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For most of my time in college, the church I attended was a small church plant in the Wicker Park neighborhood of Chicago with my wife Jamie, who was at that time my girlfriend. The pastor of this church had been commissioned by a large church in the suburbs to start a congregation in this neighborhood that would reach young, college age and above, unchurched people of a more "alternative" mindset, who didn't have much of a taste for the bigger traditional churches of Chicago. This pastor had a large family, consisting of what grew to be nine children, and was financially supported by his commissioning church. Things did not turn out as planned.

The vision of many church plants is to grow into a self-sustaining entity that provides a powerful, Christ-honoring influence to an area where there is little or no Christian presence. To some extent, this church plant did this. It was a small community of young families and believers who would gather together in various rented, run-down venues to worship the Lord, and who would maintain godly relationships as they lived out their walks with Jesus together. They were never lacking in zeal to lend a helping hand when someone was moving, when there were community outreach efforts, or even when fellow believers needed money to pay the rent. Yet for some reason, our church was not ultimately able to sustain itself, possibly because of the limited financial resources of the twenty-somethings who comprised most of its congregation, possibly because of reasons beyond our control. Amid stories of other church plants that thrived, and grew, and became parent churches of their own, I can remember the last few months meeting in the lobby of an apartment building for worship service. When it ended, many of its former members went to find other churches where they could fit in, longing for the kind of fellowship and deep discipleship they knew so well at the church that would from then on only exist in their memories.

Ultimately it was just simply not the Lord's will that this church should continue to exist. But he did accomplish something greater. He provided for us. In what was for many of us formative early years as Christians, he gave us other strong, growing believers, who would shape us, as we shaped them, into much stronger, faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Many would go on to become parts of other, more "successful" churches that sprung up in the following years in that area. God accomplished his purposes the hard way.

Have you ever noticed how two people on very similar life paths can have vastly different experiences? Sometimes, the other person, doing almost exactly what we do, can for some reason have such an easier time doing it. College and grad students can obviously relate to this. Some students just seem to have an easier time than others. They have money to pay rent and tuition, they take the classes they need, do well, are in, and are out. Much more often, however, education is a struggle, while the funds that seem to roll in for others just never seem to roll in for you. Or for parents, some people just don't seem to have the kinds of difficult issues that you do with your kids. Wouldn't it be great if we could all just see our children grow up to be strong believers, making wise, healthy choices? Others look at people who are so happily married and wonder, "Why didn't my relationship end up like that?" Or what about employment? Why is it that one person will have no problem holding onto a well-paying career, while others among us have a hard time even getting an interview? I could go on giving examples forever, but

the chances are that everyone here this morning has some or many areas of their lives where they wish they could ask God, "Why can't things just be easier for me?"

Make no mistake about it, God is faithful. We might not know how much will be in our retirement accounts tomorrow, or what the results of the next doctor's visit will be, but we know this for sure: God is faithful. God is a God of promises and he will not fail us. Trust in the simple promise of the gospel is essential to what it means to be a Christian. Ultimately, there is the promise of heaven, of spending eternity with him. There is the promise to not leave us or forsake us. There is the promise of establishing his church in such a mighty way that the very gates of hell will not prevail against it. There is the promise that if we seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, God will provide for us what we need. These things are not in question. Where we have difficulty is when the path to the fulfillment of these promises is more rocky than we expect it to be. Again, sometimes, it is smooth, and we praise God for that. But sometimes it is difficult.

This morning I want to look at an excellent biblical example of how God fulfills his promises, sometimes doing so the smooth way, and sometimes the rough way.

For the last two weeks Pastor Lee has been bringing us through 1 Chronicles chapter 17, a chapter which gives us the details regarding what has come to be known as the Davidic Covenant, God's covenant with David. Without rehashing all of the details, we can recall that David had resolved to build God a temple, and that God, far from being on board with this idea, explicitly tells David that he will not be the one to build God's "house," his temple, but that God would instead set himself to the task of building a "house," and enduring and lasting dynasty, for David. Although David was indeed God's servant, it is true that, as the apostle Paul says, "God is not served by human hands" (Acts 17:25). To the contrary, it was God who had taken David, the youngest son of his family, a mere shepherd boy, and had exalted him to the status of kingship. It was God, who, up until now, had been with David wherever he went, and had "cut off all his enemies from before him." This was true, as we have seen already in Chronicles, but what follows this brief summary of all that God had done for David is an explanation by God of what God was still going to do for David, and for his dynasty. He promises to raise up for David a great line of kings, the first of whom, King Solomon, would one day be the one to actually build God's temple. This Davidic king would be to God a son, and God would be to him a father. The throne of this son of David, we are told, will be "established forever." This, of course, is key to understanding who Jesus is—the offspring of David whose throne was and is established forever.

Now if you are following in your Bible my brief recounting of chapter 17, you will notice that I've left something out. Before God makes the promise to David to give him a royal line of descendants, we run into verses 9 and 10, where God says the following:

"And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall waste them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will subdue all your enemies."

So we have essentially four promises made by God to David: (1) God will give his people peace from their enemies around them; (2) God will give David a son who will be, in effect, God's very own son; (3) this son will build God a temple, a place to dwell; and (4) the throne of

this son will endure forever. It is no surprise, then, that as soon as chapter 17 ends, as soon as David responds in praise to God, God sets himself to the business of fulfilling his promises, and the first of these, that he will give his people peace from their surrounding enemies, is exactly what we find God doing in this morning's text, 1 Chronicles, chapters 18 through 20.

This of course gives us a better platform with which to address the giant elephant in the room that shows up every time we read about war in the Bible about—war that God not only allows, but approves of, often commands, and in which he actively participates. You see, God's desire is to give his people a place, a land, where they could live in peace and worship him, practicing righteousness and justice. But here's the catch: He doesn't do this in Disneyworld. He does it on the rough, violent, and unforgiving stage of human history. In Israel's case, he does this in the ancient Near East. If you have a good working knowledge of the geography of this region, then you are aware that the nation of Israel is a prime piece of real estate. Not because it's the best place to raise crops, or because it's got a nice, smooth terrain, but because it forms the only feasible land bridge between the two great superpowers of the ancient world: Egypt and Mesopotamia. This means that anyone wanting to travel between them, whether for trade or for military purposes, or for whatever, unless that person has a boat, needs to pass through Israel. And so this land to which God had brought his people and planted them, was constantly watched with the envious eyes of opportunistic rulers who would have burned Israel's cities to the ground in the blink of an eye if that meant political domination. In fact, that often is what happened. All you have to do is read the book of Judges, or almost any other book of the Old Testament for that matter, and you will see that Israel was constantly under the threat of domination from almost every other kingdom that existed in this region. And this doesn't even begin to address the influence that the religious practices of these peoples that were a constant threat to the true religion of Israel.

And so a king ruling Israel had two options: Dominate, or be dominated. To dominate would often mean asserting military power over these other kingdoms. Sometimes, this was easy, and accomplished with little or no bloodshed. Often, it was not. This obviously does not explain all of the wars in the Bible, especially the conquests at the time of Joshua, but it does get us closer to understanding what is going on in today's text.

As I said earlier, God is setting himself to the task of fulfilling his promises to David, starting with the promise of giving his people peace from their surrounding enemies. In these chapters—chapters 18, 19, and 20—we read about the subjugation of the Philistines, the Moabites, the Aramaean states of Zobah and Hamath, and the Ammonites. Yet one thing that would be immediately apparent if we were to read them through in one shot is that God accomplishes this for David in vastly different ways. In the cases of some, the report of the action is quick, and is easily passed over and perhaps even forgotten. Yet the amount of text devoted to the subjugation of other cities is very high—there is over a chapter devoted to the war with the Ammonites. Why is this?

In all these cases God is fulfilling his promise to his people, to give them peace in the midst of enemies. Yet the fact of the matter is that the fulfillment of God's promises sometimes goes very smoothly, while at other times it is rough, riddled with setbacks, hardship, and even pain. Let's not get ahead of ourselves here, though, and let's especially not get ahead of the text. First, let's look at some examples of God fulfilling his promises in a way that seems to us very smooth and unproblematic.

### *Sometimes, God Fulfills His Promises Smoothly*

Chapter 18 verses 1 and 2 read, "After these things, David struck the Philistines, and he humbled them. And he took Gath and its villages from the hand of the Philistines. And he struck Moab, and Moab became servants of David, bringing tribute." In both cases, David does what he is supposed to, and succeeds. He gains territory from the Philistines (which is technically Israelite territory anyway), and succeeds in subduing Moab. As with any state at this time that was client to another state, the Moabites become tributaries to Israel. The only detail we are given as to any military activity on the part of David is simply the quick note that he "struck" them. We are given the impression that these are quick, easy victories for David.

And then we are given a more extended account of David's conflict with a kingdom significantly further North, the Aramaean kingdom of Zobah. David, we are told in verse 3, is going very far North to the River Euphrates to set up a monument. Setting up a monument was a typical thing for kings in the ancient Near East to do when they wanted to make it clear that they were the overlord of a particular region. And so on his way to set up his monument at the River Euphrates, David encounters the army of Hadadezer of Zobah, and defeats it.

This, of course, was bad news for Hadadezer, who was a powerful ruler in his own right. Just like David, Hadadezer exerted control over other small kingdoms. When such a ruler would exercise this kind of control, he would write treaties, or covenants, with his vassal states, which would require them to provide military support for their overlord in the time of war. This is precisely what happens in verse 5. The city of Damascus comes to Hadadezer's aid. David in turn strikes them down, and subjugates them as well, placing military garrisons in Damascus, effectively taking them out of the hand of Hadadezer. And we read, in verse 6 that they too, like the Moabites earlier, "became servants of David, bringing tribute."

Then, at the end of verse six, we are given a key statement. We read that "the Lord saved David (or "gave victory to David") wherever he went." One thing that is very interesting about this account is the name of the enemy king: Hadad-ezer. Historically, we know of several Aramaean kings by this name, and the name literally means, "Hadad is help." Hadad was the name of a prominent storm god throughout those regions, and so it is quite ironic that we are told that it was the Lord who gave David victory over the great king of Zobah whose very name expressed his confidence in a false god, fashioned in the image of man. Yet David trusts in the one who truly does help, the Lord, and the Lord gives David victory wherever he goes.

It becomes very evident that God is blessing David, because in the next section, verses 9–10, Tou, king of Hamath, another Aramaean state, comes to David to make peace. We read, in verse 10 that "he sent *his son*, Hadoram"—not an messenger, not a servant, his prince—"to King David, to ask about his health and to bless him because David had fought against Hadadezer and defeated him; for Hadadezer had often been at war with Tou. And he sent all sorts of articles of gold, of silver, and of bronze." Remember how I said that these kings David was fighting were opportunists. They would seek to dominate weaker lands and weaker kingdoms at the drop of the hat. Hadadezer, as we have seen, was a formidable force. Earlier in the chapter, Damascus sends its army to fight with the army of Hadadezer, probably because it was bound by treaty to do so for its overlord. And here we have Tou, king of Hamath, sending his son and expensive gifts to David, expressing his willingness to submit to him because, we learn, "Hadadezer had often been at war with Tou." In other words, Hadadezer had sought to subject Hamath in a way it had

subjected Damascus, and apparently Tou of Hamath was much more willing to be a servant of David than a servant of Hadadezer. Once David had defeated his rival, we Tou more than willing to approach David with terms of peace, which David accepted.

Finally, in verse 12, we learn that Abishai, one of David's commanders, defeated the Edomites in a place called the Valley of Salt, placed military garrisons in Edom, and the Edomites became David's servants as well. And then at the end of verse 13, we have the note we encountered earlier once again: "The Lord gave victory to David wherever he went."

As far as we can tell, these are incredibly successful campaigns for David. Sure, there were probably Israelite casualties, and it would have been easier if these other kingdoms simply followed Tou of Hamath in willingly submitting to Israel, but it seems apparent that the text is emphasizing the swift, decisive nature of these battles. Great victories are achieved, peace is established, and God's people prosper. Sometimes God fulfills his promises smoothly.

When God fulfills his promises smoothly, there are two responses that are appropriate, and we see David doing both of these things here in chapter 18. These two responses are what the godly person does in light of the fulfillment of God's promises.

First, the godly give God his due. Those of you who have been following along in your Bibles will notice that I've left out a few things. I've left out those verses that speak of what David did with the riches obtained from these victories. In verse 8, we learn that the bronze captured from Hadadezer is set aside for use in the temple; we are told, "With it Solomon made the bronze sea and the pillars and the vessels of bronze." This is, of course, referring to the construction of the temple. Later, in verses 10 and 11, when we read of the "articles of gold, silver, and bronze," that Tou sends to David, we find that David "also dedicated to the Lord, together with the silver and gold that he had carried off from all the nations, from Edom Moab, the Ammonites, the Philistines, and Amalek." Now it was very common indeed for ancient kings to use riches captured in war to supplement their nations' revenue. With it, armies could be developed to bring in more spoil, public works and monuments could be financed, city walls could be fortified, and royal palaces could be built even more spectacular testimonies to their mighty kings' military prowess. Yet these spoils, these riches, are used by David, not to improve his economic prosperity—they are dedicated to the Lord, for use in his temple. To be sure, many other passages attest to the everyday benefits enjoyed by Israel under David's kingship, yet here, David dedicates his spoil to the Lord.

Why is this significant? Because it is exceedingly and shamefully common for us to forget God when things go smoothly. How many times have you sat and prayed with someone and—you know the routine—"Who wants to share prayer requests?" We write down request, after request, after request, praying for those of us who are sick, those who are struggling in their walks with God, those whose walks with God are non-existent, those who have exams, those who have anxieties and troubles—and *so we should . . .* after all, God tells us, nay, commands us, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil 4:6). But then we get to the bottom of the list and find, yes, the praises. One, maybe two, maybe none. Why is that? In fact, why is it that we do not continually go about our days thanking God, praising him for even the opportunity to live at a time when it is still called today? Do we not realize that "Every good and

every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow of change"?

We like it when God fulfills his promises smoothly, but are we like David when he does? David gives to God what belongs to God—and what is exemplary here is that David does it in good times. And he does this, as we saw in chapter 17, in praise, but he also does it in a way that is tangible, concrete, in a way that costs him. Why? Because everything good we have belongs to God in the first place, and because it expresses trust in God to continue to provide, and it expresses thankfulness to God in a way that goes beyond mere words. We can see how this can apply to our own lives by completing this sentence: "God has fulfilled his promise to me by \_\_\_\_\_, and I can express my thanks by \_\_\_\_\_. Has God taken care of you financially? Has he given you a healthy body? Do you have children who are walking with Christ? Do you have friends, people who love you and who care for you? If you're sitting here today, I know he's put you in a great church filled with people who love you and care deeply about you. God fulfills his promises to us by giving us these things. Do we give him his due?

The second response that godly people manifest when God fulfills his promises is that they use what God has given them to do good. Verse 14 is no verse to miss: "And David reigned over Israel, and he administered justice and righteousness to all his people." David could have been selfish with what God had given him. David could have said, "God is clearly fulfilling his promises to me. He's given me victory, he's made me great. Let me make my donations to the temple, and, well—that's about it." The only thing is, David doesn't stop there. He realizes that it's not just about him and God. God has put him where he has for a reason. God has given him success for a reason. God has given him a unique opportunity to be a blessing to others, and this is just what David intends on doing. "He administered justice and righteousness for all his people." The godly realize that it is not just between them and God, but that who we are before God has a lot to do with what we are like to other people. Jesus said, "As you have done to the least of these my brothers, you have done to me" (Mt 25:40). When Jesus asked Simon Peter if he loved him, and Peter responded that he did, Jesus' response to him was, "Feed my sheep." Not only do the godly give God his due, but they use what God has given them to do good.

### *Sometimes, God Fulfills His Promises Roughly*

Then we come to chapter 19, and we see that, although sometimes God fulfills his promises smoothly, *sometimes he fulfills his promises roughly*. In verse 1, we learn that Naḥash, the king of the Ammonites, a people across the Jordan River to the east of Israel, died. It seems as if David had some sort of formal, treaty-governed positive relationship with this king. But now the death of the Ammonite King Naḥash meant the potential severing of this relationship. So, in verse 2, David sends messengers to console him regarding the death of his father, which is an implicit offer to continue positive relationships between Ammon and Jerusalem.

Hanun's advisors don't think David's motivations are so innocent. Verse 3: "Does David honor your father in your eyes, in that he has sent comforters to you? Has he not sent his servants to come to you to search, and to overturn, and to spy out the land?" Apparently, this is enough to convince Hanun, so he takes David's messengers, shaves them, cuts their garments halfway, at the hip, and sends them away. This is dreadfully humiliating thing to do in this time and place. The beard was something men were very proud of. And you can imagine how shameful these

men of high status, servants of the King of Israel, looked as they walked out of the Ammonite capital of Rabbah, shaven and exposed, with their robes cut at the hips.

Then, we are told in verse six that,

"When the Ammonites saw that they had become odious to David, Hanun and the Ammonites sent 1,000 talents of silver to hire for themselves troops from Aram Naharayim, and from Aram Maakah, and from Zobah (our old friend Hadadezer) chariots and horsemen. And they hired for themselves 32,000 chariots, along with the king of Maakah, and his people. And they came, and they encamped before Medebah, and the Ammonites were gathered from their cities."

For reasons I don't have time to go into, this city, Medebah, is actually the Ammonite capital Rabbah, which we'll encounter elsewhere in this story. So this vast army assembles, ready to challenge David, at the capital of the Ammonite nation.

Verse 8 tells us that "David heard, and he sent Joab (the commander of his army), and the warriors, and the Ammonites came out, and they formed the battle line at the entrance of the city, and the kings who came with him were by themselves in the field." They figure they have the ultimate strategy. Rather than placing all their troops in one spot, the Ammonites assemble their forces into two contingents so that the Israelites will have to fight not one, but two fronts.

David's commander Joab knows what is at stake here. He knows that Hanun and his forces will not stop with the defeat of the Israelites on the field, but that if David's army is defeated here, the Israelite cities, which the Ammonites had tried to capture in the past, will be left vulnerable, and unable to fend off an army of this size. You have Hanun, Hadadezer, and a large coalition of hired mercenary states that have come to finally put an end to this Israel, this so-called people of the Lord. They'd heard of how the Israelite God brought them up out of Egypt, and how he had taken the land of Canaan from the Canaanite city-states, and given it into their hand, and now they've seen in their own generation how this Israel has been able to subdue the Philistines, the Moabites, the Edomites, and Zobah, and how powerful alliances had been formed with the king of Hamath. It was now or never. Destroy the Israelites. Lay siege to their cities. Wipe them off the face of the earth forever!

And so when Joab stood there, his army surrounded by the Ammonites on one side and the Aramaean coalition on the other. At this time, God was fulfilling his promises roughly. So Joab takes his men and faces the armies from Aram, and appoints his brother Abishai and faces him and his men towards the Ammonites. Then, he musters up what courage he has, and issues his plan to his brother:

"If Aram is too strong for me, then you shall come to me to save me. And if the Ammonites are too strong for you, then I will save you. Be strong, and strengthen yourselves for the sake of our people and for the sake of the cities of our God, and may the Lord do what is good in his eyes!"

And then the battle ensues. We're spared many of the details, because within less than a verse, the Lord has already begun to do indeed "what is good in his eyes." Aram flees before the army of Joab, and when the Ammonites see this, that the great army they had hired fled, they too flee from before Abishai, entering their city. But the battle isn't over. Within a matter of days, we

learn from verse 16 that Aram, who had suffered a humiliating defeat before the army of Israel, brings out other forces, lead by their commander, Shopak, the commander of the army of Hadadezer. David responds, this time at the head of his army, crossing the Jordan, and coming to them. David, once again, has a great victory. Verse 18 tells us that Aram fled before Israel, and David killed 7,000 of their chariots and 40,000 of their footsoldiers. David personally had Shopak, the commander of the army, put to death. As a result, Hadadezer, after all these years, makes peace with David, and becomes his servant (verse 19). "Aram," we are told, "was no longer willing to come to rescue the Ammonites."

The final chapter of our text this morning recounts one further campaign, in which the Ammonite capital, Rabbah, is besieged by the army of Israel, under Joab's leadership, and is finally subdued. There are a lot of other details that we just don't have time to go into. Suffice it to say, Hanun, had proven himself too dangerous and reckless of a ruler to govern the powerful kingdom of the Ammonites, and David was ultimately forced to conquer his capital and to take the very crown from his head. We also have, in verses 4 through 8, small, individual stories of some of David's fiercest warriors, and the victories they had over the Philistines.

All of these stories from chapters 19 and 20 have one thing in common: They show us that some of God's promises are accomplished with much greater difficulty and resistance than others. Indeed, sometimes God fulfills his promises roughly. Notice, however, that the outcomes are exactly the same: God's people dwell safely and peacefully in the land, with no external enemies harassing them. I find this particularly well-illustrated from the account of Hadadezer. We've seen him show up several times. At first, resisting David's rule, and then submitting. But then, at the drop of a hat, Hadadezer took the first opportunity he could to throw off Israel's yoke once and for all. Yet again, he was not able to, and suffered not one, not two, but three crushing defeats at the hands of David's armies. Then, finally, when we get to 1 Chr 19:19, where after all this, he and his people become servants of Israel.

As I mentioned earlier, that God is fulfilling his promises is not in question. What there is no guarantee of, however, is whether he is fulfilling them smoothly or roughly. Are your needs met on a silver platter, or would you rather trade your daily routine for a visit to the dentist's office the day they ran out of Novocain? Chances are, there's a mix of both in our lives. When God does things smoothly, that's great. Remember the example of David. Always give God his due, and use what God has given you to do good. We are just as needy for obedience in that area as we are for comfort, and obedience, when things go roughly. And here, this text also informs us.

*The godly are drawn to faithfulness when things get rough.*

All of us suffer; some more than others. We all get a taste the rough fulfillment of God's promises. And the knee-jerk reaction is typically, God get me out of this, get me through this, help me, why are things so difficult right now. That's fine. But don't miss the fact that rough times give us opportunities for bold and courageous obedience to Christ like nothing else does. There is no coincidence that it is in the face of incredibly intimidating circumstances that Joab utters words expressing great confidence in God, "Be strong, and strengthen yourselves for the sake of our people and for the sake of the cities of our God, and may the Lord do what is good in his eyes!" When things in your life stink, don't just wallow in them and get pulled into the quicksand of despair. God is fulfilling his promises in the lives of all of us. But when that

fulfillment is rough, make no mistake, it is a trial. And James says, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him" (Jas 1:12). If things always went smoothly, you would never have the opportunity to be the blessed one who remains steadfast in the face of trials. The rough fulfillment of God's promises is an opportunity to have the depth of relationship with God that would never come if all we ever had were smooth sailing. It is an opportunity to exercise love and courage in a way that never comes to those whose bills are always payable, whose health is always admirable, whose careers are always enviable, but whose trust in the Lord is therefore negligible.

And let us not forget the rough road of greatest fulfillment of all God's promises—God's promise to redeem mankind. We saw today how militant kings like Hanun King of the Ammonites and Hadadezer King of Zobah could not simply be appeased and would not content themselves to live at peace with God's people—they wouldn't simply go away. As bad as these kings were, the human race has always had a much more formidable foe—human sin. God's greatest promise throughout the Bible, as far back as the opening chapters of the book of Genesis, is to deal with this. This is why, in stories like the one we've looked at this morning, it is so important that Israel was preserved. God promised to give David an heir, and through that heir, through David's seed, would come one who would redeem mankind from evil, who would put an end to the curse that is the burden of all Adam's descendants, and would reign on the throne of David, as God said in chapter 17, forever. The reason why we have a promise to trust in is because God's own Son hung on a brutal cross and endured the wrath of God for every single person sitting in this room. It is because God fulfilled this promise—and did so roughly—that the offer of forgiveness of sin stands for all who place their faith in Jesus Christ. We have the promise that when we stand before God, the righteous judge of the universe, we will not be condemned, but will stand before him with a righteousness not our own, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. And it is because of this that we have a promise that all our "slight, momentary afflictions are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." So let the redeemed of the Lord stand before the armies of Hanun and of Hadadezer and say, with Joab, "Be strong, and strengthen yourselves for the sake of God's people and for the sake of the kingdom of our God, and may the Lord do what is good in his eyes." Be strong, and be faithful, for you have a great promise.