

# A Home Among My People

## Political Life and the Kingdom of God

### Bonus Lesson



### Scripture Focus

2 Kings 4:8-37; Matthew 5:13-20

### The Word to Live By

*“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltness, how can it be made salty again? (Matt. 5:13)*

### Session Truth

Christian life calls us to the way of Jesus, which may be different than the political conventions of our time.

## THE CAMPAIGN MESSAGE

From the dawn of creation, the God of Christian faith began to provide order in the midst of chaos. If you’ll notice, much of what is taking place in Genesis 1 has to do with placing things in order: light from dark, day from night, land from sea, and so on. It was that order that allowed life to flourish. Political life is really about how things ought to be best ordered for life to flourish: How should humans be ordered together? How should we order our resources so that our neighbors can flourish?

Politics, seen in this list, isn’t about holding power for the sake of holding power. It is about faithfully stewarding our life and resources in this time between the beginning of God’s creation and the time when God will bring new creation. Is there a political vision that can guide Christians toward that kind of political life?

## THE PRIMARY

On election night, 2012, I was at church. We were holding a service that night, and between elements of the service, I noticed a small group of young men who were huddled toward the back of the building, peering at cell-phone screens, looking for the latest election information. On the line was the political future of their country. For some of them, they were nervously hopeful that the election results were trending

in a way that was favorable to them. For others, they were nervously hopeful that the trend wouldn't hold. The significant point I saw in that group was that everyone was nervous.

Primarily, I think they were nervous because so much was on the line for them. The way the world would be governed was going to be decided that night. Some hoped it would be governed according to a particular political party's platform, and some hoped it would be governed according to an opposing party's vision. Each were dedicated to some version of political options that were given to them by the available selections.

The learning outcome of this lesson is not to argue for or against any of the political options given to us by the systems of governance, but to encounter a vision of political life in the way of Jesus Christ, who lived, preached, and taught a different vision of political life. Jesus' life and ministry opens our eyes to an approach to political life which takes seriously the strange ways that God is redeeming the world, even when those ways make little sense according to the political options given to us by the world around us.

2 Kings is a challenging, strange, and fascinating political book, which is why we will focus our attention there for this lesson. It continually presents differing approaches to political life and asks the reader, "Which of these political visions will capture your imagination?" On the one hand is what we will call the "world of kings." It's the political world as we often encounter it, a world that traffics in political agendas which favor the powerful and insist that history is written by kings in their might. On the other hand is what we will call "the world of the kingdom," a vision of political life which sees that God is writing history through God's own faithfulness to the weak, the poor, and those forgotten by human history.

The hope, then, is that a holiness engagement with political life will not primarily be about aligning ourselves with one of the political options given to us by the kingdoms which surround, but about offering to the world a completely different vision of political life – that of the way of Jesus, who opened new options for political engagement by his path-carving embodiment of a king who is lifted up not on a throne, but on a cross.

## STEPPING INTO THE STORY

### *Background*

Many scholars believe that 2 Kings was composed during a time of Israel's exile from their homeland. In the midst of being taken into political captivity by a foreign king, the composition of 2 Kings serves to remind a holy people of their calling and challenge them to not lose their distinctiveness, and to encourage one another to not be subsumed into a foreign culture.

## *Political Vision in 2 Kings*

As a reminder to remain who they have been called to be, the author presents the people of Israel with a series of stories for the sake of contrasting them against one another. In one set of stories, the political vision of the kings are played out: the kings go to war, they flex their political power, they believe that they have what it takes to advance history in a way that will favor their kingdom. The contrasting stories are those of widows, mothers, lepers, slave girls – those who possess very little or no political power. These stories advance an alternative political vision because we see that God is actually writing a history of salvation, rather than a history of conquest, through remaining faithful to those who are in deep need.

## *Kings*

The king in this story is Joram, a king who does not find favor in the eyes of the author of 2 Kings (3:2). When this story opens, we find Joram has just returned from a military campaign to capture the wealth of a neighboring kingdom. The campaign is a disaster, many in Joram's army are killed, and the king comes home with no profit to speak of.

## *Economics*

2 Kings 4 is the story of a woman who is about to pass from being in a position of power to powerlessness. Unlike many of those who we encounter in the pages of 2 Kings, the Shunammite woman is economically well-off. She is married to a man who can afford to meet all of her needs. That provision, however, is about to run out. Her husband is very elderly, and when he dies, so does her economic security.

## *Connections*

This woman has a previous connection to Elisha. She used her economic abilities to build him a guest house on her property. Elisha would use this as his quarters when he was in the area. Elisha is a prophet, but he has political connections. He has the ear of Joram, the king. Joram has listened to Elisha in the past, and we are led to assume that he would listen to Elisha again in the future.

## *Plot*

Knowing that her economic security is going about to run out, Elisha makes an interesting offer to the Shunammite woman, who had been gracious enough to provide housing to Elisha. He offers to speak to the king or the commander of the army on

the woman's behalf (4:13). We aren't told directly in the text, but there are probably marital undertones to this question; the king may be willing to take her as a wife, and provide significantly more of the kind of economic security that she is about to lose. Her response is fascinating: "I have a home among my own people," she says. Seeing that she has declined his offer, Elisha wonders what he can offer to her, and instead promises that she will bear a son within a year. The child is eventually born, but dies a short time later. The woman begs Elisha to do something for him, and after going to the boy and lying on the boy's body, the boy returns to life.

## STEPPING INTO THE KINGDOM

- The woman's response signals that there is a difference between the king and her own people. There is difference between them, between the way they operate, and between the way they see the world. The king may have his way of seeing the world, but that way is different from the way of the woman's people, and she is choosing the way of her people.

- The woman doesn't argue against the king, nor does she attempt to overturn him. She simply suggests that she wishes to go another direction. Her point is not political overturning, but faithfulness to the ways of God's people, even in the midst of a king's reign that is based on a fundamentally different political vision of the world.

- Aligning herself with the king would have aligned the woman with the king's way of obtaining things, like economic security. The king, we have seen, obtains security by making war against neighboring kingdoms and taking that which will make him secure. The woman is opting to entrust herself to God's very different way of making provision for God's own people. That way is strange and different, but the woman opts for it because it is the way of her people.

- The options given to the woman were clear, based on the political realities of her day: she could align herself with the powerful, or she could condemn herself to join the weak. She sees another option that wasn't given to her by the conventional political wisdom of the day. She is able to envision a political future according to God's humble faithfulness, and she chooses that path instead of any of the political paths offered to her by conventional political wisdom.

- Her response is a subversion of the conventional political wisdom that would say that political life must be about aligning oneself with the powerful. She does not seek to tear down the world of kings, but humbly seeks to offer an alternative, that of the world of the kingdom of God, which does not depend upon war or the use of power to steal from neighboring kingdoms.

- The 'given' political world begins with the quest to gain power and ends with

the quest to gain power. While power can be used for good just as much as it can be used for evil, the logic of ‘given’ political wisdom is that you must gain power by opposition, or you will lose power in defeat. If those are the only options we see to choose from, we will likely cease to offer the world a holy and refreshing difference. We will, to use Jesus’ language, lose our salty distinctiveness. Engaging the political world in the strange way of God offers a salty alternative to a world which is offered only a bland vision of political life.

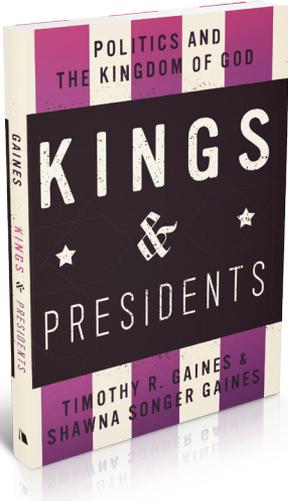
### A STORY

Jacob and Dorothee Morris had been happily living in and around Nashville, TN since they were married in 2009. After completing seminary studies, Jacob entered pastoral ministry while Dorothee

accepted a position working in the School of Theology and Christian Ministry at Trevecca Nazarene University. It was there, in Dorothee’s office, that they found themselves discussing a pressing

New from **Shawna Songer Gaines** and **Tim Gaines**

## *Kings and Presidents*



What if a faithful approach to politics wasn’t simply about who was going to win the next election? How might our political hope change when we encounter a God who offers us a different kind of kingdom?

God isn’t asking the church to be politically uninformed, apathetic, or even bi-partisan. On the contrary. God is asking us to be faithful citizens of the kingdom—a kingdom of surprising hope where the majority of God’s work to save the world will be done.

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political issue which was deeply rooted in a political vision of the world. While Dorothee had been at home in her native Germany, she noticed an influx of displaced refugees who were fleeing their homes in Syria because the political instability and violence had become too dangerous to endure. Germany was a much safer and more stable place to live, and so many Syrians, at great risk to themselves and their families, left everything they knew for fear of what was taking place in their home cities.

When the images of a young Syrian boy's lifeless body, washed up on the beach near where his family had been attempting to flee the violence in their towns, began being shown in news media, Jacob and Dorothee were moved with compassion. After all, their own 3-year-old son wore the same kind of Velcro laced shoes and the same rocketship t-shirt as the boy who had lost his life as his family fled for their lives.

It was around the same time that the Syrian refugee crisis also began to be debated in political centers around the United States. State capitol buildings, senate chambers, and public hearings became venues of airing out the

given political options. One option was to welcome those refugees. The other option was to turn them away. The debate spilled into the news media, classrooms, workplaces, and churches. Each side argued their points: safety vs. hospitality, security vs. welcome. These were the given political options.

Jacob and Dorothee saw another option. It wasn't an option offered to them by the political conventions of the day. They contacted the Church of the Nazarene's Global Mission Department, resigned their jobs, sold their possessions, and made preparations to step into the flow of those who are fleeing for their lives. As Nazarene missionaries, Jacob and Dorothee will work among those who have been forced from their homes into refugee camps, working there for the sake of a God who heals by stepping into dark situations. This is the way of Jacob and Dorothee's people, called Nazarenes. That way opened a different kind of political vision. That kind of political vision allowed them to see other kinds of political options than the ones being given to them by the political debates of the world.

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## by TIMOTHY GAINES

*Timothy Gaines used his time as pastor of Bakersfield First Church of the Nazarene to seek distinctly Christian approaches to pressing contemporary issues and to apply those responses in faithful and creative ways in the local church setting. Tim now serves as assistant professor of religion at Trevecca Nazarene University.*

## SESSION PRESENTATION

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- A. Stepping into the Story
  - a. Break into discussion groups and read 2 Kings 4:8-37.
  - b. Ask each group to identify:
    - i. The political vision of the king.
    - ii. The political vision of the Shunammite woman.
    - iii. How those might differ from one another.
  
- B. The Strangeness of God's Story
  - a. As a group, discuss the ways that:
    - i. You see the way God is working in this passage.
    - ii. Is the way God works something you think the people in the story would have expected?
  
- C. Ask the group to compile a list of political options that are given to us by the world, perhaps around a particular current issue. Look for common themes or ideas among those options. What kind of political vision is being given to us by these options?
  
- D. Read Matthew 5:13-20 (You may wish to read through verse 48.)
  - a. When Jesus talks the Law, what kind of options did that Law provide to the people of his day? (The rest of the chapter may help.)
  - b. Does Jesus teach his disciples to live according to those options?
  - c. Does Jesus teach his disciples to destroy the Law?
  - d. What kind of political options does Jesus open up for his disciples?
  - e. What do you think it means to be "the salt of the earth" in this political context?

## Summary

- *The world often operates according to a certain political story, which makes political life about winning through beating the opposition.*
- *The Kingdom of God doesn't want to destroy political life, but has a different vision of it, which is about the way of holiness. It is the particular and peculiar way of God's people.*
- *Often times, our peculiar way of seeing the world will mean we can't simply accept one of the options given to us by the political systems of the world. We are often called to offer an alternative that is faithful to the way of Jesus, which means that it may call for humble engagement for the sake of serving others.*

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