



THE CHURCH OF THE
RESURRECTION

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FROM BLINDNESS TO SIGHT

2 Kings 6:8-23

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2 Kings 6:8-23 is a masterfully told tale of the wimp repeatedly outfoxing the bully. Within the broader tragedy of Israel's downfall, this story comes as a brief moment of comic relief, a farce before the collapse. From a theological perspective, it's a story that is layered with lessons about the Lord. As we study it together, I trust that it will be a means of growing much deeper in our knowledge and love for God.

God is a Deliverer

At its simplest, this story shows that the Lord God of the Bible is a *deliverer*, which is something we all need. You may be walking home from the metro at night, by yourself, afraid for your safety. There may be people in your life who want to tarnish your reputation, turn your friends against you, steal your ideas, or see you fail in your endeavors. You may be afraid of growing old alone, or getting sick, or losing your job, or running out of money. In any case, even though we live in a relatively safe part of the world, there are still a great many dangers that surround us. Fear and anxiety are common to us all.

The God of the Bible is a deliverer. He loves to come to the rescue of his people. This story points us to God for deliverance, not just once, but over and over again.

For example, consider the comical deliverance of Israel from the hand of the Arameans (modern-day Syrians) repeatedly. At this point, Aram lacked the strength and organization to build an empire, so they resorted to beating up on smaller neighbors whenever they could. Prior to this story, the Arameans would come down into Israel on raids, stealing people and livestock. Then in this story God intervened to deliver Israel from these raids. Here's how it would happen: The King of Aram would make his attack plans, saying "At such and such a place shall be my camp" (6:8). Then through Elisha, the "Man of God," the Lord would alert the King of Israel, saying, "Keep watch that you do not pass this place, for the Arameans are going down there" (6:9). The Israelites were informed beforehand of every ambush, and the Arameans were confounded every time. Thus, the Lord delivered the Israelites "more than once or twice," just like in the cartoons when Jerry the mouse escapes Tom the cat every time.

This theme of deliverance continues through the rest of this story with God's deliverance of Elisha. The King of Aram was furious that his dastardly plans kept being foiled again and again (6:11).¹ The Aramean king learned that Elisha was the one who kept leaking Aramean military intelligence to Israel (6:12). So he "sent horses and chariots and a great army, and they came by night and surrounded the city" where Elisha lived (6:14). The siege was terribly frightening to Elisha's servant boy, who cried out, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" (6:15) Yet Elisha wasn't afraid, presumably because he had seen this coming as well. Even so, Elisha and the lad still needed God's deliverance, so Elisha prayed to the Lord, and God struck the Arameans with blindness (6:18). Then not only was Elisha able to escape, but he also led the Aramean army down to Samaria, where they themselves were surrounded by the army of Israel (6:19). So the Lord delivered Elisha and the Israelites once again.²

Deliverance is woven throughout this entire story, and behind every deliverance is the Lord, the God of the Bible. The Lord is a deliverer.

The Bible is full of stories and songs and poems of God's deliverance. Why do you think? Is it merely because God wants us to know that he's a deliverer? That's not the full reason. Even more important is what God wants us to do: to look to him for help. The Lord loves to deliver people. All you have to do is ask.

All the biblical stories of deliverance point to one in particular. At the apex of the grand narrative of the Bible is God's ultimate intervention, when he entered into our broken world to save it through the death and resurrection of his Son. The story begins in Matthew with the Virgin Mary turning up pregnant, and Joseph making plans to divorce her. It was then that an angel appeared to Joseph and said, "Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name *Yeshua* (Jesus), for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:20-21). *Deliverer* is what "Jesus" means, and that's in fact what Jesus did when he lay down his life for us. He was crucified and died in order to deliver us. The cost was enormous, but it's who God is and what God does. He is a deliverer.

¹ The Hebrew text of 6:11 says that the king's *heart* was *storming*. This is likely poking fun at the Aramean storm god. The God of Israel kept thwarting the Arameans' plans to storm Israel, and so the Aramean king's heart that was storming instead.

² There's yet another deliverance that is implied in this story, in the protection of Naaman the Aramean military commander. Naaman had come to faith in the God of the Bible in 2 Kings 5 when he was baptized in the Jordan and healed of leprosy. In 2 Kings 6:11, when the King of Aram became furious over leaked intelligence, he asked who among his court officials was a traitor. Presumably he focused his suspicions on Naaman, who had made a spiritual pilgrimage to Israel, met with the king of Israel, returned with two truckloads of Israelite soil, and built for himself a shrine to the Israelite God! Thus, when the Aramean king asked, "Will you not show me who of us is for the king of Israel?" he was almost certainly staring right at Naaman. However, one of his servants pinned the blame on Elisha (6:12), thereby sparing Naaman from the wrath of the Aramean king.

God is also a planner. We are too, because we are God's image bearers. I'm something of a reluctant planner, preferring to have fun now rather than plan for good times later. But some things are important enough that I will reluctantly set aside the time to plan for them. For the better part of a year I spent a great many hours planning a trip with my wife to celebrate our 25th wedding anniversary this past summer. (It was completely worth it, but I'm glad that I have 25 years before I have to do that much planning again.) As God's image bearers, we plan for the things that are most important to us, just like our Father in heaven. When it comes to God's greatest act of deliverance through the Lord Jesus, the Bible makes it very clear that this wasn't the result of some last minute decision. God did not do his Christmas shopping on December 24th. The prophetic witness of the Bible shows that God had planned to do it for ages, ever since sin entered the world. When Christmas finally came, it happened at just the right time, in the right place, when everything in the world was ready for Jesus. Even the stars were ready, if you think about it.

Here's the point: nobody does this much planning for something unimportant. God did all this because deliverance is fundamental to his character. It's who he is.

Deliverance is also God's invitation to you. Rest assured that if you cry out in faith to God for deliverance, he will rescue you. First and foremost, through the great intervention of Jesus, the Son of God, whose death and resurrection brings salvation to the people of God. If you will make Jesus your king by entrusting your life to him, then he will deliver you too. God will also come to your rescue daily if you cry out to him. The Lord loves to deliver his people, not only in big ways, but also in small ways all the time. You can pray for his protection when you're walking home at night, or when people turn against you, or when you feel all alone. He will deliver you.

All of this may be old news, since it's a foundational truth for the Christian life. If you identify as a Christian, well then, of course you know that God is a deliverer! Yet there's knowing in our heads, and then there's knowing from the heart. Jesus said that what comes out of our mouths proceeds from our hearts. And while our heads may affirm that God is a deliverer, often that's not what spills out of our mouths, is it? Often instead of giving voice to faith, our mouths give voice to fear. So even though at its simplest this story shows God as a deliverer, there's more to it than that. Let's take a deeper look to gain more confidence to turn to him.

Our God is Merciful

Digging a little deeper, underneath the surface there's also a strong theme of mercy in this story. It shows us that the Lord God of the Bible is not only a deliverer, but also a God of mercy.

Sometimes when I'm feeling anxious and afraid, I have this thought: I know that God is a deliverer, but I also know that God is holy and I'm not. There are a great many things that I have said and done and left undone that I should not have. Though I need God's help, I'm not

sure about whether to turn to him. Will he help me? Or will he punish me? I need the former, but I know I deserve the latter.

Our God is merciful. Not only for all those who have turned to him in repentance and faith, but even—shockingly—for those who haven't, as we see several times in this story.

For example, consider God's mercy in repeatedly delivering the King of Israel and his troops from the Arameans (6:10). At this point in Israel's history, it had been more than a century since any of their kings had shown any loyalty to the Lord. God's original covenant with Israel had required that they remain faithful to him. Yet their leaders had not done so for a very long time and the countdown to exile had begun. Already in the previous chapter, God's favor was with Naaman, the Aramean general, rather than the Israelite army. Nevertheless, even after so much sin and apostasy, God was still merciful. In this story, he was merciful to Israel by disclosing to them the Arameans' every plan. He didn't have to do it, but he chose to do it, because just as he is a God of deliverance, he is also a God of mercy. It's his nature.

Some might object and say that God was merciful to all these people only out of love for Elisha and the remnant of believers still living in Israel.³ If that's what you think, you're probably right. That's often how God's mercy works. Proverbs 11:10 says, "When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices." There's a wideness to God's mercy. His care for his people often spills over to encompass others who don't even know him. So, for example, we pray for our elected leaders all the time, regardless of their religious affiliation, because we believe that God will care for them out of his care for us. For this reason, we ought to call out to God for mercy all the more, not only for ourselves, but also for the millions in this city who don't know their right hand from their left.

Here's another, even more surprising demonstration of God's mercy in this story: the feast at the end. After Elisha led the blinded Aramean raiders into an Israelite ambush in Samaria, the King of Israel was eager to kill them. He asked, "Shall I strike them down? Shall I strike them down?" (6:21). Elisha refused and instead had the Israelites prepare a table before the Arameans, in the presence of their enemies. They set food and drink before them, and when they had eaten and drunk, he sent them home to their master. It may have felt like a trap at first, but Elisha had instead led the Arameans into the mercy of God.

The feast demonstrates another frequent way that God's mercy works. God has mercy on people who oppose him in order to demonstrate his power, both to save and to destroy. Then, because of his mercy, those who formerly opposed him choose to follow him instead. Think, for example, of the conversion of the Apostle Paul, who had been responsible for the martyrdom of Stephen. Instead of destroying Paul, God showed him mercy. He temporarily blinded Paul,

³ There were some 7,000 who had remained faithful to the Lord during the time of Elisha's predecessor, Elijah. In the Elisha stories there are quite a few believers—like the widow who had a miraculous provision of oil, and the Shunammite family whose son was raised from the dead.

knocking him off his high horse, so that Paul might turn to the Lord. Paul responded positively to God's mercy, turning to God in deliverance, and subsequently he became the great missionary apostle to the Gentiles.⁴

God doesn't want to destroy any of us. If you feel some distance from him, and you're wondering whether to turn to him or not, remember this: he is being merciful to you *right this very moment!* The fact that you are remembering him is a demonstration of his mercy. He is whispering his name to you and inviting you to return to him. So confess your sins to him, ask for his forgiveness, and then bask in the warm generosity of his mercy.

Why then would you not turn to him? Is it perhaps because you doubt that he's there at all? That's often the heart of the issue, and it's also at the heart of this story.

Our God is With Us

The central message of this story is that God is always with us. It's a message addressed to our anxious and fearful hearts.

We probably all know what it's like to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and yet *not* be able to say with David, "I will fear no evil for you are with me" (Psalm 23:4). Living in a global city, there are crowds everywhere, yet in the midst of millions, it's astounding how often we feel all alone. There may be good friends at school and at work and at church, and yet loneliness is our constant companion. If you, like me, still feel this way from time to time, then you should know from this story that God is with us.

"God with us" is one of those truths that has both an upside and a downside.⁵ This episode reveals both to us. Consider the King of Aram's whistleblower problem at the beginning of the story. "One of his servants said, 'Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedroom'" (6:12). Imagine how paranoid the King of Aram must have been to hear this (for the rest of his life)! No wonder he sent horses and chariots and a great army by night to surround Elisha and bring him in!

⁴ It also happened in the wilderness during the Exodus, when the Israelites really blew it by making and worshiping a golden calf. God moved to destroy them, but then showed them mercy because of Moses. When God restored his covenant with Israel he reminded them of his nature, saying, "Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Exod 34:7).

⁵ Such is the case in the Immanuel passage of Isaiah 7-8. The sign of Immanuel, "God with us," means judgment on an apostate king. It also is a sign of God's presence to bring relief and justice to the downtrodden, i.e. the people who have been suffering under the king's greed and selfishness. Ultimately it points to the coming of Jesus, God's great Immanuel, in Matthew 1:23.

Here, then, is the downside to knowing that God is with us. Even when our words and actions aren't being captured on camera, and even when there aren't any credible eyewitnesses watching us, God is still with us. Someday we will give an account for everything we have said and done. Jesus told his disciples, "Whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops" (Luke 12:3). And the apostle Paul wrote this to the Roman Christians: "We will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.' So then each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Rom 14:10-12).

Think of how different Washington would be if every elected official knew and rightly feared the Lord! Integrity is often defined as doing the right thing even when nobody else is watching. But for Christians, integrity is doing the right thing because the only one who truly matters is in fact watching and listening. That's what it means to live *Coram Deo*, before the face of God. Nothing escapes his observation. Because God is with us, he sees and hears it all.

The downside to "God with us," then, is that there's no such thing as privacy before an omniscient God. Nevertheless, the central message of this passage is one of *comfort*, because Almighty God is not with us primarily to punish us. If he were, his wrath would be immediate and final. Instead, God the merciful deliverer is with us to love us. At the center of this story we find this love letter from him, addressed to our hearts rather than our heads. Consider 2 Kings 6:16, which is at the center of the story both in terms of being quite literally the middle verse in the account, and also its core message. Elisha said to the lad, "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

Think of this boy who had heard the horror stories from the Aramean raids, including how they would capture children and carry them away to be their slaves. And think of how safe he felt living with Elisha, whom the Lord sent transcripts of everything the King of Aram said. Then imagine his absolute terror when he got up at sunrise and looked out to see the siege. How could this have happened? If there was any safe place in the whole world, it was with Elisha. Yet to his dismay, they were totally surrounded by horses and chariots and a great army sent from the king of Aram.

The lad cried, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" (6:15). To which Elisha replied, "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Then Elisha blessed him and us with a wonderful gift: a glimpse of the unseen spiritual reality that surrounds us all the time. Elisha prayed, v17, "O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see." This is not to say that the lad's eyes weren't already open; they were, but he couldn't see all that the Lord sees. So God enabled the boy to see a little more, "and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha." Elisha had not been lying! Those who were with Elisha and his servant far outnumbered the Arameans! Presumably the boy was no longer afraid.

The rest of the story drives home God's active role in determining what we see. After praying for his servant's eyes to be opened further, Elisha prayed for the Aramean army's eyes to see less (6:18). Just as God answered Elisha's first prayer, he also answered the second, such that the Arameans were struck with a kind of blindness, not unlike the Apostle Paul's blindness after his initial encounter with the Lord. Elisha said to the Arameans, "This is not the way, and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom you seek" (6:19). Then he led them to the city of Samaria, up on a high hill whose name sounds like, "Place of Seeing." It was there that Elisha prayed once more, "'O Lord, open the eyes of these men, that they may see.' So the Lord opened their eyes and they saw, and behold, they were in the midst of Samaria," the place of seeing.

The King of Israel wanted to kill them, but Elisha also redirected the King's vision, such that he set a table for his enemies. By the end of the story, everyone saw the entire world quite differently, didn't they? And they all knew that the Lord was present in their midst.

This story is not the only one of enhanced, spiritual sight in the Bible. There are visits from angels, revelatory dreams and visions and so on. In the Gospels the story of Jesus' transfiguration is perhaps the most important of all such stories. Peter, James and John were given a glimpse of Jesus in his full glory, transfigured up on another mountain of seeing. Yet even after seeing Jesus truly, when they came down the mountain they seemed no better off than before, unable to heal a boy who was tormented by an unclean spirit. There is a sense from all these stories that even if we were granted comprehensive spiritual sight to see the horses and chariots of fire and to see Jesus in all his glory, we still would stumble in faith.

So yes, there is an invitation in this story to turn to God in prayer, and to ask him to open our eyes to show us what he sees. But what is most important here is not gaining the ability to see all that is unseen. We will never have that, even in the consummation of all things when we meet God face-to-face we still won't be able to see all that God sees. What is most important is looking to the Lord Jesus himself, since he is the only one among us who sees all wavelengths all the time and who understands all that is going on.⁶ He's also the only one who loves us perfectly all the time.

"We walk by faith, not by sight," (2 Cor 5:7) following Jesus, the commander of the horses and chariots of fire. So "do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." You may not see them, but if you look to the Lord Jesus, you'll see the only one you need to see.

⁶ This is the argument of Hebrews 2:5-9. Quoting Psalm 8, the author Hebrews agrees that we humans were made for dignity and to serve God as his agents in the world. However, we don't yet see all of this coming to fruition. Our work is still subject to thorns and thistles, childbearing is still painful, the world is filled with bandits who surround us while we're sleeping, etc. Even though we don't yet see the glory that God intended for us, we do see the Lord Jesus, who died for us and rose again to new life. He's our glorious king. As long as we keep our eyes on him, everything will be just fine.