

O LORD, OPEN HIS EYES

SERIES: THE PRAYERS OF THE SAINTS

By Steve Zeisler

In Jesus' earthly ministry he gave sight to some who were physically blind. He also gives sight to the spiritually blind, and often uses our prayers in this process. The text we'll study in this message can help us learn to minister in prayer this way. The prophet Elisha twice prayed very simply, "Open their eyes." He prayed for insight, perception, recognition of glorious things that were otherwise hidden from those in bondage.

2 Kings 6 is where these prayers are recorded. But first I want to introduce Elisha in 2 Kings 2.

A crisis of faith

Elisha is an interesting character. He was the servant of Elijah, who was probably the greatest of all Israel's prophets. Elijah was the one in whose pattern John the Baptist came as the forerunner of Christ, "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). Elijah was an extraordinary, towering figure who challenged the failure of his nation and the foolishness of apostate rulers. He fought battles against the prophets of Baal. He prayed for drought and there was drought. He prayed for rain and it rained. We are going to look more closely at Elijah himself in the next message.

But Elisha, we are told, poured water on Elijah's hands (3:11); that is, he attended him. Elijah had a school for young prophets, and Elisha was the premier student, the closest disciple of the great Elijah.

Elisha would turn out to be different in many respects from almost all the other prophets. Over the course of his ministry he dispensed grace and truth in a way that was almost priestly or pastoral, as opposed to uttering denunciations of sin and ethical failure, calling for reformation.

At the end of Elijah's life, Elisha knew that God intended him to step into the shoes of his master—he would be the one to head the school of prophets, he would be the senior spokesman of God to the nation. Not surprisingly, he felt inadequate for the task. Let's pick up the story in 2 Kings 2:9:

When they had crossed [the Jordan], Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?"

"Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied.

In Israel the firstborn son was always given a double portion of the inheritance as it was divided up among the descendants. This was a way of designating who the heir, the patriarch for the next generation, would be. What Elisha was saying was, "I need to be given your spirit. I have been designated your successor with words, but I need the spiritual resources that you have. If I am going to take your place, grant me your authority, your faith."

Verse 10:

“You have asked a difficult thing,” Elijah said, “yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise not.”

Elijah replied, “If you are a man of faith, you will see God come for me. You will apprehend invisible realities—angelic presences, the power of God. But if not, you will imagine ordinary explanations. ‘Maybe Elijah got lost in the desert. Maybe he fell into some ravine or got heatstroke. Maybe there’s some other explanation for his failure to return.’”

Verses 11-14:

As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.

Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart.

He picked up the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and went back and stood on the banks of the Jordan. Then he took the cloak that had fallen from him and struck the water with it. “Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?” he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over.

Thus he became the servant of Israel to minister to his people, to speak to them of God, to head the community of younger prophets who were going to learn from him to speak for God. He was wearing Elijah’s mantle, and he was going into battle.

His crisis had concerned whether he would have his eyes opened to see how God acted and where God was present, whether he would be able to declare invisible realities that others couldn’t see—chariots and horses of fire, the wonder and power of God. Would he be able to speak confidently not just about how the world appeared but also about the ways of God?

Now consider chapter 6, where we will find Elisha’s simple prayer: “Open his eyes.”

The best way to share your faith

Through a series of events, Elisha had been giving military information to the king of Israel (the northern kingdom), whose capital was Samaria at this time. The Arameans (sometimes known as the Syrians) were at war with Israel. They would set ambushes, but Elisha would tell the king to stay clear of the places where the Arameans had set them. The king of Aram eventually became furious. He accused some of his people of being traitors until he learned about the prophet in Israel who protected God’s people. Then the King of Aram decided to kill Elisha.

I hope you and I get in trouble someday for the same reason! May God give us an opportunity to speak the truth in such a way that the people God loves are protected from harm. May we find ourselves the focus of opposition because the things we are say do good to those who need protection and care.

Elisha was lodging in a city called Dothan. He had one of his young disciples with him. Here was the young prophet attending the senior prophet as Elisha himself had once attended the great Elijah before him. We will pick up the story in 2 Kings 6:13-16:

“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.”

This great truth of Scripture is echoed in the New Testament: “The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). Chariots were powerful military vehicles. Warriors in the chariots, drawn by horses trained for battle, had surrounded the entire city of Dothan. So as Elisha and his servant walked around the wall, they saw a military force aligned against them at every point. There was no escape. But Elisha said to his servant, “We’ve got them just where we want them now. There are more of us than of them.” The servant must have looked at him as if he had lost his mind.

Verse 17:

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.

Dothan was a small walled city. It was in a valley ringed by mountains on which the servant of Elisha saw the chariot and horses of fire. God’s provision and power had been there all along, but the servant hadn’t been able to see it. Remember, Elisha’s own crisis of faith had concerned whether he would see the chariot and horses of fire when they came for Elijah. Already he had faced the issue, “Will I trust God, see the invisible, and believe in the strength and authority of heaven even when it cannot be measured with my physical senses?” In like manner he prayed for his servant to apprehend truth that required faith to see.

It’s a marvelous privilege to be able to pray for a struggling friend, for the believing heart next to us that is fearful and beaten down. “I’ve tried to tell them as much as I can, but, O Lord, you have to make it real.”

Verse 18:

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 prayed for the opposite result for these soldiers advancing on them: “Make them blind and show them their inadequacy. Show them their arrogance and pride.”

Verse 19:

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.

Blinded, they had no choice but to follow the one who could see. He led them to the capital city, where they were surrounded by the soldiers of the Israelite army. Verse 20a:

And after they entered the city, Elisha said, “LORD, open the eyes of these men so they can see.”

In the first case Elisha had prayed for his younger brother, his fellow prophet, to be able to see what he could not. In this case he was praying for dangerous enemies to see.

Verses 20b-22a:

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?”

These were defenseless men who had come into Samaria blind. They had no opportunity to prepare to fight. And the king wouldn't normally kill prisoners of war if he had won a battle against them.

Verses 22b-23:

“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.

What are some observations we might make from this text? Let me suggest a couple.

God's answers to human problems

The first is that the hills around Dothan had on them not giants or spaceships or some other esoteric representation of the power of God, but chariots. Elisha and his servant were surrounded by chariots made by human strength, chariots of worldly power and opposition. What God provided as an answer, declaring his own power, were chariots of *fire*.

The point of this is that when we are under pressure, when we find that the world is doing its best to destroy, to take away our hope, to hurt those we love, the kinds of threats that are mounted will be met with wise, direct, powerful good news.

Christians are accused of being other-worldly escapists at times: we flee to God and avoid the struggles of the real world; we don't know what it's like to live in hard places and in hard times. But what we find in this

account is that we get specific answers to real problems. That is certainly the witness of the New Testament. Death threatens, and death is answered by resurrection. Chains bind, and chains are broken for freedom's sake. Children are orphaned, and they are claimed by God as royal sons. The dying are given life in abundance. Failure is overcome with grace.

Some reports on the history of MTV came out on a recent anniversary. The efforts made by advertisers and merchants greedy for gain at the expense of children are a terrible concern for parents. One study that I saw pointed out how well the advertisers understand the vulnerabilities of the young, and how aggressively they take advantage of them to make money. In this study one reporter asked an MTV executive if they influenced kids. His answer was, "We don't influence them—we own them."

For godly parents, these powerful, threatening influences that want to own their children are like the chariots surrounding Dothan. Whatever children get hooked on will make them vulnerable financially. What is the answer to that? Is the best answer for parents to tell their children to close their ears and their eyes, to avoid contact with targeted temptation? Well, that is part of the answer. But we have to offer something better in the gospel. Why are kids interested in what is ultimately destructive? Because they are lonely, because they want to be somebody, because they think they are not beautiful and they want to be, because they would like independence, because they would like life to have meaning, because they would like to be connected to something that is worth having.

What does the gospel offer them? It offers beauty, strength, identity, freedom, and connection to something that is worth having. Manmade chariots arrayed around Dothan were no match for the chariots of fire. God's solution will give needy souls exactly what they need in place of the foolishness that preys on their vulnerabilities. The chariots of God are chariots of fire meeting the needs of hearts in ways that overwhelm the threatening and destructive alternatives.

Blessing your enemies

Another observation I would make from this text concerns what happened to the enemy soldiers. Elisha said, "Open their eyes." He could have said, "Let's execute them!" But the way of God is not to destroy enemies. It's to win them, to open their eyes. God's authority comes into play most powerfully when we love our enemies, when we overcome evil with good, when we are able to give away life rather than fight back against those who take it, when we bless those who curse us.

Consider Jesus. There has never been a more authoritative person. No one has ever spoken as he did. Whatever he encountered, whether it was the soldiers of Rome or religious authorities of Israel, whether it was poor townspeople or crowds in the wilderness, whether it was storms on the sea or a legion of demons, he was in charge. And how did he use his authority? To be a blessing, to save sinners, including soldiers and Samaritans, to challenge pride so that it could no longer stand before him.

The movie *The Apostle* has both good and bad examples of Christian experience, but a powerful scene in it illustrates this point. The main character, a pastor named Sonny (played by Robert Duval), has founded a church. It's a poor, racially mixed congregation, and God is at work among them. But there is a racist in the community who hates the power of love. He shows up with a bulldozer one Sunday morning intending to destroy what he hates. Sonny opens his Bible and places it on the ground in front of the bulldozer. The word of God is a barrier that not only prevents the hater from destroying the building but leads him, with beautiful tenderness, to conversion. And the enemy who was going to destroy everything becomes one of the most

faithful members of the congregation. The scene is a wonderful depiction of what happens when we see enemies as those whose eyes have not yet been opened.

To conclude, recall that Elisha himself had had a crisis as to whether he would be able to observe the chariots of fire, to wear Elijah's mantle, to be what he knew he was called to be, to have the faith to trust God. Realizing what he had been given, he prayed for others to have the same. His was a powerful ministry of seeing the invisible and giving it away. "Lord, open his eyes! It's not my persuasion that will help, it's my prayer."

Our privilege, in the same way, is to pray for others, to intercede for both believers and unbelievers who are in bondage—that God may open their eyes. Our privilege is not of talking to people so much as talking to heaven on their behalf. Sometimes we overdo conversation and come across like know-it-alls who have an answer for everything. That doesn't help. Less talk and more intercession is something we can learn from Elisha.

Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1 has the same language as 2 Kings 6:

"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also 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 1:17-19a.)

May the Lord bless us with enlightened hearts and teach us to pray in this way for others.

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