

You may remember from last week, we talked about Ahaz and how he was afraid at being attacked by the northern kingdom of Israel and of Syria at the same time. God had told him at that time, "Don't be afraid. I'm going to take care of it. There's nothing to be worried about." But Ahaz still rejected him and didn't want anything to do with the Lord. And as a result, God promised a judgment would come upon Judah. And our reading from the Old Testament today, from 2 Chronicles chapter 28, is part of that judgment. Because the attack that Ahaz feared has now happened. Israel and Syria together have attacked Jerusalem. And the other thing he was so afraid of also happened. He lost that battle. And this is the outcome of that battle, which we hear in the first part of this chapter: "Therefore, the Lord his God gave him into the hand of the king of Syria, who defeated him and took captive a great number of his people and brought them to Damascus. He was also given into the hand of the king of Israel, who struck him with great force. For Pekah, the son of Remaliah, killed 120,000 from Judah in one day, all of them men of valor, because"--and pay attention to this--"because they had forsaken the Lord, the God of their fathers." They lost this battle because they had sinned. They lost this battle because the Lord had caused them to lose. God had used Israel and Syria together to judge Judah for their sins, and he was the one who brought it about. He was the one who gave them into their hands.

Now, I want to be very clear here. There is no such thing as an accident in history. Things do not just happen. God is the one who is in control of all things. Now, I know that's a lot easier for us to see in good things, right? When things are going well, we say, "Yes God's in control of these things." But God's in control of the other things too. God causes all things to happen, because God is in control. So Judah did not lose this battle because God was just off somewhere, not really paying attention. Judah lost this battle because God chose them to lose this battle. God caused it to happen, because it was a judgment for their sins. And God used Israel and Syria to carry out that judgment.

Now, I want to make one other thing very clear here too. Sometimes when things happen in our lives that we consider to be bad, they're not always happening because God is judging us. I think sometimes we can get that impression, that God is somehow punishing us for every bad thing that happens. God always has a reason for doing what he does, and sometimes that reason is for our good. Take, for example, the thorn in Paul's side. He said he prayed three times to have it removed. "God, please take it away from me." But three times God told him "No, because my strength is made perfect in your weakness." And that thorn, as terrible as it was to Paul, actually served him for his good, because it kept him humble. It kept him from falling into pride and losing his salvation. So yes, God sometimes sends crosses into our lives, sometimes sends things which seem bad, as a means for our good, but he always has a reason for doing it, even if we don't always quite see how.

But God also had a reason for why he caused Judah to lose that day, because he was judging them for their sins. And in doing so, he used Israel and Syria to carry out that judgment, because God very often uses people to do his will. But it's not something that happens in a robotic way, as if God is like a puppet master who is just controlling people and telling them what to do. Israel and Syria were still responsible for their actions, because they chose to do this. They chose to carry out what God wanted them to do. And we see that happening because Israel after they won

the battle began acting like soldiers, frankly. It says they "took captive 200,000 of their relatives, women, sons, and daughters, and they also took much spoil from them and brought the spoil to Samaria." This wasn't unusual. This is how you paid your army in those days. They didn't have salaries or wages. They won battles and then they took whatever they wanted, because that's how they got paid. That's how you kept them going. So there's nothing unusual about that. But the problem here is that they're treating Judah like foreigners. They're not treating them like brothers. And because they're not treating them like brothers, they've actually committed a far worse sin than Judah ever did.

This is why Oded comes to them, a prophet from the north who still believes in God, and says, "Behold, because the Lord, the God of your fathers, was angry with Judah, he gave them into your hand, but you have killed them in a rage that has reached up to heaven. And now you intend to subjugate the people of Judah and Jerusalem, male and female, as your slaves. Have you not sins of your own against the Lord your God? Now hear me and send back the captives from your relatives whom you have taken, for the fierce wrath of the Lord is upon you." Yes, he says, God used you. Yes, you were his instruments. God used you to carry out judgment upon your brothers. But that doesn't excuse how you're behaving now! It doesn't excuse the sins that you have now committed. Repent, Oded says, and send them home, because this is what God wants you to do!

Now, I recognize that this is a complex thing, Christians. We're talking about something that can sometimes I think confuse us. God is in control of all things. God causes all things to happen. But we're still responsible for the things that we do. Sometimes it's difficult to see how those two things work together, how that can be true in both cases. But they are both true. And because they are both true, it teaches us an important lesson about what it means to be a Christian. We are Christians because God made us to be Christians. And being a Christian means that God uses us for his purposes. But that's not an excuse for us to sin. It's not an excuse to just do whatever we want because we are in God.

Because consider the example of the elders of Ephraim, who stopped those who are bringing the captives. They say to them in verse 13, "You shall not bring the captives in here, for you propose to bring upon us guilt against the Lord in addition to our present sins and guilt. For our guilt is already great, and there is fierce wrath against Israel." They say, it's not right what you're doing! You are treating your brothers like foreigners. You need to stop this, before God becomes even more angry with us. And then, even though God had used them to judge Judah, even though he had used them to carry out his wrath, he now uses them to carry out his mercy. Because the elders of Ephraim take care of these captives just like they were their brothers. They clothe them. They feed them. They tend to them. And they take them home. Because that's what God wanted them to do. Just because he was using them to punish them didn't mean that his other will had changed. They were still brothers, those whom God had joined together into one body, and because of that, God wanted them to care for one another as brothers. And that's exactly what these people did.

And Christians, for us too, God has not created us to be Christians so that we can then do whatever we want. God has created us to be Christians in order to carry out his will. And we hear this especially in the book of Ephesians chapter 2 verse 10, where Paul says this: "We are his

workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." Note what he says here. We are his workmanship. God made us to be Christians. It's not something we chose. It's not something that just happened. God chose us to believe in him through his Son, Jesus Christ. And this is a free gift. No one can boast about it. It's not of your doing, as Paul says. God has brought that to be. But for a reason! For good works, so that we would do what God wants us to do, to do the things that he has created us to do. And notice how he also says God prepared them beforehand. God is the one who caused these things to happen. God is the one who has brought you to this moment to carry out his will in the world. All of these things he has caused for you so that we would follow after him in everything.

So we don't want to make excuses then. We don't want to say it's too hard, or I don't have enough time, or just ignore it and turn away. God has brought you here, Christians, to be his instruments, to be his hands in the world. So if there are some among you who are hungry, feed them. If there are some among you who are thirsty, give them something to drink. If there are some among you who are in need, take care of them. If there are some among you who are poor, provide for them. Whatever the need may be, God has called you to be his instrument to carry out his will, because we are the one body of Christ. We are the means which he uses in the world.

Because consider the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. God the Father caused him to go to Gethsemane, and God the Father caused him to come to that point so that he would be the sacrifice for our sins. Jesus could have turned away from that. He could've chosen to not do it. That's why he struggled with temptation. He says to the Father, "If possible, take this cup away from me!" But he doesn't. He submits to the will of the Father and says, "Not my will, but your will be done." So that what God has caused to happen, Jesus goes along with it. He has chosen to submit himself to the will of his Father, so that he would go to the cross to die for our sins. And now risen and ascended, our Lord Jesus Christ calls us by the Spirit to become like him, so that we would carry out his will also in the world.

So Christians, God has caused you to come to this moment and has created you to be who you are because of Christ Jesus. So let us follow after him and do his will, because this is what he wants us to do and who he has made us to be in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you are the master of all of our ways and the one who directs our steps, and have called us to be yours in Christ Jesus. We pray that you would strengthen us to follow after you in everything, so that we would be your hands and carry out your will among ourselves and to the world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.