



ELISHA THE EYE-OPENER

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We had a great hike yesterday up to Twin Falls. That's always one of my favorite hikes because when you reach the end, there's a great payoff. I need all the motivation I can get to exercise, so there better be something good waiting for me when I make it to the top. And this hike doesn't disappoint. You have a great view of these spectacular waterfalls.

What I didn't know until recently is that there's another trail up there that takes you right down to the base of the waterfall itself. Wayne Lindell told me about this. You can get right in under the waterfall itself, swim in the pool at the base of it and feel the power of all that water crashing down around you. You can experience it from the inside out, not just look at it from a distance. That would have been an even better payoff.

You may not have been able to go on the hike yesterday, but you've been with us on this trek through the lives of Elijah and Elisha. We've seen some pretty amazing things along the way. Today, we've reached the end of our time with them. And our story doesn't disappoint. This is a good payoff, a good way to wrap up this series.

If this were a waterfall, though, I'd want to get right down in it – not just read it or look at it from a distance. The story calls us deeper in to experience it from the inside out, to feel the full power and weight of it. So let's jump in.

2 Kings 6:8-23

Now the king of Aram was at war with Israel.

That's not a very surprising sentence. A couple weeks ago, we talked about how Aram, which is present day Syria, had a long-running clash with Israel. They were constantly fighting, and here the king of Aram is at it again. We aren't told which king of Aram and we're not told which king of Israel, and really it doesn't matter. This type of engagement was happening all throughout the life of Elisha.

Sometimes it was all-out battles, when the Arameans would bring their full forces to attack a city of Israel. Other times it was small raids, like when they captured Naaman's slave girl. Little forays to unsettle and discourage the Israelites, trying to gain a psychological advantage. Either way, you've got a state of war for a long period of time.

Do you ever feel like you're under siege? Life in general can be a battle sometimes, and if you're trying to live it for Jesus, it becomes an ongoing, lifelong struggle. Not exactly what you want to hear if you're thinking of becoming a Christian.

Did you see in the news where some army recruiters were lying and saying the war in Iraq was over to get people to join? They said, "No – nobody new is going over. We're bringing people home." Their words didn't line up with reality, but it's tough to convince people to sign up when they know they're going to be deployed.

I could stand up here today and tell you that following Jesus puts an end to your problems, that your struggles will be over if you become a Christian. That would make your decision easier, but that wouldn't line up with reality. In some ways, being a Christian makes life harder, because you're further out of sync with the rest of the world. When the Bible says to take up your cross and follow Jesus, you have to expect a tough road.

I think that's one of the big themes from the stories of Eijah and Elisha – choosing God in the face of opposition.

Opposition can take on many forms for us. It can be actual people. You might not call them your enemy, but they sure clash with you a lot. The Bible is full of references to individuals who caused trouble for God's people all through history.

Paul says that our bodies can battle us. No kidding. Sometimes it's a fight just to get mine out of bed. Paul told the Romans that there was a war going on between his body and his mind. His body operated under its own set of rules that contradicted what he wanted to do. Whether it is our bodies' appetites, or just age or disease or pain, our bodies can end up working against us instead of with us.

Society and the world around us can be against us. Every value system, every distraction that pulls us away from God. They fight for our attention, and before you know it, we've surrendered to them.

But in addition to those struggles, we also have a spiritual enemy – the devil. A personality with an ability to snipe at us in all kinds of ways. Again, Peter puts it in perspective for us:

1 Peter 5:8

Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

We don't spend a lot of time talking about it, but Satan and spiritual warfare are real. You and I will face attacks on our spirit that have no other explanation. Profound discouragement. Loss of direction. Lies that keep surfacing in our mind. Sometimes it's an all-out assault and other times its just the raids that keeps us unsettled and insecure.

I say all this because in order for the rest of the story to make sense in our lives, we have to first acknowledge that we're in a fight, and it's not going away any time soon.

We all nod our heads and say, "How true, how true." But I want to get a little more specific. I'm going to give you a moment right now to identify the first thing that comes in your mind to finish this sentence:

My "king of Aram" is...

What is your biggest struggle right now? A sin? A hurt? A person? A feeling? You know what it is. Maybe it will surprise you what pops into your head right away. Take a moment to name it in your head or even write it down.

Well the king of Aram had every intention of attacking Israel, but something strange happened.

After conferring with his officers, he said, "I will set up my camp in such and such a place."

The man of God sent word to the king of Israel: "Beware of passing that place, because the Arameans are going down there." So the king of Israel checked on the place indicated by the man of God. Time and again Elisha warned the king, so that he was on his guard in such places.

This enraged the king of Aram. He summoned his officers and demanded of them, "Will you not tell me which of us is on the side of the king of Israel?"

"None of us, my lord the king," said one of his officers, "but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom."

Can't you just see it? Over and over again, the king of Aram plans his surprise attack. Over and over again the king of Israel changes his itinerary. Curses! Foiled again! That only has to happen a couple times before you start to ask, "Who's the mole?" The king of Aram is sure there has to be a leak from the inside, a traitor who is selling him out to the Israelites.

He pounds his fists on the table and demands to know: Which one of you is it? All the officers are silent, until one of them speaks up and says, "It's not us. It's Elisha. I don't know how he does it. It's like he's reading your mind."

This is a classic case of what Psalm 146 tells us:

Psalm 146:9

The LORD...frustrates the ways of the wicked.

He sure was frustrating this king. Two weeks ago, we were told that God was the one who had given victory to Aram. Now he just as easily prevents Aram from having a victory by giving Elisha insider knowledge. There is no such thing as operating outside of God's control. When it seems like bad people are doing well, and we wonder, where is the justice? God is not unaware.

As futile as it may sound to try to fight against it, the king of Aram is determined to not let God get the better of him through Elisha.

"Go, find out where he is," the king ordered, "so I can send men and capture him." The report came back: "He is in Dothan." Then he sent horses and chariots and a strong force there. They went by night and surrounded the city.

The fight between Aram and Israel just became very personal. It's now no longer country against country. It's country against Elisha. The king goes after him with the kind of force he would use against another army.

Here Elisha has been doing a good thing – helping out the army of Israel, and where does it get him? In hot water. His service to God translates directly into persecution by the enemy.

When we're living right, when things are going well for us spiritually, deep down we begin to believe that will result in life going well for us. We'll enjoy an extra measure of blessing for being so good.

But sometimes just the opposite is true. The more effective we are in living the Christian life, the more we attract the attention of the enemy. We become a more important target. And our service can translate directly into our persecution.

When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" the servant asked.

What a shock that must have been. The servant steps outside to take in the sunrise and sees a view that would have been much like this one. This was taken from the ruins at Dothan. The servant sees the valley and hills he saw every morning. Then all of a sudden, he does a doubletake. He looks, then blinks and rubs his eyes. That's not just scrub grass out there – that's an army. He looks from side to side and sees that they completely surround the city. Then it sinks in: They're here for Elisha. There's no other explanation. Oh my lord, what shall we do?

Imagine seeing thousands of soldiers with one mission: to bring you down. It's a horrible, hopeless position to be in. There is no way of escape. It's just a time of waiting for the shoe to drop, waiting for the enemy to close in for the kill.

King David experienced that on more than one occasion, crying out to God about the enemies that had cornered him. But he used the same language to talk about his spiritual battles as well.

Psalm 40:12

*For troubles without number surround me;
my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see.
They are more than the hairs of my head,
and my heart fails within me.*

It makes me think of that referee who was in the news this week. He was charged with betting on NBA games that he was officiating at. Super high profile games. It was a huge scandal. He pled guilty and told the judge he was taking anti-depression and anti-anxiety drugs. Of course he was. It would be difficult to function at all under the weight of that kind of guilt. I think that's what King David would have been taking – his heart was failing within him as he felt completely surrounded and overtaken by his own sin.

Oh my Lord, what shall we do? Maybe you can relate to that, whether it is your own sin or just the weight of your life pressing in on you. You look out and see a valley full of army tents and it's just a matter of time until the shoe drops.

Elisha's servant is terrified as he tells Elisha the news. It's that terror that becomes a second battlefield all together. You'll notice that the servant hasn't actually fought anyone yet – he's only seen the danger. The armies haven't inflicted any wounds on him, so he's not actually hurting yet. It's the anticipation that is killing him – the prospect of pain still to come.

I can relate to that. I stress about scenarios in my mind long before anything happens in the real world. Half the time, the anticipation is far worse than the actual crisis. Mark Twain once said, *"I have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened."*

Even the apostle Paul himself wrestled with that extra level of struggle. I like the way the old King James translated his words to the Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 7:5

... we were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears.

There are two kinds of battles: the real ones and our fears about them. It is those fears within that tend to be our undoing, the overwhelming sense that we'll never make it – even before we've started.

Again, I want to pause for a moment and let you think about it very specifically. See if you can complete this sentence:

My biggest fear right now is...

Take a moment to identify it and talk to God about it.

Elisha knows what his servant is going through, and he knows just what he needs.

"Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

And Elisha prayed, "O LORD, open his eyes so he may see." Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

You can imagine the servant dragging Elisha back to the door of the tent, saying, "Look! Look! What are we going to do?"

Elisha surveys the view, staying completely calm. Then he says the totally unexpected thing: "Don't worry. We have more on our side than they do on theirs." I can see the servant looking back and forth between the two of them and beginning to wonder if the old man has lost it. There's no military outpost in Dothan. What's Elisha talking about?

Then Elisha prays for the servant to be able to see – to gain the same kind of insight he himself had gained when Elijah was taken up to heaven.

The servant looks back out at the scene. And suddenly it all changes for him. The hills are full of the Lord's army – dwarfing the Aram army in comparison. What an awesome sight that must have been. A huge wave of relief to go from total hopelessness to complete confidence. There's no way this battle can be lost.

Did you notice what Elisha DIDN'T pray? He never said, "Oh God, please protect us." "Oh God, show up." Instead he just asked that God would help the servant see that he was already there. He was already there!

God was THERE before the servant saw a thing. And he's here in our lives before we see anything. Oh, I want the eyes of faith to see God's presence on a regular basis! To have my perspective go from total hopelessness to complete confidence. I want to see the army that's ready to protect families. I want to watch the chariots roll down and pave the way for spiritual health and salvation in people's lives. I want to see how God will fight for stronger marriages, how he will provide a stellar youth group for our high schoolers, how he will build up leaders and soften hearts and transform our community. God is already here. He is here.

Isn't that good to know? I don't have to plead for God to show up. I just need to see.

Psalm 125:2

As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore.

Now and forevermore. I love how the writer of our story describes what the army of the Lord was doing. He doesn't say they were surrounding the city of Dothan – He says they were surrounding Elisha. As much as the enemy was there for one person, God was there for one person. He surrounds each of his people.

If you walk away hearing nothing else this morning, hear this: You are not alone. And no matter what you're up against, remember, there are more with you than with them. God outnumbered all our problems.

1 John 4:4

...the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

In the latest Harry Potter movie, Harry is feeling increasingly isolated in his struggle against the evil Lord Voldemort. His sense of being all alone in the fight becomes a larger and larger piece of his despair, because he doesn't see how he can possibly win by himself. Finally, one of his classmates turns to him and says, "Well, if I were You-Know-Who, I'd want you to feel cut off from everyone else. 'Cause if it's just you alone, you're not as much of a threat."

That's a brilliant insight that applies directly to our lives. If the devil, if our you-know-who can make us feel cut off and alone, if he can make us forget that God is on our side, then we are not much of a threat. We're defeated before we begin.

But we're NOT alone. Psalm 46 tells us that

Psalm 46:1

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

I love that very. He's not just present – he's VERY present. He's right here. No enemy is closer than God, and no enemy is bigger than God. Seen or unseen, the hills are full of chariots of fire, and when we remember that fact and cling to it, it will change whatever battle we face.

We're going to take another break here to finish another sentence:

If I could see God was here, I would ask him to...

What difference would it make for you to visibly see God? What would you ask him for? Once you have thought of it, go ahead and ask him for it, because he IS here. Visible or invisible, God is with you today.

Jesus had the same confidence as Elisha when he headed toward the cross. The biggest battle for him wasn't necessarily dying – it was going through with letting himself be killed when everything human in him wanted to run away. But he knew he wasn't alone. When some of his disciples tried to intervene and defend him, Jesus said,

Matthew 26:53-55

Don't you realize that I could ask my Father for thousands of angels to protect us, and he would send them instantly? But if I did, how would the Scriptures be fulfilled that describe what is happening now?"

The knowledge that he wasn't alone gave Jesus strength to go ahead with the plan, even if it didn't mean asking the angels to fight in the way that might be expected in order for him to win.

God's battle tactics are not the same as ours. Just because he is present with us doesn't mean he will fight the way we expect. Look at what happened with Elisha. If I were him, I think I might have asked God to send those chariots of fire down into the valley as quickly as possible and wipe out the Aramean army. Get rid of the threat. Make it go away. But that's not what happened. Sometimes God has other plans in mind.

As the enemy came down toward him, Elisha prayed to the LORD, "Strike these people with blindness." So he struck them with blindness, as Elisha had asked.

Call it the un-prayer. It's the exact reverse of what Elisha prayed for his servant. He wants these enemies to NOT see reality.

There was a modern example of this back in the 1950s and 1960s. This was during the cold war, when communist countries had banned the Bible. It was a crime to have one behind the iron curtain, in countries like Yugoslavia and Romania and Russia. But a man named Brother Andrew felt a burden to smuggle Bibles into those countries.

It was a highly dangerous idea, but his method of smuggling them in was amazingly simple. He would drive across the border with the Bibles in his little VW bug. Each time he reached a check point, he would pray, "Lord, you've made blind eyes see. Please make seeing eyes blind." And time after time, that's exactly what happened. Guards who spent an hour checking the car ahead of him would wave him through. They would check under the hubcaps on other cars and not even notice the Bibles on the front seat of Brother Andrew's car.

It sounds naïve or crazy, but those are just the kind of ideas God seems to like. He tackles problems in completely unconventional ways.

Elisha told them, "This is not the road and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will lead you to the man you are looking for." And he led them to Samaria.

Obi-Wan stole the idea from Elisha when he told the storm troopers, "These are not the droids you're looking for." Elisha led the troops on a journey of several miles to the heart of Israel, where they themselves would be surrounded.

After they entered the city, Elisha said, "LORD, open the eyes of these men so they can see." Then the LORD opened their eyes and they looked, and there they were, inside Samaria.

Once again, Elisha prays for eyes to be opened, and they are.

When the king of Israel saw them, he asked Elisha, "Shall I kill them, my father? Shall I kill them?"

"Do not kill them," he answered. "Would you kill men you have captured with your own sword or bow? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink and then go back to their master." So he prepared a great feast for them, and after they had finished eating and drinking, he sent them away, and they returned to their master.

So the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel's territory.

What was this little episode all about? Was God just being clever for the sake of being clever? God is never random, and here he shows that he is operating with two principles in mind.

First, **he always works for our best.** As strange as it was for God to blind the soldiers, that saved Elisha's life. That was the move that protected him. He was able to actually go so far as to talk face to face with his enemies and not feel threatened.

Romans tells us that God uses all things to work for our good. When God's ways are incomprehensible to us, when they seem strange or unexpected, we can know that even then he is working for our best. There's a song that says, "When you can't trace his hand, trust his heart." God's tactics will never go against his fundamental commitment to do what is best for us in the long run.

Secondly, **he always works for redemption.** When you deem something, you are giving it value. "I deem this diamond to be worth one million dollars." When you re-deem something, you are taking something that has been made worthless and putting value back into it. You are re-deeming it. There was a way in this situation with Elisha for God to not only save the prophet, but also to show his power to the Arameans and put an end to the fighting. This was an opportunity to take circumstances and turn them around completely. By doing the unpredictable, God redeemed a bad situation – he reclaimed it and made it good again.

Maybe you're like me, and in your battle, you're more inclined to say, "God, come wipe out this enemy. Take away the pain. Free me from having to face this anymore."

Sometimes he'll do that. More often than not, he won't. He will always work with your best in mind, but there may be even more that he wants to do. He can redeem your situation.

One last sentence still needs to be completed.

I would like to see God redeem...

What's the bigger picture? I get so pre-occupied with my own needs, that I often miss what else God is concerned about in the world. Who breaks his heart? What circumstances in my life might he want to do something with? What about my history or relationships does he want to change from worthless to priceless?

God is the God of mercy and grace, who breaks his enemies with kindness and loves nothing more than to see impossible situations turned around and restored.