

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Lessons from the life of Elisha: Elisha – the prophet

Elisha the prophet; what is a prophet? Our usual picture of a prophet is someone who can foretell the future. This is often true but just as importantly a prophet is someone who brings God's Word to His people to challenge or to guide them "The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream; And he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully". Jeremiah 23:28. Very often the true prophets of Jehovah suffered a great deal personally because of their message. Elisha is unquestionably a prophet of grace, God's undeserved favour towards us. His was a message of grace but Elisha was also a very gracious man.

Elijah the predecessor of Elisha has been called "God's emergency man". Elisha could just as appropriately be called "a man for all seasons". As we have seen in the previous talks on this remarkable man he has had to face all manner of different problems and he has always provided the answer. Now he faces what is certainly the gravest challenge yet. The capital city of the ten tribes of Israel, Samaria, is besieged. Ben-Hadad, the king of Syria, an old enemy of Israel had brought an enormous army to the city of Samaria to surround and conquer it. We are not told how long the siege had already lasted, only its effects. The plight of the trapped citizens was so extreme, the food all gone, that they were reduced to eating a donkeys head and the droppings of doves! The price for this food if that is what we should call it, was so high that only the very wealthy could afford it. Worse still, some of the population had resorted to cannibalism! They were eating their own children!

We are reading today from 2 Kings 6:24-33: "And it happened after this that Ben-Hadad king of Syria gathered all his army, and went up and besieged Samaria. And there was a great famine in Samaria; and indeed they besieged it until a donkey's head was sold for eighty shekels of silver, and one-fourth of a kab of dove droppings for five shekels of silver. Then, as the king of Israel was passing by on the wall, a woman cried out to him, saying, 'Help, my lord, O king!' And he said, 'If the LORD does not help you, where can I find help for you? From the threshing floor or from the winepress?' Then the king said to her, 'What is troubling you?' And she answered, 'This woman said to me, 'Give your son, that we may eat him today, and we will eat my son tomorrow.' So we boiled my son, and ate him. And I said to her on the next day, 'Give your son, that we may eat him'; but she has hidden her son.' Now it happened, when the king heard the words of the woman, that he tore his clothes; and as he passed by on the wall, the people looked, and there underneath he had sackcloth on his body. Then he said, 'God do so to me and more also, if the head of Elisha the son of Shaphat remains on him today'. But Elisha was sitting in his house, and the elders were sitting with him. And the king sent a man ahead of him, but before the messenger came to him, he said to the elders, 'Do you see how this son of a murderer has sent someone to take away my head? Look, when the messenger comes, shut the door, and hold him fast at the door. Is not the sound of his master's feet behind him?' And while he was still talking with them, there was the messenger, coming down to him; and then the king said, 'Surely this calamity is from the LORD; why should I wait for the LORD any longer?' 2 Kings 6:24-33.

What an incredibly black day for any nation, but how much worse that Israel, God's chosen people were in this dreadful condition. They were learning that there is a price to pay for disregarding God and His laws. God had promised to nurture and protect them, watching over them and caring for them. But they had turned to other so called gods, disobeyed God's statutes and now they were reaping what had been sown. We too live in a very difficult time, our nation is now paying the price for a decade of greed and extravagance, although, it might well be true that those most at fault so often get away lightest. Much worse though than the financial crisis is the moral crisis the western nations are facing. It is depressing to open the newspapers and read yet again of infidelity and immorality among those who claim to lead the nation or act as role models for the young. It would seem that the only thing that is not to be tolerated today is intolerance! Anything goes! But God has never lowered His standard, and we disregard Him at our peril.

Samaria and its inhabitants, including the prophet Elisha, were suffering. People were starving and desperate. These two women in the story we have read, had hatched a most appalling plan to secure their food supply for a few more days. They had each agreed to kill their own child, one, one day, the other the next day, to provide them with a meal. But the second child had been hidden away and not killed. The first mother, seeing the King of Samaria passing by, calls out to him about the unfairness of it! The woman asks the king for help. His frustrated and sarcastic reply is to enquire as to whether she needed help from the grain store or the wine press. Both had been emptied long ago. When

the woman explained to the king the diabolical plan the two mothers had conceived and started to carry out, the king is absolutely horrified.

I am struck by this story. The mother who had killed her own child is outraged that her friend and fellow mum had reneged on her part of the deal and hidden her child! Had she no sense of guilt, no shame at what she had done? We are all horrified to read this story, or its more modern counterpart in the siege of Leningrad by the Germans when similar dreadful events occurred, and yet we live in a land where the lives of so many babies are legally terminated before birth. Do we have double standards? Both acts are reprehensible to a loving and holy God.

The king of Samaria, on hearing the women's story tears his clothes in grief and fury and proclaims that he will have Elisha's head by the end of the day. Why blame Elisha? Quite possibly he held him responsible for allowing the Syrians to go free when they had been in his power earlier. Elisha had shown the Syrians grace and released them when their lives could so easily have been taken at an earlier battle. Not for one moment did the king think that possibly it was his own behaviour and the rebellion of the nation that was to blame. Are we like this? Overlooking our own sins and faults and blaming others, or even God for our problems? The King of Samaria said "Surely this calamity is from the Lord." All the kings of Israel were required to read and study the Law of God. If this king had done so he would have recalled that twice God had warned the people that this dreadful situation would occur if they turned their back on Him, the only true God. As it was King Jehoram set out to murder the only person who could help him. Elisha had previously been a great help and a good guide to King Jehoram, now the king wants him dead.

How often is this same sorry tale repeated through the Bible! Joseph's brothers plotted together to kill him, the people threatened to kill Moses, and even King David, a national hero, was at risk of being stoned to death. Far, far worse of course is the way the nation of Israel enjoyed the blessings and healing that the Lord Jesus brought to them but at the end cried out "Crucify Him!" Mark 15:13.

How did Elisha respond to the king's threats? "Then Elisha said, 'Hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the LORD: "Tomorrow about this time a seah of fine flour shall be sold for a shekel, and two seahs of barley for a shekel, at the gate of Samaria.'" So an officer on whose hand the king leaned answered the man of God and said, 'Look, if the LORD would make windows in heaven, could this thing be?' And he said, 'In fact, you shall see it with your eyes, but you shall not eat of it.' Now there were four leprous men at the entrance of the gate; and they said to one another, 'Why are we sitting here until we die? If we say, 'We will enter the city,' the famine is in the city, and we shall die there. And if we sit here, we die also. Now therefore, come, let us surrender to the army of the Syrians. If they keep us alive, we shall live; and if they kill us, we shall only die.' And they rose at twilight to go to the camp of the Syrians; and when they had come to the outskirts of the Syrian camp, to their surprise no one was there. For the LORD had caused the army of the Syrians to hear the noise of chariots and the noise of horses - the noise of a great army; so they said to one another, 'Look, the king of Israel has hired against us the kings of the Hittites and the kings of the Egyptians to attack us!' Therefore they arose and fled at twilight, and left the camp intact - their tents, their horses, and their donkeys - and they fled for their lives. And when these lepers came to the outskirts of the camp, they went into one tent and ate and drank, and carried from it silver and gold and clothing, and went and hid them; then they came back and entered another tent, and carried some from there also, and went and hid it. Then they said to one another, 'We are not doing right. This day is a day of good news, and we remain silent. If we wait until morning light, some punishment will come upon us. Now therefore, come, let us go and tell the king's household.'"

Elisha the prophet, knew what the King of Samaria was planning and spoke to the elders of the city who were sitting with him in his house. In response to the king's threats he had a most welcome and remarkable message for them and for the king. "Tomorrow about this time a seah of fine flour shall be sold for a shekel, and two seahs of barley for a shekel, at the gate of Samaria." 2 Kings 7:1. In the city of unimaginable poverty is a message of almost unbelievable plenty! One day five silver shekels would buy approximately half a pint of dove's droppings, tomorrow one silver shekel would secure you twenty pints of fine wheat flour or forty pints of barley meal. We do not read of the king's reply, but the retort of his right hand man is recorded. "Look, if the LORD would make windows in heaven, could this thing be?" 2 Kings 7:2. Elisha's solemn answer to that is, "In fact, you shall see it with your eyes, but you shall not eat of it."

This intriguing story continues with the tale of the four lepers living outside the city wall. Their illness forbade them entry into the city and to go to the Syrians would seem to mean certain death. Their plight however is just as desperate as those inside the city and so they decide that they really have nothing to lose. They can either starve to death outside the city walls or go to the camp of the Syrians to beg for food and risk being killed. "If they kill us, we shall only die". 2 Kings 7:4. To their amazement, on arriving at the camp they find it deserted by the soldiers who had fled leaving behind all their food and belongings.

The lepers had a field day! They collected together all the gold and silver they could find and then helped themselves to the abundant food and drink.

Very quickly they all realised that they were being selfish! “We are not doing right. This day is a day of good news, and we remain silent. If we wait until morning light, some punishment will come upon us. Now therefore, come, let us go and tell the king’s household.” 2 Kings 7:10. These lepers, who had been forced to live outside the walls of Samaria would have known nothing of Elisha’s prophecy. Nevertheless they wanted to share the good news with others. They had a responsibility to do so. Their news is received back at the king’s court with considerable scepticism, the king and his advisors suspect a trick to get them out from behind the strong city walls. However a scouting party is sent out and the leper’s story is confirmed. It really was a day of good tidings! These men, shunned by their own community really did have good news, life saving news to share. And so do we!

Paul, addressing the Roman Christians, writes “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.” Romans 1:16. Paul had experienced the life-changing power of God’s good news and was convinced it was the remedy for mankind’s deepest need. For Paul every day was a day to share the good news! “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” 2 Corinthians 6:2. Our Lord’s commission, before he returned back to heaven was that His disciples should “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.” Mark 16:15.

Elisha’s response to the king’s threat was the announcement of gracious salvation. God’s response to the horrors of Calvary and the murder of His Son is to offer to all forgiveness and the blessing of eternal life! Sadly King Jehoram’s right hand man who had mocked God’s ability to save in this miraculous way never benefited himself. He saw the fulfilment of God’s word but never tasted the blessing himself. So near and yet so far! The Lord Jesus said “he who does not believe will be condemned.” Mark 16:16. How vital to believe what God has said!

It would seem that some forty years have passed in the history of the nation of Israel. King Jehoram who had reigned during the siege of Samaria had been succeeded by Jehu, who in turn had been succeeded by King Jehoahaz. King Jehoahaz was a faithful king who had the wisdom to cry to God for help for the nation. Do you think the nation had forgotten Elisha? He had been a channel for God’s blessing and salvation to them on many occasions yet as far as I can see forty long years had elapsed and no mention is made of Elisha! I am sure previous speakers have made mention of the meaning of Elisha’s name which is “God is Saviour” Our nation too has forgotten “God our Saviour, Who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” 1 Timothy 2:3-4. I think we can see all too clearly the price we are paying for ignoring God and His gracious desire to bless and help us. Still as individuals we can cry out to God and He will hear us and help us. “Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me.” Is the promise of God in Psalm 50:15.

Let’s read part of the last and slightly unusual historical reference to Elisha in 2 Kings. Joash or as he is also called, Jehoash was now King in Israel and now an old man, “Elisha had become sick with the illness of which he would die.” He had been a channel of healing for many others, but sought no help for himself, Elisha was content in God’s will for him. Joash the king comes to visit the dying prophet and says “O my father, my father, the chariots of Israel and their horsemen!” (2 Kings 13:14) What a strange thing to say to a dying man! I think it was a lament! Just a few verses earlier it is recorded that there were in fact just ten chariots and only fifty horsemen! If we go back a few chapters however we see a very different scene. The King of Syria had sent a vast army to the city of Dothan where Elisha was. “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, 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.” 2 Kings 6:14-17.

“Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” The scared young man who stood with Elisha had the unique experience of being allowed to see the angelic hosts that surrounded this man of God. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them” reminds me of the expression in Romans, “If God be for us, who can be against us!” Romans 8:31. Or again “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” 1 John 4:4. King Jehoash might very properly lament the appalling weakness of Israel’s army, their defence against the enemy, but this was because they had forgotten God, just as they had forgotten Elisha, God’s prophet of grace. We must never forget Jesus, God our Saviour in this way!

I was going to say that there are two more incidents in the life of Elisha to relate, but that is not strictly true! One relates to his life, one to his dead body!

“And Elisha said to [Joash, the King of Israel], ‘Take a bow and some arrows.’ So he took himself a bow and some arrows. Then he said to the king of Israel, ‘Put your hand on the bow.’ So he put his hand on it, and Elisha put his hands on the king’s hands. And he said, ‘Open the east window’; and he opened it. Then Elisha said, ‘Shoot’; and he shot. And he said, ‘The arrow of the LORD’S deliverance and the arrow of deliverance from Syria; for you must strike the Syrians at Aphek till you have destroyed them.’ Then he said, ‘Take the arrows’; so he took them. And he said to

the king of Israel, 'Strike the ground'; so he struck three times, and stopped. And the man of God was angry with him, and said, 'You should have struck five or six times; then you would have struck Syria till you had destroyed it! But now you will strike Syria only three times'. 2 Kings 13:15-19.

It cannot be that it is just an idle word when Elisha tells the king to "Open the east window" Often the last years of life are referred to as the autumn or sunset of one's life. Not so with Elisha! He was looking towards the sun-rising. It is a study in itself to go through the Bible and notice how often we are directed to the east or sun-rising! God is not moving towards the night and darkness rather, He is working towards a glorious new day.

Joash, helped and guided by Elisha, fires an arrow, which he describes as "The arrow of the LORD's deliverance". Joash is instructed to strike the enemy of God's people until they have been destroyed, and in token of this he is told to strike the arrows on the ground. The king's energy and enthusiasm for the task seems to be indicated by the fact that he only strikes the ground three times. Elisha is very angry with the king, whose lack of energy, maybe even his indifference, would mean that only a limited and partial victory would be achieved. What a warning for us today!

So the history of Elisha concludes. "Then Elisha died, and they buried him. And the raiding bands from Moab invaded the land in the spring of the year. So it was, as they were burying a man, that suddenly they spied a band of raiders; and they put the man in the tomb of Elisha; and when the man was let down and touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his feet". 2 Kings 13:20-21.

What a wonderful picture story to conclude the life of Elisha! We often used to sing a hymn that started with the line "Life through the death of Jesus" This unnamed Israelite had life through the death of Elisha. I have life, eternal life through the death and, of course, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. On this basis alone can God offer to anyone at all forgiveness and the assurance of eternal life. My debt has been paid and my punishment borne by my Saviour and Substitute. But there is also the promise of a bright future for Israel. After the death of Elisha, the ten tribe nation of Israel continued in their wicked ways and eventually was carried away into Babylon. Their whereabouts today is unknown. Judah the two tribes left were also later to be taken into captivity in Babylon but were graciously allowed to return to their land. God has not however forgotten His people, nor has He lost sight of them. In God's time, but through great suffering they will be revived, given new life and returned to the Promised Land. They will finally realise that Jesus was truly their looked for Messiah whom they had crucified. In the words of Isaiah they will say "But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed." Isaiah 53:5.

The letter written to the Hebrews Christians starts with the words "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by Son." Hebrews 1:1-2. All through the Old Testament God had used many different prophets, including Elisha, to speak to His people. They each had a different character, they each had a slightly different message, they were often quite remarkable and outstanding people. Now they must all stand aside, God has now spoken to us in His Son. Jesus came, not only with a message from God, but as He was Himself God, He has come to make the heart of God known. And what an amazing God is disclosed to us! A God of love and grace and truth. A shepherd God, a Father God, a giving God, but also a Holy God. Elisha seems to have been ignored or forgotten for the last forty years of his life, the Holy Spirit in Hebrews warns us "See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven" Hebrews 12:25.

God has now spoken to us in His Beloved Son, the Lord Jesus. It is an amazing message of love and forgiveness in the face of our sin and opposition, but in a sense God has nothing more He can say to us if we disregard or ignore this message. "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him", Hebrews 2:3. Let us respond with the obedience of faith.

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