

Homiletics Analysis: 2 Kings 13

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Second Kings 13 records the reigns of two northern Israelite kings — Jehoahaz (vv. 1–9) and Jehoash (vv. 10–25) — and closes with the death of Elisha and a remarkable postmortem miracle (vv. 14–21), followed by Israel’s partial recovery of territory from Aram (vv. 22–25). The chapter traces a recurring cycle: Israel sins by following Jeroboam’s idolatry, the LORD delivers them into oppression (here, under Hazael and Ben-hadad of Aram), Israel cries out, and the LORD raises up a deliverer. Yet the repentance is shallow — the Asherah pole remains, the Baal worship at Bethel and Dan persists — and the deliverances are therefore partial and incomplete. The centerpiece of the chapter is the Elisha death narrative: the king of Israel weeps over Elisha, Elisha gives a cryptic sign-act with arrows and the ground, rebukes Jehoash for striking only three times, and then dies. Even in death, Elisha’s bones raise a dead man. The chapter closes with a theological summary: the LORD remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and that covenant-faithfulness drove His compassion and deliverance (vv. 22–23).

This Text — Intent:

God is pressing two interlocking realities onto the reader simultaneously: the persistent, self-defeating folly of half-hearted devotion (Jehoash strikes three times and stops — and therefore wins only three battles instead of total victory), and the relentless, covenant-driven faithfulness of God who delivers even those who do not fully deserve it. The intent is not simply to inform readers about the political history of the northern kingdom — it is to confront them with the cost of tepid faith and to astonish them with the grace of a God whose covenant commitments outlast even the death of His prophet. The postmortem resurrection by Elisha’s bones is not an incidental wonder story; it is the chapter’s sharpest theological statement — that the word and power of God through His servant cannot be extinguished. The reader is meant to feel the tragedy of Jehoash’s restraint and the wonder of God’s persistent grace.

Subject Sentence: Israel’s half-hearted repentance limits her deliverance, yet God’s covenant faithfulness delivers anyway.

Primary Claim: God is confronting readers with the self-imposed limits that half-hearted devotion places on experienced grace — and simultaneously astonishing them with the truth that His covenant mercy persists far beyond what our tepid faith deserves.

Interpretive Evaluation

The sign-act of the arrows (vv. 15–19): The central interpretive question in this chapter is the nature of Elisha's rebuke of Jehoash. Was Jehoash's failure a moral failure of faith, a ritual failure in the performance of the sign-act, or simply a practical military miscalculation? Some interpreters read the rebuke as straightforwardly about military strategy — Jehoash did not commit fully to the campaign. Dispensational readings sometimes flatten this into a political narrative about Israel's territorial fortunes with little theological weight on the sign-act itself. The Reformed and canonical reading is more compelling: the sign-act is a prophetically charged moment requiring wholehearted, active trust — the kind of faith that throws itself fully into what God has commanded. Jehoash's restraint (striking three times and stopping) is not merely tactical timidity; it is a symptom of the same half-heartedness that characterized his entire reign (v. 11 — he did not depart from the sins of Jeroboam). The rebuke is moral and spiritual, not merely strategic. This reading is preferred because the narrative locates the arrow incident within the broader pattern of the chapter's theology — partial repentance produces partial deliverance — and Elisha's emotional anger (v. 19) signals that something of deep theological consequence has been missed, not merely a miscommunication about battle plans.

The postmortem resurrection (vv. 20–21): The Wesleyan/Arminian tradition sometimes treats this miracle as evidence for ongoing miraculous power available through holy persons or relics — a trajectory that leads toward veneration of saints and sacramental objects. This reading overreaches. The text does not commend the man's bones as an ongoing source of power to be sought; the miracle appears to be incidental in its immediate occasion (a burial party under Moabite raid pressure) and theologically pointed in its meaning. The Reformed reading is that the resurrection by Elisha's bones is the chapter's final and most dramatic statement that the word and power of God do not die with His servants — not that the bones themselves carry ongoing efficacy. The miracle punctuates the chapter's larger argument: even when God's prophet is gone, covenant grace persists. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions that have historically used this text in support of relic veneration are reading a theological function into the narrative that the text itself does not support and that the broader canon actively resists (cf. the command against seeking the dead in Deut. 18:11 and the care taken to hide Moses' burial site in Deut. 34:6).

The covenant-faithfulness summary (vv. 22–23): The closing verses explicitly anchor Israel's repeated deliverances not in their repentance (which the chapter repeatedly characterizes as incomplete) but in the LORD's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Arminian readings tend to emphasize the human cry for mercy (v. 4) as the operative cause of deliverance. This partially holds — the text does note that God heard Jehoahaz's plea. But the chapter's own theological summary in vv. 22–23 insists the deeper cause is the covenant, not the quality of the cry. The Reformed reading is that Israel's cries function as the occasion of deliverance but not its ground — the ground is the LORD's covenantal

faithfulness, His remembering of the Abrahamic covenant. This distinction matters enormously for how the passage is applied: it is not teaching that God delivers those who pray sincerely enough, but that God delivers because He is bound by His own gracious covenant commitments.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 15:1–21** — The LORD’s unilateral, self-binding covenant with Abraham is the theological foundation for the summary in 2 Kings 13:23; God’s deliverance of Israel under Jehoahaz is ultimately an act of covenant faithfulness, not a reward for Israel’s devotion.
 - **Judges 2:11–19** — The cycle of sin, oppression, crying out, and deliverance through a judge is the structural template for 2 Kings 13; the Judges text makes explicit what 2 Kings implies — that God raises up deliverers out of compassion for His groaning people, even while they persist in their idolatry.
 - **Numbers 14:17–19** — Moses’ appeal to God’s slowness to anger and steadfast love as the ground for pardoning Israel’s rebellion directly parallels the theology of 2 Kings 13:23; God is not compelled by Israel’s merit but by His own character and covenant pledge.
 - **John 11:25–26; Romans 6:3–5** — Elisha’s postmortem resurrection miracle finds its canonical fulfillment and explanation in Christ, who is the resurrection and the life; the raising by Elisha’s bones is a shadow pointing to the One in whom resurrection power permanently and personally dwells.
 - **2 Corinthians 4:7–12** — Paul’s description of the gospel treasure in jars of clay — where death works in the servant but life works in those who receive the word — resonates with the Elisha death narrative: the prophet dies, but the power of God through him does not.
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Aim: To confront readers with the tragedy of half-hearted faith that limits their experience of God’s grace, and to anchor them in the covenant faithfulness of God that persists even when their devotion does not.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Jehoahaz becomes king of Israel in the 23rd year of	Northern kingdom; synchronism with Judah

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	Joash of Judah; reigns 17 years in Samaria	maintained throughout Kings
2	He does evil — follows Jeroboam’s sins with the golden calves at Bethel and Dan	The refrain “sins of Jeroboam” recurs throughout Kings as the benchmark northern apostasy
3	The LORD’s anger burns; He gives Israel into the hand of Hazael and Ben-hadad of Aram	Aram is the LORD’s instrument of discipline, not merely a political adversary
4	Jehoahaz seeks the LORD’s favor; the LORD listens — He sees the oppression imposed by Aram’s king	The prayer is noted but not characterized as deep repentance; God responds nonetheless
5	The LORD gives Israel a deliverer; Israel escapes from Aram; they live in their own homes again	“Deliverer” (môšîaʿ) — same root as “savior/Joshua/Jesus”; the identity is unnamed, pointing to the pattern not the person
6	Yet they do not turn from the sins of Jeroboam; the Asherah pole remains in Samaria	The deliverance does not produce repentance — the idol stands; deliverance is grace, not reward
7	Jehoahaz’s army is reduced to 50 horsemen, 10 chariots, 10,000 infantry — like dust at threshing	The military devastation is stark; the army that remains is negligible — a shadow of what Israel should be
8–9	Rest of Jehoahaz’s acts; he dies and Jehoash his son succeeds him	Standard regnal formula; transitions to the next king
10–11	Jehoash becomes king of Israel in the 37th year of Joash of Judah; reigns 16 years; does evil — continues the sins of Jeroboam	The pattern repeats; the two-verse summary mirrors that of his father
12–13	Rest of Jehoash’s acts, including his war with Amaziah king of Judah; he	The war with Judah is briefly noted here; fuller account in ch. 14

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	dies and Jeroboam II succeeds him	
14	Elisha is ill with the illness from which he will die; Jehoash visits, weeps, cries “My father, my father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!”	The same cry Elisha made at Elijah’s translation (2 Kings 2:12); Jehoash recognizes Elisha as Israel’s true military strength
15–17	Elisha commands Jehoash to take bow and arrows, put his hand on the bow, then open the east window and shoot — “The LORD’s arrow of victory — victory over Aram!”	A prophetically charged sign-act; the east window faces Aram; the arrow is the LORD’s, not merely Israel’s
18–19	Elisha tells Jehoash to take the arrows and strike the ground; he strikes three times and stops; Elisha is furious — “You should have struck five or six times; then you would have struck Aram until you had destroyed it — but now you will strike only three times”	The rebuke is sharp and the consequence is immediate; Jehoash’s restraint is a spiritual failure, not merely tactical; three partial victories instead of total victory
20	Elisha dies and is buried	Simple, unadorned notice of death — no translation like Elijah; Elisha dies an ordinary death
21	A dead man is thrown into Elisha’s tomb; when the man’s body touches Elisha’s bones, he revives and stands on his feet	The chapter’s most dramatic moment; power through Elisha persists beyond his death; the covenant word does not die
22	Hazeal oppresses Israel throughout Jehoahaz’s entire reign	Summarizes the broader Aramean pressure; historical framing for vv. 23–25
23	But the LORD is gracious and has compassion on Israel; He turns toward them	The theological summit of the chapter; the ground of deliverance is covenant-

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	because of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; He has not been willing to destroy them or banish them	faithfulness, not Israel's merit
24–25	Hazael king of Aram dies; Ben-hadad his son succeeds him; Jehoash defeats Ben-hadad three times and recovers the Israelite cities	Exactly three victories — as Elisha's rebuke predicted; a partial recovery, not the total destruction of Aram that wholehearted faith could have secured

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–9	Jehoahaz: The Cycle Restated — Sin, Oppression, Cry, Partial Deliverance, Persistent Idolatry
2	10–13	Jehoash Introduced — The Pattern Continues
3	14–19	Elisha's Deathbed Sign-Act — The Cost of Half-Hearted Faith
4	20–21	Elisha's Death and the Postmortem Miracle — Covenant Power Outlasts the Prophet
5	22–25	Theological Summary and Fulfillment — Covenant Faithfulness Delivers, Partial Faith Limits

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Israel's half-hearted repentance limits her deliverance, yet God's covenant faithfulness delivers anyway.

Primary Claim: God is confronting readers with the self-imposed limits that half-hearted devotion places on experienced grace — and simultaneously astonishing them with the truth that His covenant mercy persists far beyond what our tepid faith deserves.

Applications (Five)

1. Examine the depth of your repentance, not just its occurrence. (*Mind/Belief*)

Jehoahaz sought the LORD's favor and the LORD listened — but the Asherah pole remained standing in Samaria (v. 6). The northern kingdom had learned to cry for relief without turning from what provoked the oppression. The passage invites readers to ask not merely “Have I prayed about this?” but “Have I turned from the thing that is actually the problem?” Seeking God's intervention while maintaining the idol is not repentance — it is religious management. Examine whether your prayers for relief are accompanied by any actual relinquishment.

2. Recognize that half-hearted obedience to God's commands produces half-hearted results — and that the limitation is yours, not God's. (*Mind/Belief*)

Jehoash struck the ground three times and stopped, and the prophet's anger told him what his restraint had cost him: total victory was available but only three partial victories would now be secured. The tragedy of this scene is that God had already declared the outcome — “the LORD's arrow of victory” (v. 17). The failure was not on God's side. Readers who wonder why their experience of God's grace feels thin and partial should sit with this scene long enough to ask whether their own tepid engagement with what God has commanded is the operative limiting factor.

3. Let your grief over the loss of God's word and God's servants be genuine and deep.

(*Affections/Worship*) Jehoash wept over Elisha — and his words were exactly right: “My father, my father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” (v. 14). He understood, at least in that moment, that Israel's true strength was not its army but the prophetic word of God and the servant who carried it. The passage invites readers to ask whether they actually feel the weight of living without God's word, or whether the loss of spiritual authority and prophetic clarity in their own lives is something they have quietly accommodated. Grief over the departure of God's word from the center of a life is a form of worship — it names correctly what is most valuable.

4. Rest in the truth that God's covenant faithfulness operates independently of the quality of your faith. (*Affections/Worship*)

The theological summit of the chapter is not Israel's cry but God's covenant: “He was gracious to them and had compassion on them and turned toward them, because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (v. 23). Israel did not earn its deliverances. The deliverances came because the LORD remembered a covenant He had made centuries earlier with the patriarchs — and He would not break it. Readers who are acutely aware of the thinness of their own faith should be arrested by this: God's covenant with His people in Christ is not contingent on the consistency of their devotion. His faithfulness is the ground, not the reward.

5. Stop treating the instruments and servants of God's word as merely human resources — they carry something that does not die. (*Will/Behavior*) The postmortem resurrection by Elisha's bones (vv. 20–21) is a dramatic sign that the power God places in His word and His servants does not expire with their biological death. The canon to which the church has access, the saints who have gone before, the faithful preaching of the word — these carry more power than their apparent fragility suggests. In practical terms: stop treating Scripture as one input among many, stop treating the faithful transmission of God's word through pastors and teachers as a convenience, and stop treating the testimony of deceased saints as merely historical. The bones still raise the dead.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Second Kings 13 teaches that God's compassion and deliverance are ultimately grounded not in human merit or the sincerity of human repentance but in His own covenantal commitments (v. 23). The chapter presents the LORD as one whose patience with His people's persistent, shallow devotion vastly exceeds what justice would require — He delivers Israel repeatedly despite the Asherah pole that remains standing, despite the continued practice of the sins of Jeroboam, despite a king whose wholehearted obedience He could not secure even on a prophet's deathbed. At the same time, the chapter teaches with sharp clarity that experienced grace — the degree to which believers actualize the deliverances God has made available — is conditioned on the wholeness of their engagement with Him. God does not withhold covenant faithfulness, but He does allow half-hearted faith to limit its scope. The postmortem miracle of vv. 20–21 teaches that the power of God resident in His word and His servants is not bounded by human frailty or mortality.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: The covenant-faithfulness summary of verses 22–23 is a compressed but powerful display of the Reformed insistence that God's grace in redemption flows from His sovereign electing love and His own unilateral covenant commitment — not from the quality, consistency, or sincerity of human response. The Abrahamic covenant, ratified by God alone in Genesis 15, is the theological engine driving every deliverance in the northern kingdom's history, even a history of near-total apostasy. This is *sola gratia* written into the narrative structure of a political history: Israel does not receive grace because she deserves it, nor because her repentance is sufficiently deep, but because God has bound Himself to Abraham and will not break His word. The Elisha narrative simultaneously guards against a passive or presumptuous reading of that grace: the covenant does not make the quality of faith irrelevant — Jehoash's restraint with the arrows has real and costly consequences. Reformed theology holds both without collapsing either: sovereign grace as the ground, wholehearted faith as the proper and

costly response. The resurrection by Elisha's bones points canonically forward to Christ, in whom the power of the covenant word is permanently and personally embodied, and who is Himself the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant that drives every deliverance in this chapter.

Main Takeaway

God is faithful to His covenant far beyond what your half-hearted faith deserves — and that should both humble you and call you to stop settling for three victories when He has promised total deliverance. Strike the ground until He says stop.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating this chapter as merely political-military history with some spiritual lessons attached.** The structure of the chapter — its sin/oppression/cry/deliverance cycle, its deathbed scene, its postmortem miracle, and its explicit theological summary in vv. 22–23 — is not a frame for historical information but a carefully constructed theological argument. Preachers who move quickly through the regnal formulas in vv. 1–13 to get to the “interesting” Elisha material will miss that the regnal summaries are themselves part of the argument: the pattern of shallow repentance and incomplete deliverance is the diagnosis the rest of the chapter addresses.
- **Preaching the arrow incident as a lesson in “commit fully to whatever you’re doing.”** The rebuke of Jehoash in vv. 18–19 is regularly domesticated into a generic motivational exhortation — “don’t give up halfway,” “go all in.” This misses the point entirely. The arrow incident is not about personal effort or determination; it is about the quality of faith and obedience in a prophetically charged sign-act. The failure is not a failure of will but a failure of trust in what God had declared. Keep the application tethered to the theological content: half-hearted engagement with God’s commands limits experienced grace — this is not a business principle.
- **Treating Elisha’s deathbed resurrection miracle as primarily a nature miracle or wonder story.** The postmortem resurrection in vv. 20–21 is sometimes presented as a marvel about the miraculous or as evidence for the ongoing power available through holy people. Neither handles the text well. The miracle functions theologically within the chapter’s argument: the covenant power of God through His servant does not die. Preachers should resist the temptation to speculate about how the miracle worked and instead press the theological point the narrative is making — and then ask where that theological claim points in the canon (toward Christ, in whom resurrection power permanently dwells).

- **Overemphasizing human initiative in deliverance (v. 4) at the expense of the chapter's own theological summary (vv. 22–23).** It is tempting to preach this chapter with the cry of Jehoahaz in v. 4 as the pivot — “he sought the LORD’s favor, and the LORD listened” — and to apply it primarily as a call to prayer. Prayer and seeking God are not wrong applications. But the chapter deliberately reframes its own deliverances in vv. 22–23 around the covenant with Abraham, not around the quality of the prayers. Let the text’s own interpretive summary govern the weight of the application.
- **Failing to press the tragedy of Jehoash’s restraint on a contemporary congregation.** The arrow scene is one of the Old Testament’s most poignant portraits of what half-hearted devotion actually costs. Preachers should not rush past Elisha’s anger or soften it. The prophet is furious because the king had total victory within reach and settled for something far less — and he will spend the rest of his reign living with that limitation. Congregations who wonder why their experience of God’s grace is thin, partial, and inconclusive need to sit in that scene. This is not a gentle observation — it is a sharp diagnosis, and it deserves to land with appropriate weight.
- **Ignoring the canonical and Christ-ward movement of the chapter.** The unnamed deliverer in v. 5 (môšîaʿ — savior), the death and resurrection imagery of Elisha, and the covenant-faithfulness summary pointing back to Abraham — all of these are canonical markers pointing forward. Preachers in the New Testament era cannot exposit this chapter faithfully without at least noting that the unnamed savior of v. 5, the resurrection power in the prophet’s bones, and the Abrahamic covenant-faithfulness of God all find their ultimate fulfillment and explanation in Christ. The chapter is not merely illustrative of New Testament truths — it is part of the canonical argument that the New Testament brings to resolution.