

6. Seeing Him who is Invisible

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[0 : 0 0] Our Bibles open, please, at 2 Kings 6, we'll have a moment of prayer. God our Father, we believe that you have words to say to us, words that we need to hear, words not just spoken to your ancient people, but spoken to your people of every generation, including us.

So open our eyes, Lord, shed light upon your word, and lead us beyond the sacred page to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Now there are two incidents in this chapter. I'm going to spend most of the time on the second one, but I'm not going to ignore the one about the axe head, in case you're wondering what it's all about.

There was a lady who was very anxious about her prayer life. I don't know any Christian who's not anxious about their prayer life. Mine certainly causes me continual concern because of its erratic and fitful nature.

What particularly puzzled her and worried her was that she felt she was coming to the great eternal God, the Lord who made heaven and earth, with totally trivial questions, with totally trivial issues, which couldn't possibly concern him.

[1 : 2 7] And she went to her minister to talk about this, and he very wisely said, My dear, if you are praying to the Lord who made heaven and earth, can you think of any incident that would actually not be trivial in comparison with his greatness?

I think we need to remember that. We need to spend less time being obsessed with whether issues are great or small, and more with the greatness of God.

And that leads us directly into verses 1 to 7, this apparently trivial and rather trite and pointless episode about the axe head.

I want to ask two questions. First of all, what is this story for? It seems very trivial, doesn't it? Now, some people deal with it by rationalizing it.

Elijah poked in the water with a stick and found the axe head. Now, there's something really trivial for you. How on earth does that exalt the greatness of Elijah as it's supposed to be?

[2 : 3 1] Because he realized if you took a long stick and poked in the mud, you would find the axe head. So I think we could ignore that. But, as Ralph Davis says, rationalism is a fancy name for unbelief.

So let's set it on one side. Others, struggling with the fact that this isn't the Bible at all, try to treat it as an allegory. It must have some huge significance.

I was brought up on preaching like this, where people would take passages like this and determined to find the gospel in it, who would say things like this. Well, you see, the water is the water of death.

And we are drowned in the waters of death. And we are rescued by the cross, represented by the stick. Now, once again, that really won't do, will it?

Because, while that's all true, it's not here in the text. And it seems to me an awful lot of harm is done to preaching if you take things which are true and import them into passages where they just aren't.

[3 : 35] Still others want to moralize it. Don't be careless with other people's property. That's what we learn from this. Now, doesn't that just fill your heart with wonder, love, and praise?

Can't you hear the singing of the heavenly host? That is really trivial. So, what is this story for? Usually, it's making the point that that incident I mentioned at the beginning illustrates that God cares for the very small as well as for the very great.

That's the God that's presented to us at the very beginning of the Bible. The majestic, awesome God of Genesis 1, before whom the angels veil their face and we bow down in worship and wonder.

We're a God far beyond us, far beyond our understanding. But he's also the God who comes right down into our human situation in Genesis 2. Becomes part of the story.

And there's the Gospel, isn't it? The God up there comes down here. Psalm 147 puts it magnificently. God tells the stars and gives them their names.

[4 : 44] God numbers the stars, gives them their names, and he binds up the broken heart. There we are, the very big and the very small. He's the Lord of the universe.

He cares for the stars, calls them by name. He's down here with a broken heart. That God cares about you. Cares about your exams and the results. Cares about your relationships.

Cares about the little irritations and the problems of every day. It seems to me that's the point this story is making. These guys found probably not a place to live, but a place to study and work.

As I read this, I thought, I found that would be wonderful when that happens in Cornhill, the place in which we're meeting is too small for us. We'll have to get a bigger place. That would be wonderful. Not to keep on praying.

Second question is, why is this story here? It's all very well saying that's what the story is for. But why is it here? What's it got to do with the stories around it?

[5 : 43] With the story of Naaman that we looked at last week. Then this bigger story we're going to look at in a moment about the Syrian armies and the chariots and horsemen of God. And the reason it's here, I want to suggest, is because these two stories are fundamentally saying the same thing.

There are two views of reality. There is outward reality, like the axe head falling off, or like the Syrian army surrounding Dothan. And there is also the spiritual unseen reality.

The unseen problem and the unseen God. And similarly with Naaman, there was the seen obvious problem of his leprosy, there was the unseen God. It's about reality.

And just one final point before we leave verses 1 to 7. It may not have been all that trivial after all. They are in a time of war. Iron is an important commodity.

This could have been an emergency. So let's not be too snooty about how important these things are. It's a story about reality. And that's why I've chosen the title for tonight's sermon.

[6 : 54] The words from Hebrews 11, verse 27, Seeing Him who is invisible. These are the words used of Moses. Moses persevered, seeing Him who is invisible.

In other words, it's a story about faith. Because that is what faith means, seeing Him who is invisible. They want to suggest that this bigger story, 8 to 14, has three ways of looking at the world.

Three ways of looking at reality. First of all, verses 8 to 14, let's call that the political view of reality. Reality the way the big battalions, the establishment, the kings see it.

Now, if this story follows immediately after Naaman, we don't know if it does, because these stories appear to be arranged topically, not necessarily chronologically. Nevertheless, the peace was short-lived.

The background is the ding-dong battles between Syria and Israel. And here the emphasis is on the perception of reality. How do the kings of Israel and Syria look at this?

[8 : 04] First of all, the king of Israel, the man of God sent word to the king of Israel, Beware that you do not pass this place. Verse 10, The king of Israel sent to the place about which the man of God told him.

The king of Israel is probably still Jehoram, Ahab's second son, who is featured already in the Elisha stories. And his view of reality is, if you can get Elisha, if you can get the church, if you like, if you get God's people to be useful, then use them.

It's essentially a political view of reality. That's the way the establishment always treats the church, isn't it? It's there for social purposes, for personal fulfillment.

And if it's going to be helpful, then fine. Let's not neglect it. But I want you to notice something very important. Notice the initiative comes from Elisha, not from Jehoram, the man of God sent word to the king of Israel.

I want you to notice something else that's important. Notice twice, in verses 9 and 10, Elisha is called the man of God. But in verse 12, the Syrian calls him the prophet.

[9 : 21] Now, man of God and prophet are not identical in the Old Testament. They can be, but they're not necessarily so. Man of God means someone who comes from God with the authoritative voice of God, essentially someone who stands in the line of Moses.

Moses is primarily the man of God. And when you hear a prophet called a man of God, that's what's being said. And indeed, this carries on into the New Testament, when Paul says to Timothy, the man of God, he's saying, be like Moses, follow in the word of God that was first given to Moses, and then given to the apostles.

Prophet, on the other hand, can mean a false prophet. Read the book of Jeremiah. The many, many mentions of prophet in that book almost always refer to false prophets.

And also in Amos, Amos famously says, I am not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet. There's a dispute about what that means, that it may be he's saying, I'm not one of those charlatans who call themselves prophets.

I actually do have a voice from God. So you see what, you see the author is showing us reality here. He's saying, the king of Israel was wise to listen to this word, because this word came from a man of God.

[10 : 40] In other words, this was somebody who lived in the real world, and gave advice about the real world. That brings us on to the king of Syria, verses 11 to 14.

Now the king recognizes Elisha is dangerous, prophets in Syria. There were plenty of them, court prophets, who were simply lackeys of the establishment, rather like Jehoram's father Ahab, had led hundreds of prophets who were simply there to do his bidding.

And he thought probably Elisha was a magic worker. He may have heard the story of Naaman, and he's rather afraid of him. But notice the preposterous reaction. He's going to capture one man.

Verse 14, So he sent their horses and chariots, and a great army. This is the way the establishment always reacts to the threat. It's the big battalions, always are wheeled out.

The press, public opinion, and so on, always wheeled out, when the prophetic voice is heard. And it's a total overreaction. Overreaction, not because the prophet isn't dangerous, but because he's not dangerous for the reason that the king of Israel, the king of Syria, thinks he is.

[11 : 52] He is dangerous because he's bringing the living word of God that the king of Syria, and indeed the king of Israel, don't want to hear. So you see, the first view of reality, the political view of reality, is holy.

You look at what's happening around. You find out who's on your side and who isn't. You find out what's helpful and what's not helpful. And you plan accordingly.

Now, of course, there is nothing wrong in being sensible. Being, following the Lord doesn't mean you're stupid. Following the Lord doesn't mean doing crazy things. But, if we simply look at the outward problems, the outward opposition, then we are going to panic.

And when you read things in the newspapers this week, like 35 rebel churches and so on, those kind of tendentious headlines, then you realize the way the establishment works.

So it always works. Trying to, the force of public opinion to try and obliterate what they don't want to hear. So the political view of reality, look at the big battalions, see who the big players are and make sure you keep on their side.

[13 : 05] And don't we in the church so often succumb to that? It's so easy, isn't it? We like to feel we're on the side of the big battalions. We like to feel that we have people with us.

Now, of course, once again, on one level, there's nothing wrong with that. You have to try and persuade people to be with you. But, it's when we become paralyzed by that, when our view of reality stops there, that we are not actually living in the real world.

We're living in a world which is real enough, but we're not seeing the total picture. So that brings us on to the second thing I want to talk about, which is the prophet's view of reality.

We look to the political view of reality now, verses 15 to 17, the prophet's view of reality. Now, I want you to look, first of all, compare verses 15 and 17.

When the servant of the man of God, verse 15, rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots. It was all around the city. And verse 17, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

[14 : 17] Now, the important thing about these is that they are both facts. These are both facts. The point is that the fact in verse 15 is visible and obvious, whereas the fact in verse 17 is only visible when our eyes are opened.

That's what I mean by the prophetic view of reality. See, if we have the political view of reality, we'll only see verse 15. And that's the rationalist view of reality.

Verse 15 counts and verse 17 is irrelevant. Now, this, of course, was the young man's view. You could hardly blame him. Alas, master, what shall we do? Notice, of course, repeating verse 5, alas, my master.

And he's terrifying and who can blame him? And so often we find this, don't we, in a crisis or sometimes just in the wear and tear of ordinary living.

Alas, master, what are we going to do? So how do we get from verse 15 to verse 17? How do we bring together the two real worlds?

[15 : 24] Now, notice what Elisha doesn't say. He doesn't say, oh, never mind, lad, they're no real problem at all. And that's not the way of faith.

That is the way of foolishness, pretending the problem isn't there. Elisha never denies the army is there. We don't deal with problems by pretending they'll go away or pretending they're not there.

What does he do? There are two things here. First of all, there is prayer. Indeed, three times Elisha prays in this story and each time it's to do with opening or closing of eyes.

Then Elisha prayed, verse 17, oh Lord, please open his eyes that he may see. Now notice what this verse is saying. It's not saying that Elisha prayed and then suddenly the chariots and horses appeared as if the prayer had magically created the horses and chariots.

That's not what's happening here. What's happening here is that Elisha is asking for the young man to have his eyes open so he can see what is already there which has been unseen up to this point.

[16 : 40] You see, prayer, in other words, changes this young man's perception of reality. Prayer did not create the horses but prayer opened the young man's eyes to see them.

You can see the importance of prayer in contact with that world which is unseen. Now of course most of us find prayer difficult. I certainly do.

But because prayer sometimes seems so futile. You have these problems, you have the chariots and horses of Syria. How is that going to be affected by people, an individual or a group of people sitting in a room with their eyes shut, talking into space?

And that of course is a rational view of prayer, isn't it? But, what prayer is doing is it's opening channels between our world of reality and the bigger world of reality.

Remember William Cooper's hymn, Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees. And why does Satan tremble? You see, Satan doesn't tremble at our work.

[17 : 48] Satan doesn't tremble at our efforts. Satan doesn't tremble at most of the things we do. But what Satan does tremble at is when people pray. Because when people pray, they are in touch with the God who changes things, the God who makes a difference.

That's the point. And that brings us on to the second thing. The second thing is vision. Now, vision is not seeing what's not there. This was not a dream. Well, of course, the rationalists have a field day with this.

What actually happened was that Elisha's strength of personality was such that he went out to the Syrians, persuaded them that he was somebody important and then took them to Samaria.

The trouble is these rationalist explanations are always far more difficult to believe than the actual miracle that happened. That is the problem. Because rationalism simply satisfies nobody.

It simply tries to explain away. You see, the political view of reality is a view of reality. Vision does not deny that the Syrian army is there, but it shows the other army, those that are with us, are more than those who are with them.

[19 : 03] Verse 14, do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them. God reigns, seeing him who is invisible.

Willie's father used to tell a story quite often, sometimes in the prayer meetings, sometimes I've heard him telling it from the pulpit. This was a story of a missionary many years ago in what was then Borneo, working in a very dangerous and desolate region which was infested with bandits.

And one night he was far away from his base and he had to spend the night in the open air. He felt that there were people watching him and he committed himself to God, probably using words rather like the words of Psalm 91, words which we sang a few moments ago.

And he slept. The next morning when the sun rose he managed to find his way back. Sometime later he met one of the notorious bandits.

This bandit said to him, one night a few weeks ago you were out in the open and we were going to kill you. Remember I said the man had sensed there were people all around him.

[20 : 23] And he said that we were afraid because there were 15 soldiers with drawn swords standing around you. That's part of the story.

The next part of the story is this. When the missionary went home sometime later he told this story to a church in London and at the end of the meeting a man came to him and said tell me when exactly was it that that incident happened?

The missionary told him. The man said well that evening there were 16 of us in a back room in this church praying for your protection. We felt you were in danger and we prayed for your protection.

What was the relationship between the 16 prayers and the soldiers? We don't know. All we do know is that God's angels had surrounded that man and saved his life.

The hosts of God encamp around the dwellings of the just. Now that doesn't always happen. There are many stories as we know of those who are not saved. Many persecuted saints are not delivered from the persecutors.

[21 : 34] But whether they are saved or not, God is there. That's what the three friends of Daniel say in chapter 3. Our God is able to save us.

But even if he does not, we will not bow down to your image. That is the prophetic view of reality. That is the view of faith. That is seeing him who is invisible.

We all live in the political world of reality. And so often, isn't it true, what we sing, what we believe in, sometimes seems so faint and far away, so difficult to believe.

We need to pray more, that what we believe, what we sing, what we profess becomes more and more part of our life and walk of faith. And the third point, the third part of the story, what happens when these views of reality clash?

Because this seems to me, this is somewhat amusing story, actually, of the Syrians being led meekly into the presence of the king of Israel. What happens when Elisha prays?

[22 : 40] What happens when the world, the unseen world and the seen world collide? When the hosts of God come into the picture? Well, two things happen.

First of all, God's enemies are humbled. Verse 18, please strike these people with blindness. blindness is an interesting word.

It's not the usual word for blindness. The only other place that's used in the Old Testament is Genesis 19, where it's used of the people of Sodom who tried to break into Lot's house and kill him.

Probably not total blindness, so much as a kind of befuddled state. It's as if they were under the influence of drugs. They just did not know what they were doing or where they were going.

And Elisha leads them to Samaria. Here again, we're being shown, aren't we, the man of God, the word of God, is more powerful than armies and kingdoms.

[23 : 38] You see, this formidable army, the horses and chariots, the great army, have just become a disorganized rabble of people staggering about and unable to know where they're going.

How quickly the Lord can overturn the pretensions of the powerful. This is something we need to remember, that the powerful may get away with it.

They may tread the world stage for a time, but he who sits in the heavens laughs. There's surely an instance of he who's sitting in the heavens laughs, because it's a rather amusing and rather pathetic story.

And the king of Israel thinks, of course, that Christmas has come, and he's got his enemies in his hands. So you see, the first thing is God's enemies are humbled, but the second thing, and even more remarkable, and perhaps the greatest miracle of all, God's enemies receive his grace.

Verse 22, Set bread and water before them, that they may eat and drink and go to their masses, so you prepare for them a great feast. You see, God has opened their eyes to a greater reality.

[24 : 49] We've no way of knowing if all, or indeed of any, of these Syrian soldiers actually realized what was happening, or the miracle that had taken place that day.

But you see how in this story, as we saw in Naaman last week, God's grace is bursting out beyond the confines of his own people. It's invading all the very strongholds of the enemy, and surely the best way of all, of defeating the enemies of God, is when they come and turn to him in repentance and faith.

Surely that is the kind of victory we need to pray for happening more often. And it does happen. God's enemies become his friends. So you see, that's what happens when the two views of reality come together.

The world's turned upside down, the mighty are put down from their seats, and the humble are exalted. That's what Mary says, isn't it, in her song. And once again, we've got this tremendous blend that we've seen so often in these stories.

God is at work in the big battalions. God is moving the wheels of history. But he also cares for the nameless son of the prophet, who lost the axe head.

[26 : 02] He cares for the poor lad, who is terrified as he sees the horses and chariots around the city. And he cares for his enemies. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

It was for his enemies that Christ died. So you see, the view of faith and the view of vision is the ultimate reality. Both things are true, and we need to pray that the vision of the unseen God and the world to come becomes more and more dominant, living the life of faith.

And the second thing as we end the chapter, there is grace for all who repent and believe, and there is a partial lifting of the problem. The Syrians did not come again on raids into the land of history.

That's what we'll see next week. That's by no means the end of the story. So what's going to be our view of reality? I don't struggle in any way with realizing that the world around me is real.

I'm not too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use. I've never had that problem. My problem is all the opposite way. My problem is I become so obsessed with the visible and the tangible.

[27 : 19] I find it difficult to see the chariots and fire around Elisha. May God bless us and may He open our eyes. We will indeed see the mountain full of horses and chariots of fire.

Let's pray. Father, you have told us that without faith it is impossible to please you. And yet we know that faith is not something we have to struggle for.

It is your gift. So Lord, open our eyes to the magnificence of who you are, to the angel hosts that surround your people and are active in your world.

And may we indeed rejoice in seeing you, the one who is invisible. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.