth. That message is that God's blessing will often spread to other people as a by-product of the fact that his people are present and he is blessing them. When Abram was called by God in Genesis 12:1-3 to become the father of his covenant people, he promised him, "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Abram would be a blessing, and all people on earth would be blessed through him. The ultimate fulfillment of that promise was that Jesus the Messiah would be a descendant of Abraham and would bring the blessing of grace and eternal life to the entire world. But God also said Abram would in general be a blessing. He would bring blessing to other people.

It has always been God's plan to use his people to be a blessing to others, even to those who do not believe in him. The mere presence of godly people can have a huge impact on those around them. Consider the curious incident in Genesis 18. God informed Abraham that he was about to bring a terrible judgment on the city of Sodom because the people there were so brutally awful. This concerned Abraham because his nephew, Lot, whom he loved, lived there with his family. He was afraid they would be collateral damage in the devastating destruction God said would come. So he ventured to ask God if there were some way to avoid the judgment.

In Genesis 18:23-24 Abraham said to the Lord, "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it?" How would it be just to kill those 50 innocent people because of the evil of other people? God agreed that would not be right and said that if he could find 50 righteous people there he would spare the entire city. I've seen estimates of the population of Sodom ranging anywhere from 4000 to 250,000. Even at the lowest end 50 is a really small percentage of the population. It works out to 1.25%. At the high end it would be the miniscule amount of 2 hundredths of one percent. But Abraham wasn't done.

He continued negotiating with God. How about if there are only 45 righteous people in Sodom? God allowed that 45 would be enough to save the city. Abraham

went for 40, then 30. In the end, God said for the sake of even 10 righteous people he would not destroy the city. At the very most that was a quarter of 1 percent of the population. It may have been as little as 1 one thousandth of a percent. The presence of that small of a number of godly people was all it would have taken to save that city. In other words, had there been even that small of a number of righteous people in town they would have been an enormous blessing to the entire city, for because of them the city wouldn't be destroyed. The people of the city would never have known it. They would never have attributed their continued existence to that small handful of godly people, and they would likely have made their lives difficult. But it would have been their presence that made the difference and nothing else.

In Matthew 5:13 Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth." Then in verse 14 he said, "You are the light of the world." We are told by the nutrition police that we have to use salt sparingly and be wary of its inclusion in the foods we eat. Recent research has actually challenged some of that idea, finding that salt plays an important role in our health. However, beyond that, we know that in the first century salt was highly valued and important. In fact it was critical. As a preservative it was essential to the food supply. Our word salary is derived from the Latin *salarium*, which was used of the wages paid to Roman soldiers that allowed them to purchase salt, among other things. That salt was considered a primary issue for them is indicated by the fact that the Latin word for salt was *sal*, from which the word *salarium* was derived.

Because you have the Spirit of Jesus in you, you are the salt of the earth. How much of a blessing is a salary? Would you say you are glad when your salary arrives? That's the message that is imparted by the metaphor "salt of the earth." You are a welcome thing that brings blessing. The same idea comes across in the image of "light of the world." Everyone knows that dark days and dark times are not good ones. They are ominous, and when light comes in to replace the darkness it is a great day. So it is with followers of Jesus. They are to bring light, goodness to the world around them.

If you are a believer in Jesus you have his Spirit, his grace, his love in you and his constant blessing upon you. I've had Christians say to me when they had a really good year financially "God really blessed us this year." I've heard pastors whose churches are growing dramatically say, "God is really blessing our ministry." If you are a follower of Jesus, God is blessing you even if you have a terrible year financially or your ministry is going backwards. That's because God always blesses those he loves. Don't you bless those you love? Are you better than God?

God is continually bombarding you with his love, his forgiveness, his protection, his wisdom, his guidance and his kindness. His grace constantly pervades every moment of your life, even if you don't notice it. For one example he is protecting you from Satan. If he were not your life would be a horror beyond your ability to imagine.

So everywhere you go you are this little circle of God's grace, his love, his blessing and the Spirit of Jesus. That great stuff is going to spill onto other people and they are going to be blessed because of you. As a child of God, one whom he continually blesses without stopping, you bring blessing to everyone, not just you. You may not even understand how that happens, it just does. God blesses his people and uses them to bless others.

Imagine that you live somewhere in the Middle East in an area that is the focus of the war on terror. Further imagine that you learn that a person living 2 doors down from you is a high level terrorist who is high on the US army's priority target list. How do you feel about that? I wouldn't want any part of that because I would know that person might be the target of a drone strike, and I could be collateral damage. Experts say fear of a drone strike grinds on a population, because they never see the drone. They have no idea if it is there or not, and they know it could strike at any moment without warning.

That's a rather negative image, but I want you to reverse it. Wherever you go you could be the target of a divine blessing strike, and people around you could receive collateral blessing. That happened to Joram. It's a pretty good bet without the presence of Jehoshaphat he and his troops would have been in deep kimchi. But the presence of Jehoshaphat meant they were targets of a blessing strike. Joram wasn't obeying God, but he was blessed because he was standing next to godly Jehoshaphat.

The grace and love of Jesus flowing into and through you is going to spill onto other people. It is going to create a circle of grace, love, patience, kindness and goodness. It is going to bless others. This story reminds us that this happens even in the driest wilderness you will ever experience. What does that mean to us? It means we just need to walk in Jesus' Spirit. Live in his grace, live in his unconditional love, revel continually at the fact that he blesses you continually every day with his goodness, and let that flow through you to others. It changes how we think about ourselves and about how we can impact other people. Even in our hardest day, we can be the locus of grace, love and God's blessing, and those around us will benefit.



Every now and then you might hear some preachers who will thunder away that surely our nation will come under God's judgment because it has become so decadent and ungodly. I've heard one say if God doesn't judge our nation he will have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah. I actually remember hearing that 30 years ago, and things have gotten considerably worse since. But we are still here. This is not God's Word, it's just my opinion, so take it for what it's worth. I think I know why. God said he would spare Sodom if as little as a quarter of one percent of the population was right with him. Some statistics claim that more than half of Americans say they are born again Christians. I don't think that's even close to being true. Studies, however, show that if we use measures such as adhering to the Bible as the word of God, faithful church attendance, regular Bible reading and prayer the number of followers of Jesus drops down to somewhere between 7 to 10% of the population. That's not very large, except that remember 0.25% would have been enough to protect Sodom. In America there is 40 times that many. Our nation continues to be protected, experiencing divine blessing because of the presence of salt here.

I've decided I'm going to tell my neighbors, "You owe me. You probably have no idea how much my presence here attracts God's blessing to our neighborhood." Okay, maybe I won't do that. But it is true. And it also does direct my thoughts to the idea that I do want God to use me to bless other people.

Have you ever been in an enclosed space, like on a shuttle bus for instance, when someone who has gone way too long since his last shower boards? That aroma begins to waft through the vehicle and it affects everyone. How much better if someone gets on board carrying a box of freshly baked doughnuts, and that delicious aroma pervades. How great is that? As we walk with Jesus, live in his presence, experience his goodness, grace, hope and joy, that aroma will begin to spread around us, and it will bless others.

Recently I had a curious little interaction. I went to Rubio's on Taco Tuesday. Laurie had called in an order and I went to pick it up. It was very busy, but I finally got my turn at the counter and told the young late teen gal there about our order. She retrieved it and I paid, and then she said, "Thank you. You seem so happy and it's nice to experience that, especially when it's this busy." Uh, okay. It was way too busy for me to discuss that with her. But I wasn't trying to do anything. I wasn't trying to impress her, I just wanted to get some food. But she experienced the effect of God's blessing flowing into my life and apparently spilling onto her.

## GOD CAN BLESS IN ANY SITUATION

Maybe you are out in your own personal wilderness, facing hard, dry times and barren vistas with no hope of change in sight. Maybe you think whatever this problem is God either can't or won't help you with it. The armies of Israel, stranded without water, seemed like a lost cause. How is an army going to survive when they've run out of water and there are no sources of water anywhere near? Listen to Elisha's comment about that in verse 18. "This is an easy thing in the eyes of the Lord." Water in the wilderness? No problem. God could handle that one in his sleep.

In Genesis 18 some men visited Abraham and his wife, Sarah. One of those "men" turned out to be the Lord visiting in the form of a man. In verse 10 he told Abraham, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." Sarah thought that was the dumbest thing she'd ever heard. She just laughed derisively. She had good reason to laugh. At the time she was 90 years old and her husband was 100. They'd wanted kids for 75 years, and at that point were 0 for 75. They lived longer back then, but at age 90, the SS Baby had sailed a long time ago. Having a son was not merely improbable, it was impossible. We're talking Padres winning the World Series impossible. No, we're talking Rick Myatt playing Major League baseball impossible. No, actually it was worse. There was a better chance of that happening than of Sarah having a baby. The plumbing necessary for her to have a baby no longer worked. Ball game over.

But look at verse 14. The Lord's answer was, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" This was a one question theological quiz, and it was pass/fail. No partial credit. I know God doesn't want you to fail this class so I'm going to give you the answer to prepare you for the quiz when you have to take it. The answer is no. It is an emphatic, unqualified NO! Nothing is too hard for the Lord. The prophet Jeremiah would say in Jeremiah 32:27, "Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you."

In Mark 10:26 after Jesus revealed the true dimensions of the problem of people winning God's acceptance by their own merit, in other words, getting salvation by earning it, the disciples, understanding it was hopeless said, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus responded in verse 27, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God." Jesus did the impossible, winning God's love, forgiveness and acceptance for us when we absolutely don't deserve it and cannot possibly gain it otherwise. In the case of Abraham and Sarah the words of Jeremiah and Jesus were proven true, for Sarah experienced the impossible. God

gave her a baby boy when there was no way for that to physically happen. That was true for Joram when there was no water in the desert, and God made water show up.

Sometimes we think things that are concerns for us are too small for God to pay attention to. Other times, conversely we think I the exact opposite, that something is so big, so hard that there is nothing God can do about it. The corrective for either of those errors is to ask what do we face that is ever big the God who created the universe? It's all small to him.

When our son, Toby, was about 3 or 4 one day he and Carissa were out in the front playing with some kids in the neighborhood. Toby came in, found me and asked, "Dad, can I have a quarter?" I could see no reason why he would suddenly have a need for some money. The ice cream truck was not in the neighborhood, so that wasn't it. I said, "Why do you need a quarter, Toby?" He said, "So I can buy a cat." I knew immediately there had to be a story there. It turned out one of the older boys in the neighborhood had managed to corral a stray cat that was wandering the area, and he was offering to sell it to Toby. As you can imagine, my answer was a clear and unqualified "NO!" Was that because his request was too big for me? Did I not have the financial resources to fund such an expensive project? No, that wasn't the problem. In fact, it would be years before Toby would come up with a request that would either excessively strain or exceed my financial resources. I said no because this crafty older boy was trying to pull a fast one on my son, and because I wanted no part of having a cat.

You and I are like Toby when we ask God to work. Nothing we ask from him is going to strain his resources. There are exactly zero situations we will face that would exert even the slightest strain on God's infinite resources. Nothing we face is either too big or too small for our great God to deal with. But that doesn't mean he'll give us whatever we think we want. I could easily have afforded that quarter, but it would not have been a good thing for Toby or anyone else in our family, so I said no.

Throughout history God has worked in a few very brief eras in miraculous ways, but most of his work has been through the quiet whisper, as he did with Elijah. It may not be stupendous and miraculous but somehow he exerts his power in a quiet way to bring about his good and perfect will in our lives.

One of the things we have to remember about the wilderness is that it is often only in the wilderness that we see God accomplish that which is impossible. This truth

plays a role in God using us to bless others, for as we live with the reality and peace that result from knowing that God can and does work even in impossible situations, we bring hope and light into difficult situations. Our hope and peace themselves are a blessing.

A number of years ago Marine Major General Charles Krulak told an amazing story from the Desert Storm campaign. He was responsible to find sources that would provide the water necessary to sustain their troops during the attack that would liberate Kuwait. Somehow in that arid desert region they had to come up with 100,000 gallons of water a day. They managed to find the sources they needed, but then as I mentioned earlier, Schwarzkopf ordered the forces shifted out to the northwest. Krulak's forces ended up out in a dry area with zero sources of water. Krulak had his people consult local Bedouins and oil company geologists, but repeated attempts to locate water failed. Krulak, a believer in Jesus, prayed earnestly for God's assistance. He had prayer meetings each morning. On Sunday just a few days before the invasion was to occur he was praying when he was interrupted by a colonel who said, "General, you've got to come see this." He drove him down a road the Marines had built until they came to a place where about 50 yards from the road there was a pipe coming up out of the ground with a pump painted bright red right next to it and a diesel generator painted green. Krulak himself had traveled down that road many times and had never seen this equipment. Troops from his division, 20,000 men, had traveled down the road, and no one had ever seen the pipe and other equipment. But there it was. They pushed the start button for the generator. It fired up, the pump started working and water began flowing. They measured it and found it was enough to supply...100,000 gallons a day. Krulak said, "That is the power of prayer." He had his last prayer meeting of the war at the site of that miracle well.

Krulak's story has been affirmed and attested to by other members of his division who were there. How did that well get there? How did thousands of American troops pass by 50 yards away and never notice it? Krulak claims God was at work. Was that a miracle? Was that God doing something dramatic? I cannot prove that. All we can say is it was an awfully startling answer to the general's prayers. God certainly was also at work back in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC when he solved the logistics problems of the armies of Israel as water somehow showed up in a dry valley in the middle