

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Lessons from the life of Elisha: Elisha - the helper

Today we continue our series of talks on the prophet Elisha. So far, we have looked at Elisha - the servant and Elisha - the blesser. Today we are going to look at Elisha - the helper. We will conclude next week, God willing, with Elisha - the prophet.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is important since it deals with church order and the gifts God has given to His Church in order to maintain that order. In 1 Corinthians 12:28 we read, "And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues." Leaving aside the question as to how many of these gifts were given primarily to the early Church, I find it tremendously encouraging that, buried away in this list of important gifts, we have that little word 'helps'. Now many of us might feel that some of these gifts are way beyond us but, in the power and grace of God, we can all seek to be helps. Hudson Taylor, the founder of the China Inland Mission, has written, "I used to ask God to help me. Then I asked if I might help Him. I ended up by asking Him to do His work through me."

As we look today at 'Elisha - the helper', we will find how God did His work through His servant in helping both individuals and a nation. Elisha would be a help equally to ordinary folk like the younger prophets and his house servant, as well as more exalted folk like the king of Israel. In all these varied situations, Elisha was equally at home in being a channel of God's mercy and power. May his example inspire each one of us to be helps in our own individual situations! We might make part of Sebastian Temple's hymn our prayer:

*"Make me a channel of your peace.  
Where there's despair in life let me bring hope;  
Where there is darkness, only light;  
And where there's sadness, ever joy.*

*O Master, grant that I may never seek  
So much to be consoled as to console;  
To be understood as to understand;  
To be loved, as to love with all my soul."*

Let us first read 2 Kings 6:1-7: "And the sons of the prophets said to Elisha, 'See now, the place where we dwell with you is too small for us. Please, let us go to the Jordan, and let every man take a beam from there, and let us make there a place where we may dwell.' And he answered, 'Go.' Then one said, 'Please consent to go with your servants.' And he answered, 'I will go.' So he went with them. And when they came to the Jordan, they cut down trees. But as one was cutting down a tree, the iron axe head fell into the water; and he cried out, and said, 'Alas, master! For it was borrowed.' And the man of God said, 'Where did it fall?' And he showed him the place. So he cut off a stick, and threw it in there; and he made the iron float. Therefore he said, 'Pick it up for yourself.' So he reached out his hand and took it."

What a lovely example of co-operation and humility we see in this servant of God! It would seem that Elisha, in his concern to pass on the truths he had learned from God, had established a school of prophets. The apostle Paul had that same concern for passing on the truth of God as he wrote to his young son in the faith, Timothy, "And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2). We still need that faithful passing on of the truth of God from the older generation to the younger generation today!

As an older man, it would have been so easy for Elisha to say, "Why change? We've always managed like this." It's a lovely thing when the wisdom and experience of the older generation blend with the energy and enthusiasm of the younger generation. So Elisha goes with them, not to stand aloof from them, but to join in the hard work of cutting down trees. Yes, Elisha as the prophet of God might have an important ministry in bringing the truth of God to his people, but he would not be averse to blistering his hands in this hard manual work of chopping down trees! So we find that the Lord Jesus Himself, before embarking on His public ministry of preaching and healing, would spend His first thirty or so years in the obscurity of Nazareth, toiling away in Joseph's carpenter's shop. He fully earned the

description given Him by the people, “Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary...?” The apostle Paul also, while daily carrying the burden of his “deep concern for all the churches” (2 Corinthians 11:28), nevertheless made time to labour at his tent-making so as not to be chargeable to any (2 Thessalonians 3:8).

But while Elisha and the younger prophets are toiling away, calamity strikes! One of the prophets loses his borrowed axe head in the deep river. Satan will always do his utmost to hamper, or even cause to cease, any flourishing work of God. But his opposition need not be the last word! The apostle John reminds us, “You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). As the man of God, Elisha uses his God-given power to cause the axe head to float. There is no word of criticism of the faulty workman, merely the suggestion that he recovers the axe head and so be able to get on with his work. That same power of God was seen when the Lord Jesus invited Peter to get out of the boat and walk to Him on the water. When Peter subsequently took his eyes off Jesus and began to sink, that same power picked him up and returned him to the boat (see Matthew 14).

We need to keep reminding ourselves of the fact that we have an all-powerful God who is always ready to help those who call on Him: “As for me, I will call upon God, and the LORD shall save me” (Psalm 55:16). “Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me” (Psalm 50:16). Unconverted man refuses to believe in the power of God. The apostle Paul on trial before King Agrippa had to challenge the king, “Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?” (Acts 26:8) Happier far to have that simplicity of faith that can declare, like Mary of old, “With God nothing will be impossible” (Luke 1:37).

The remainder of 2 Kings 6 is taken up with the account of Elisha’s help, firstly to the king of Israel and then to Elisha’s young servant. It will be helpful to look at both of these. As we have already remarked, as a servant of God, Elisha is ready to help all, high and low, rich and poor.

As happened from time to time, the land of Israel was under attack from the king of Syria. Usually, these attacks were allowed by God to take place at times when Israel as a nation was departing from God. In this way, Israel might realize their need of help and turn to God. From time to time, Elisha sent messages to the king of Israel warning him of where the king of Syria was going to attack. How could Elisha know this? Because as a prophet he was in touch with God and, once again, God demonstrates His power through Elisha. So Elisha learned, as David had already experienced, “The secret of the LORD is with those who fear Him” (Psalm 25:14). So accurate was Elisha’s information that the king of Assyria was sure that he had a traitor in his court!

On being told by one of his servants that Elisha was the source of the information, the king of Syria was determined to destroy Elisha. We pick up the story at verse 13: “So [the king of Syria] said, ‘Go and see where [Elisha] is, that I may send and get him.’ And it was told him, saying, ‘Surely he is in Dothan.’ Therefore he sent horses and chariots and a great army there, and they came by night and surrounded the city. And when the servant of the man of God arose early and went out, there was an army, surrounding the city with horses and chariots. And his servant said to him, ‘Alas, my master! What shall we do?’ So he answered, ‘Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.’ And Elisha prayed and said, ‘LORD, open his eyes that he may see.’ Then the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha” (verses 13-17).

Why is it that the enemies of God are so quick to recognise the power of God while the people of God are so slow to recognise that power? The king of Syria was certainly quick to recognise that power! He wanted to arrest one man, Elisha. What does he do? He takes no chances but sends an army stealthily by night with horses and chariots! He recognises the power of God that surrounded the servant of God! Earlier, King Ahaziah, the wicked son of his wicked father, King Ahab, wanting to arrest Elijah, three times over had sent captains with fifty men to arrest the solitary Elijah (see 2 Kings 1). So too, the enemies of the Lord Jesus when they wanted to take Him, sent Judas who, “having received a detachment of troops and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees, came there with lanterns, torches and weapons” (John 18:3). Hamilton Smith has written, “The world instinctively knows that one man, if God is with him, is stronger than a great host without God.”

But Elisha’s servant still had to learn that power of God. Seeing this great enemy army, he is greatly troubled. We do well to note Elisha’s quiet confidence. His message to his servant still rings true for us today as the people of God: “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” We have already reminded ourselves of John’s wonderful promise: “You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

Elisha’s confidence stemmed from the fact that he already knew something of that power of God. He had watched Elijah being taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire with horses of fire (2 Kings 2:11). Elisha knew that those same chariots and horses were far more powerful than the chariots and horses of the king of Syria! The psalmist David

knew that same delivering power. So he writes in Psalm 34:7: “The angel of the LORD encamps around all those who fear Him, and delivers them.” That’s a good verse to remember when we are troubled!

So we read, “And Elisha prayed and said, ‘LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.’ Then the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha” (verse 17). “LORD ... open his eyes” - we would do well to make that prayer ours in a twofold way. First of all, as the apostle Paul tells us, “But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age had blinded, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them” (2 Corinthians 4:3-4). We are surrounded by men and women, boys and girls, who have been spiritually blinded by Satan and we need to pray that their eyes might be opened to believe the Gospel and receive the Lord Jesus as Saviour. Secondly, those of us who are older need to pray for our younger fellow believers that they, too, might have their eyes opened to recognise something of the power and grace of God that we may have experienced in our lives.

William Tyndale was falsely condemned as a heretic and burnt at the stake for translating the Bible into English so that his fellow countrymen might be able to read and understand it. Our Authorised Version of the Bible is largely the result of his work. Before he died, his last words were, “Lord, open the king of England’s eyes”. The king of England then was Henry VIII who, up till then, had been resolutely opposed to the circulation of the Scriptures in English. A few years later, Henry gave permission for the Scriptures to be freely circulated and read! That prayer worked for Elisha and for William Tyndale. May our prayers be equally effective!

But what was Elisha to do, surrounded as he was by these Syrians? We read, “So when the Syrians came down to him, Elisha prayed to the LORD, and said, ‘Strike this people, I pray, with blindness.’ And He struck them with blindness according to the word of Elisha. Now Elisha said to them, ‘This is not the way, nor is this the city. Follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom you seek.’ But he led them to Samaria. So it was, when they had come to Samaria, that Elisha said, ‘LORD, open the eyes of these men, that they may see.’ And the LORD opened their eyes, and they saw; and there they were, inside Samaria! Now when the king of Israel saw them, he said to Elisha, ‘My father, shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?’ And he answered, ‘You shall not kill them. Would you kill those whom you have taken captive with your sword and your bow? Set food and water before them, that they may eat and drink and go to their master.’ Then he prepared a great feast for them; and after they ate and drank, he sent them away and they went to their master. So the bands of Syrian raiders came no more into the land of Israel” (verses 19-23).

Some years earlier, the wise King Solomon had written, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” Elisha certainly proved the truth of those words. As God’s representative, Elisha would show the kindness of God unto his enemies. That same kindness of God has been shown to us also. Paul writes to Titus, “But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us” (Titus 3:4-5).

So through prayer Elisha was able to save his nation far more effectively than by any battle! “The bands of Syrian raiders came no more into the land of Israel” (verse 23). It may be that we, too, need to learn this same lesson from Elisha: the best way in which we can save our nation is through prayer. That’s why Paul writes to Timothy, “Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all men to be saved” (1 Timothy 2:1-4). Note Paul’s emphasis: “first of all”! For Paul, this kind of prayer was a top priority! May it be our priority too!

We have seen, then, how Elisha was able to be a help in his generation, in the little things of life as well as in the bigger things of life, with ordinary people and with royalty. By the grace and power of God, may we be helps in our generation!

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