

COMPASSION FOR THE BLIND

ELISHA: PROPHET OF COMPASSION AND CONFRONTATION

By Ron R. Ritchie

I want to share with you the story of a brother who we'll call "Joe," who as a Christian became spiritually blind. As all of us do, he had to turn back to the Lord Jesus, the only one who could give him back his spiritual sight, so that he could become the whole person God intended him to be in the first place.

Have you ever thought that you had made such a mess of your life that you could never again face your family or friends? I felt that way eleven years ago and for years afterward. Let me explain.

I was an executive with a \$400 million corporation, married with two children, and living what looked to be a very nice life. But my mind had been unbuttoned and twisted by confusion over who I was. I could not get a grasp on my confused and twisted mind.

Here is yet another testimony of the destructive power of child abuse. My father used a hardwood floor plank for enforcement of discipline, and my mother always called me bad names that she shouted at the top of her lungs. My grandmother enjoyed dressing me as a female. When my uncle found out my grandmother had cross-dressed me, he began to tease me and abuse me sexually. All this took place before I was ten years old. To cope with the abuse, I developed a second personality named "Crystal" who would escape the abuse.

But the consequences of this twisted confusion would come thirty-three years later when I was diagnosed as a transsexual. To eliminate the twisted confusion, sex change surgery would be required. I wanted the confusion that had tormented me all my life to go away, so in 1983 the surgery was performed. Joe, male, became "Jennifer," female. That is when the mess started to get so big that I lost my career, my wife, my children, and my friends.

My inability to get hold of the twisted confusion was complicated by the fact that I was a high-functioning alcoholic who also used cocaine to cope. In 1986, as the female personality Jennifer, I entered an alcohol recovery home. Four months of in-home treatment has worked to provide over eight years of recovery now.

But the surgery changing my sex did not eliminate the twisted confusion. And it was not until 1991, eight years after the surgery, that a new diagnosis of my case was made. Over the six months beginning on July 21, seven prominent Ph.D.s and psychiatric doctors agreed that I was not nor had I ever been a transsexual, but had always suffered from multiple personality disorder. As an abused child I had developed sixteen fragmented personalities, some female and some male. But one thing was for sure: the very destructive transsexual surgery was in error.

By 1986 it had become very clear that I needed to affirm my relationship with Chris, and this time I needed to entrust my life to him. Opening my eyes to Christ came the hard way. I had accepted Christ as my Lord and Savior in 1976, but I had failed to completely trust him. At the time I didn't make the connection between accepting him and the necessity of entrusting my life to him. I placed more trust in my alcohol-soaked brain to make the best choices for my life, when I needed to do nothing but open my eyes to Christ and trust him.

But opening my eyes to Christ is what has made it possible to restore the personality of Joe, male. I have not yet been able to restore my life financially because of my experiences. It has been difficult to impossible for employers to provide me an opportunity to work in a position at or near my skill and experience level. But prayers continue.

I choose not to blame the childhood abuse for my troubles, nor do I blame the doctors for their misdiagnosis of transsexualism. I don't blame alcoholism or drug addiction, either. The responsibility for the problems that destroyed my life is mine alone. At the core of my failure was accepting Christ without trusting him.

It took the total destruction of my life and then my recovery from alcoholism for Paul's great prayer to become a reality for me: "...that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe" (Ephesians 1:18-19).

Just as Joe had the eyes of his heart opened to God's truth, we all need to be given spiritual eyes to see ourselves as God sees us. As we walk by faith in Him and experience the "invisible realities" we can be used in a world that is blind to his life and love. In this message we want to see how God is able to give us eyes to see into the world of the Spirit and then give us eyes to see those around us who are spiritually blind so we might show them the compassion of our Lord Jesus. But first, a little context.

We find in 2 Kings 6:1-7 a wonderful, touching story of how the present and powerful Jehovah was willing to be involved with his prophets even in the daily pressures of life. Elisha and the other prophets went from Samaria down to the Jordan River to cut down some trees in order to build a new meeting hall. During the cutting, one of the men dropped a borrowed ax-head in the river. He came to Elisha and told him about his accident and wondered if he could be of any help. Elisha asked him to show him the spot where it fell in. When he did, Elisha threw a stick at the spot, and the metal ax head rose to the surface of the river and was retrieved. This is an illustration from the Old Testament of the way our Lord Jesus is also willing to enter into the daily lives of his children: "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7).

But in spite of that peaceful scene down by the Jordan river, Aram was once again at war with Israel.

The eyes of the Lord

Now the king of Aram was at war with Israel. 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. (2 Kings 6:8-10)

From time to time war would break out between Aram and Israel. In this case roving bands of soldiers from Aram were testing the strength of Israel; eventually they would begin a full siege of Samaria (see 2 Kings 6:24). The same situation exists today as roving bands of guerrillas from Lebanon in the north keep slipping into Israel. In 852-841 BC Joram (Jeroboam) I, the son of Ahab and Jezebel, was the reigning king of Israel, and Ben-Hadad II was the king of Aram. Ben-Hadad was sending out his spies, and based on their information and the wisdom of the various commanders, he would then move his army to make contact with Israel. But every time the Aramean army arrived at what should have been a classic location for an ambush, no one else showed up!

The prophet Elisha was residing in Dothan, as we will see, and God continued to reside in the heavens but remained very interested in his people. "...The eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His" (2 Chronicles 16:9). (There was a spiritual remnant in the land, but the majority of Jews were trying to worship both Jehovah and Baal. Elisha was seeking to woo them back to Jehovah.) So in this time of war, God once again stepped into time and space and by divine revelation informed Elisha of every plan that King Ben-Hadad made. The prophet in turn would tell King Joram, who would then check out the information. Finding it truthful, he was able to avoid one deadly conflict after another.

A hundred years earlier David had written a song (Psalm 59) about the time Saul was sending out men to kill him:

*Deliver me from my enemies, O my God;
Set me securely on high away from those who rise up*

*against me.
Deliver me from those who do iniquity,
And save me from men of bloodshed.
For behold, they have set an ambush for my life;
Fierce men launch an attack against me...
Arouse Thyself to help me, and see!
...For God is my stronghold.
My God in His lovingkindness will meet me;
God will let me look triumphantly upon my foes...
For Thou hast been my stronghold,
And a refuge in the day of my distress.*

Would that Israel had had the heart of David toward God. Would that we had the heart of David toward God in the midst of our spiritual warfare!

President Clinton's crime bill was defeated last week, and it put him into a depressed mood. According to a report in the *San Francisco Chronicle* with the headline "Clinton Says He Needs Prayers," our president went to the Full Gospel African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Temple Hills, MD last Sunday. He said, "I ask you to pray and to speak to your friends and neighbors and to hope somehow we will all find the wisdom and judgment to come back and do the will of God in our ministry, which is to make you as safe as we possibly can." Regardless of what you think of all the contents of the crime bill, the role of government according to Romans 13 is to be the sword of the Lord toward wrongdoers. Our communities are becoming overwhelmed by wrongdoers, and the leader of our nation has asked us to pray for him. In the spirit of David we need to support him in prayer as we trust God to deal with the violence and crime in our communities.

The man of God

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."

"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.

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.

"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. (2 Kings 6:11-17)

Ben-Hadad finally assembled his officers and yelled out at them, "Which of us is on the side the king of Israel?" He was sure there was a spy in the camp. It is amazing that the men knew what was really going on when the king did not. But one of the king's officers told him what it appeared most of them knew: None of them was disloyal or even a spy; the truth was that Elisha the prophet of God knew every word the king spoke in his bedroom, and he would turn around and tell the king of Israel; and then the king would move his army out of harm's way.

Finally Ben-Hadad's failures on the battlefield all made sense: Elisha was the eyes and ears of Israel. So the next plan was to find and capture this prophet. The word came that he was residing in the small city of Dothan ("Two Wells"), which was about ten miles north of the capital, Samaria. (Dothan was the same city where Joseph's brothers had sold him into slavery [1850 BC; see Genesis 37:17-28].) So Ben-Hadad sent a large part

of his army including men, horses, and chariots down to that city and surrounded it.

The next morning Elisha's new servant got up, had a cup of coffee, walked out to the front garden, looked up to the hills, and was shocked to see them covered with men from Aram who had surrounded the city with their horses and chariots. Fear gripped his heart, and as he ran back into the house he cried out to Elisha: "Oh, my master, what shall we do?"

I personally find that for many Christians in the western church, fear is our first reaction when we feel surrounded by the enemy. And then we too ask, "What shall we do?" On the political battlefield, the liberal party is saying that the religious right is a scary group of people, and those in the religious right are saying that they are surrounded by the liberals who are going to take away all their rights. Fear rules the day on both sides. On the social battlefield, the gays and straights are lining up against each other and the anti-abortion folks are lining up against the pro-choice groups. The Hispanic gangs are lining up against the Asian gangs, the neo-Nazis are lining up against the blacks, and the blacks are lining up against the Jews. In the religious arena conservatives are lining up against the liberals over the social gospel versus the gospel of salvation, the positions of men and women within the church, and whether the word of God is really the word of God.

With hearts filled with fear, each side is crying out, "What shall we do?" When we feel outgunned, outnumbered, and outwitted, whether it be on the political, social, or religious battlefield, and our hearts are filled with the temptation to give in to fear, we need to go back into the Scriptures to see what men and women of God did in similar situations.

Moses: The prophet could see the Egyptian army chasing the people of Israel as they were leaving the land of slavery. The people were terrified and wished they had stayed in Egypt rather than coming out to die in the desert. But Moses had had the privilege of having a conversation with God, face-to-burning-bush. He had had the privilege of seeing and realizing that there is life and God beyond the physical world. He was invited into eternity while living in the desert of Sinai. He was given spiritual eyes to see that behind history stood God Almighty, and no daily event was out of his control no matter how frightening it appeared at the moment. So because of his spiritual eyesight, Moses was able to say with full confidence, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still." (Exodus 14:13-14.)

Deborah: Israel had sinned against God during the days of the judges, so the Lord sold them into the hands of the Canaanites; and they were ruled, intimidated, and treated cruelly by Sisera the commander of the army with his nine hundred iron chariots. Finally after twenty years of this cruel oppression, the people cried to the Lord for help (they stepped into eternity). The unseen but always spiritually present Lord heard the cry of his people and sent help in the person of Deborah the prophetess, who was leading Israel at that time. In the strength and wisdom of the Lord Jehovah, she was able to form a plan that placed Sisera and his nine hundred iron chariots in the dry river beds on Mount Tabor. Then the Lord caused a heavy rain to fall, and the chariots were stuck in the mud and run-off, forcing the army to flee on foot. That enabled Barak to destroy Sisera's whole army. (See Judges 4.) Deborah broke out into a victory song, of which this is one verse (Judges 5:3):

Hear this, you kings! Listen, you rulers!

I will sing to the LORD, I will sing;

I will make music to the LORD, the God of Israel.

Israel experienced victory over their enemies because they were finally given the spiritual eyes to see that their only hope after twenty years of oppression was to turn to the invisible but always present God of Israel.

Hezekiah: He was king of Judah 715-687 BC, a good king in the eyes of the Lord. He found himself and the city of Jerusalem surrounded by the Assyrian army of 185,000 soldiers. He went to the Lord in the temple (he stepped into eternity) and prayed that God would deliver his people. Then he gathered his people and said with the eyes of faith, "Do not be afraid or discouraged because of the king of Assyria and the vast army with him, for there is a greater power with us than with him. With him is only the arm of flesh, but with us is the LORD

our God to help us and to fight our battles.' And the people gained confidence from what Hezekiah the king of Judah said" (2 Chronicles 32:7-8). Then the Lord sent his angel among the Assyrian army, and 185,000 men died. Victory is "not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the LORD Almighty" (Zechariah 4:6).

So Elisha told his servant, "Don't be afraid. Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." A thousand years earlier Jacob, just before he was to wrestle with God and then meet his brother Esau, was met by a large army of angels, and he named the place Mahanaim, which means "double camp" or "double host;" the camp of God and the camp of Jacob, two worlds of beings co-existing (see Genesis 32:2).

The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear Him,

And rescues them. (Psalm 34:7)

Elisha prayed to the one and only living God of Israel, "O LORD, open his eyes so he may see." Then the Lord answered his prophet's prayer and opened the servant's eyes. And when he looked out he saw the same hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

The breathing dead around us see only with physical eyes and live out their lives based on what they can see alone. But the Scriptures are filled with the truth that the physical realm is not all there is, for God is Spirit and rules within the spirit world as well as in time and space. Paul later encouraged the Corinthian church, "...We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:17). The prayer that all of us need to pray in times of fear and distress is, "O Lord, open my eyes that I may see spiritually what is really going on around me. What are you doing behind the curtains of history? And how should I react to my current stress?"

What did the servant of Elisha see? He saw the hills filled with horses and chariots of fire (not material fire, but the glory and brightness of celestial beings when made visible to man). David wrote (Psalm 68:17),

The chariots of God are tens of thousands

and thousands of thousands....

Zechariah the prophet would write three hundred years later (520 BC), "I looked up again—and there before me were four chariots coming out from between two mountains—mountains of bronze! The first chariot had red horses, the second black, the third white, and the fourth dappled—all of them powerful. I asked the angel who was speaking to me, 'What are these, my lord?' The angel answered me, 'These are the four spirits of heaven, going out from standing in the presence of the LORD of the whole world'" (Zechariah 6:1-7.) The chariots of fire that Elisha's servant saw were similar to the ones that had taken Elijah along with the whirlwind to heaven and would eventually be mentioned at the death of Elisha himself (see 2 Kings 2:11-12, 13:14). The servant saw the powerful army of God positioned to protect his prophet and his people, and if necessary to defeat their enemies on earth.

There is another song of David that should become ours in times of threat and fear (Psalm 118:5-8):

*From my distress I called upon the LORD;
The LORD answered me and set me in a large place.
The LORD is for me; I will not fear;
What can man do to me?
...It is better to take refuge in the LORD
Than to trust in man.*

The apostle John wrote to encourage the Asian Christians, "...The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

What would you do if your house was surrounded by a hostile enemy? Would your heart become filled with fear? Would you try to run, or reach for your weapons, or call 911....?

The blinding power of God

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.

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.

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.

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. (2 Kings 6:18-23)

As the enemy came down toward him, Elisha prayed to the Lord. Notice that he did not panic. His heart was not filled with fear, for he was given the spiritual reality that the army of the Lord covered the hills. He was living in the double camp, the spiritual world and the physical world. His prayer was very interesting. If you are at war, the objective is to kill as many of the enemy as possible before they kill you. Here was an army that hated God and Israel as well as the prophet and his servant; but unlike his mentor Elijah who had called down fire from heaven to consume the eight hundred false prophets of Baal, he prayed only that the army would become blind. God answered his prayer, and the entire army was struck blind. This could have been either physical blindness or mental blindness leading to confusion so that they willingly allowed Elisha to lead them to Samaria. In this context, as the servant had eyes but could not see the spiritual world, so the Syrian army probably had eyes but could not see that the man was Elisha.

"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 the blind army to Samaria. Can you picture this in your mind? A humble prophet of the living God of Israel leading the army of Aram ten miles south into the capital of Samaria and then into the palace area, where he presented them to King Joram. Once they arrived in Samaria, the prophet prayed again and asked the Lord to open their eyes, and as they began to focus they found themselves in the enemy's camp, fully surrounded by Joram's troops. And a wildly excited king approached Elisha with rare respect and urgently asked, "Shall I kill them, my father? Shall I kill them?"

Elisha said, "Do not kill them, but set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink and then go back to their master." That way they would witness the spiritual reality that the God of the whole world was Jehovah, and he protected his prophet as well as his people. They would also know that they themselves were extended the grace of God when they were set free to return home unharmed. What a witness! You can hear the soldiers of Aram when they returned home to Damascus: "We were strangely captured and led to Samaria by a bald-headed man and surrounded by the army of Joram. But instead of being killed, we were fed by the Jews and then sent home!" This act of kindness would eventually affect the whole nation of Aram: "There is a God; he lives and blesses Israel, the Jewish slave girl, and the Gentiles who place their faith in him, like our General Naaman. So the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel's territory.

Compassion for the blind

It was only God who gave spiritual eyes to the servant of Elisha so that he as well as the prophet could live in the spiritual reality of the double camp. Likewise, he can give us spiritual eyes to see that the eternal chariots of God are always present, surrounding and protecting us from the armies of this world when it is the will of God to do so.

It was only Jesus who was able to give physical sight to a man born blind in John 9. Meanwhile the spiritually blinded Pharisees refused to believe Jesus was their Messiah because he healed the man on the Sabbath. Their spiritual blindness kept them from believing either the man's or his parents' witness that it was Jesus who had healed him. The formerly blind man finally told the spiritually blinded Pharisees, "One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" (9:25.) Jesus then told the Pharisees, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." (9:39.)

It was only Jesus who heard the prayer of Paul on behalf of the Ephesian Christians: "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened [moving the truth of God from the mind into the heart so it will be stirred with emotion] in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you [eternal life now], the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints [we belong to God and he belongs to us, so we can draw on his spiritual resources and he can use our lives], and his incomparably great power for us who believe [the same power that God used to raise his Son from the grave is available to us when we ask for it]." (Ephesians 1:18-19.) This "resurrection power" eliminates fear in any circumstance.

It is only Jesus who can continue to remove our friend Joe's spiritual blindness and our own spiritual blindness so that we can finally become the people of wholeness that God has called us to be in Christ Jesus.

We have seen that God used his prophet Elisha as an instrument of his compassion among his Jewish people. We have also seen that Elisha's life and ministry foreshadowed the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. And in the same way, our Lord's life and ministry foreshadowed what our life and ministry are—to be among the hurting people he leads us to relate to day by day as Christians.

Once we recover from our spiritual blindness, we are then motivated by the Spirit of God to move out into the body of Christ and the world around us and to seek ways to help others who are spiritually blind. The greatest testimony anyone can hear from us in a world of darkness is the words of the formerly blind man in John 9: "All I know is that once I was blind but now I see!" And when asked, "How did that happen?" he answered, "I met Jesus—the Light of the world!"

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