

Of Axes and Angels

II Kings 6:1-23

Introduction

In his brilliant book, *Nicholas and Alexandra*, Robert K. Massie tells how the Tsar and Empress of Russia were misled by a miracle and thus, brought their great empire down to dust. After many years of anxious waiting for an heir to the Russian throne, Tsar Nicholas II and his German wife, Alexandra Federovna, were blessed with a son. However, their hopes for the future were cruelly crushed six weeks later, when doctors discovered the infant had hemophilia, an incurable blood disease that could kill at any moment. All of his short life was to be lived in the shadow of terror, with death stalking every footstep. This tragedy introduced into the royal family, one of the most evil men who ever lived.

Several times the young Tsarevich slipped close to death. Seeing him writhe in excruciating pain, his tormented parents would beg doctors to do something, but they were helpless. In those moments, they turned to Gregory Rasputin, a religious mystic of questionable credentials, who was later known as, “the mad monk of Russia”. Invariably, he would pray for the boy and there would be a marked improvement. Even today, doctors are at a loss to explain how these healings took place, but history testifies to them.

Always, Rasputin would warn the parents that the boy would only live as long as they listened to him. Rasputin’s power over the royal family became so great that he could, with a word, obtain the appointment or dismissal of any government official. He had men appointed or dismissed on the basis of their attitudes toward himself, rather than their abilities. Consequently, the whole Russian government reeled under the unwise counsel of this

evil man. Seeds of revolution were planted and watered with discontent. It erupted into the murder of the royal family and a revolution.

Alexander Kerensky, a key government figure during those trying times, later wrote, “Without Rasputin, there could never have been Lenin!”

There is an incredible power of counsel, good or bad, that can move an individual’s life or even the life of an entire nation. That is one of the reasons that God’s wise sayings for believers in the book of Proverbs, have so much to say about who we allow to counsel and influence us.

One of the chief problems in the history of Israel’s divided kingdom has been the incorrect or ungodly counsel to its kings. However, over the course of years, Elisha, unlike Elijah, had become a welcomed figure in the courts of Israel. His counsel was accepted and obeyed.

Today, we are going to observe some of Elisha’s last recorded acts, including his last recorded miracle. Then, we are going to see his influence over the king of Israel. We are going to dig into the counsel he provides for the king of Israel and look at the difference it made for the nation.

A Sight For Sad Eyes

So, let us rejoin our series of studies in the book of II Kings, in chapter 6. Look at verses 1 through 3.

Now the sons of the prophets said to Elisha, “Behold now, the place before you where we are living is too limited for us. Please let us go to the Jordan and each of us take from there a beam, and let us make a place there for ourselves where we may live.” So he

said, “Go.” Then one said, “Please be willing to go with your servants.” And he answered, “I shall go.”

Before we go further, I do not want you to miss the wonderful implications of their need. The sons of the prophets had outgrown their space, which indicates the work is prospering and growing. Just a few years earlier, they had been hiding in caves in fear of Ahab and Jezebel. Now, their leader, Elisha, is welcomed in the king’s court as his confidant, and other men are applying for the ministry. It is time to build.

As we, a church family, experience the same problems with growth and crowded spaces – where the hallways lack sufficient oxygen and the parking lot is a weekly test of sanctification – we should take encouragement from this.

Listen as one author compares this Old Testament problem to the New Testament church:

Elisha’s influence was evidently telling on the nation. The religious movement represented by the prophetic schools, was growing in force and volume. Likewise, it is encouraging to hear of growth and progress in the church. But note this: they did not stand still and endeavor to accommodate their increased numbers of the old conditions. They showed a spirit of enterprise, of advance, in correspondence with their new needs. This was true wisdom. The church must adapt herself to new needs, to altered circumstances, to the conditions of progress, if she is to hold her ground.

For your information, this was not written by some marketing consultant on church growth in America. This was written by a pastor in England, in 1888.

Let us go on to verses 4 and 5.

So he [Elisha] went with them; and when they came to the Jordan, they cut down trees. But as one was felling a beam, the axe head fell into the water; and he cried out and said, “Alas, my master! For it was borrowed.”

You need to understand that this was no small matter to this young prophet. To us, it is the loss of an axe head and we would not consider that to be a big deal. But, to this man, it was a very big deal. Why?

To begin with, he reacted so strongly because of the fact that he had borrowed the axe. The word “borrowed” is literally, “begged”.

We need to slip back into this culture and understand that an iron axe head was “state of the art” equipment and it was expensive. Not only did he have to beg someone to be able to use this expensive tool, but as far as this poor prophet was concerned, the axe head was irreplaceable. There would be no way he could pay for another one.

Perhaps it would help us to compare the value of this axe head with a contemporary piece of equipment. This would be comparable to borrowing a brand new chain saw from your neighbor, along with his pick-up truck to carry it. You go to the edge of a lake to clear some trees, but then, turn around and discover, to your horror, that you left the truck in the neutral gear. Before you can react, it rolls down the embankment and slowly sinks into the water. You stand there with your heart racing, as the roof of that brand new pick-up truck slips out of view. The only thing left to see is a lot of little air bubbles popping on the surface of the murky water. Now you know how the young prophet felt.

Continue to verses 6 and 7.

Then the man of God said, “Where did it fall?” And when he showed him the place, he cut off a stick, and threw it in there, and made the iron float. He said, “Take it up for yourself.” So he put out his hand and took it.

A couple of liberal authors suggested that the stick that Elisha threw into the water was actually poked into the water and used to retrieve the iron axe head. They are saying, in other words, that God included this account in the Bible just so we would know that Elisha was coordinated enough to retrieve the axe head with a stick.

I do not believe that is so. The iron, the text says, floated. The stick then, was merely a symbol of what Elisha wanted the iron to do. And, like a piece of wood, through this miracle of God’s power; perhaps, by the hand of an unseen angel, or through the reversal of iron properties, the axe head floated to the surface. It was as breathtaking to the sons of the prophets as it would be for you to see that pick-up truck slowly rolling back up the hill and shifting into park.

A Sight For Sacred Hearts

Now, the scene of chapter 6 changes from an enjoyable building project to a national crisis. The Arameans are continuing their raids in Israel. They have become more than an irritation, and in fact, have created a debilitating way of life for the Israelites who were living in the villages that had been terrorized by their raids.

Elisha begins to help by telling the Israelite king ahead of time, where the Arameans have planned their next attack. This was obviously transmitted by God to His prophet. So, troops would be sent in before the Arameans arrived, and the raid would be routed.

The king of Aram thought a traitor or spy was at work, so he ordered an investigation. Notice verse 11.

Now the heart of the king of Aram was enraged over this thing; and he called his servants and said to them, "Will you tell me which of us is for the king of Israel?"

In other words, "Okay, who's the traitor?"

Continue to verse 12.

And one of his servants said, "No, my lord, O king; but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedroom."

We do not know, but perhaps this servant was Naaman. Naaman had first-hand knowledge of Elisha's ability, through the enabling of his God, to read the hearts of people.

So, the king of Aram dispatches an army to Dothan, Elisha's hometown, and plans to capture and probably kill Elisha. Look at verse 14.

He sent horses and chariots and a great army there, and they came by night and surrounded the city.

Now understand, this was an unexpected attack. There are no forces within the city to defend against a strong army. And, observe the fact that they did not attack the city. Elisha was the only one they wanted. Surely the citizens of Dothan would gladly surrender the prophet to ensure their safety – at least that is what the Aramean army thought.

Continue to verses 15 and 16.

Now when the attendant of the man of God had risen early and gone out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was circling the city. 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."

I can just see that servant looking around and perhaps, thinking that the school of the prophets should require a course in mathematics. "There is an army out there and I am coming up with only two of us! Is Elisha just trying to act brave?"

I can remember as a kid, having to go out to the garage and climb up into the dark attic overhead to get things my parents needed at times. There was no light in the attic, just a light below, and it was scary. So I would talk out loud to myself or sometimes I would whistle. That did not mean that at that moment, I loved music, it meant that I was covering up.

Was Elisha whistling in the dark?

As you grow older, you learn the proper Christian thing to do when facing a crisis is to say, "No problem here," and sing, "God Is So Good," which He is. However, sometimes we use spiritual jargon to cover fear, anxiety, and need.

I like the fact that this servant actually said,
. . . Alas, my master! What shall we do?

If he had not, he would have missed the sight of a lifetime!

Now, here it comes – in verse 17,

Then Elisha prayed and said, "O Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see." And the Lord opened the servant's eyes and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

Both men were faced with a crisis. One man knew God was aware and available. The other had yet to learn.

Where do you think Elisha learned that the heavens were filled with the invisible hosts of God's angels? He learned it, as recorded in chapter 2 of II Kings, when Elijah was transported to heaven in a fiery chariot with its horses of fire!

If we had the ability to see into the spiritual dimension, we would see the air above us filled with the hosts of heaven. Imagine, physical evidence of the spiritual world!

Caution: Angel Infatuation

There is no doubt that our society, at large, is enamored by the world of angels. According to a

recent report in *Time* magazine, 69% of those polled believe in the existence of angels and 46% believe they have a guardian angel. Gallup polls reveal that teen belief in angels has increased steadily from 64% in 1978 to 76% by 1992. There is an infatuation today for angels. Angels are politically correct.

Listen to what Dr. David Jeremiah records in his recent book as he introduces the subject of angels:

We are living in an age of “Angel Mania”. In mid-1994, ABC aired a two-hour prime-time special entitled “Angels: The Mysterious Messengers,” hosted by Patty Duke. Both Time and Newsweek carried feature articles on angels in the December 1993 issues. From January 1994 to February 1995, 32 books on angels were released in the secular book market. There is an angel-watch network in Mountainside, New Jersey. It monitors angelic comings and goings in its bimonthly journal. There are 2,000 subscribers to the journal. The 1,600 members of “The Angel Collector’s Club of America” exchange information on everything from angel cookie jars and postage stamps to, of course, angel food recipes. They hold a national convention every two years. Across the country, boutiques have opened that sell nothing but angel collectibles – calendars, perfume, napkin rings, place mats, stationery, postcards, T-shirts and even angel sunglasses. In many places, people are sending angel collectibles in lieu of flowers to funerals. Angel seminars are packed in cities and rural retreats all over the country. In some, participants simply share experiences. Others promise that “getting in touch with your inner angel” will help solve your problems. Harvard Divinity School teaches an entire course on angels and Boston College now teaches two courses.

The trouble is, much of what is going on today, with regards to angels, is outside the standard of God’s word. While angels are mysterious, powerful, and involved in the arrangement of God’s plan, much of what is attributed to angels in the secular world does not match God’s word. Let me break down this caution into three thoughts.

While angels are sent to minister for us, they can never minister in us

1. First, while angels are sent to minister for us, they can never minister in us – only God can do that.

Just because we know that angels are from the spirit world, we should never mistake their role for the role of the Holy Spirit. Angels do not transform souls, the Holy Spirit does. Angels do not enlighten the mind and comfort the broken hearted, the Comforter, the One called to come alongside of us, the Holy Spirit of God does that.

These misconceptions present a subtle threat to a secular society that is infatuated with angels. One man wrote it this way, “With angels around, people feel they don’t have to bother an Almighty God in order to get help.” Another wrote, “Angels too easily provide a temptation for those who want a ‘fix’ of spirituality, without bothering with God Himself.”

While angels are involved in spiritual work, they are never to receive worship or adulation

2. Secondly, while angels are involved in spiritual work, they are never to receive worship or adulation.

If the possibility of that sounds far fetched; if you think I am being overly dramatic in believing that people could somehow actually worship angels, consider Paul’s warning to the Colosse church. He warns in chapter 2, verse 18 of the book of Colossians, and I will read from Eugene’s paraphrase,

Don’t tolerate people who insist that you join their obsession with angels and that you seek out visions.

By the way, in the Bible, angels always appear in the masculine – not most of the time, every time. And, they do not spend time earning their wings or helping the world at large. In fact, when they appear in the word, they are so intimidating, frightening, and awesome that they most often have to say, before saying anything else, “Fear not”.

We are never told to “ask our angel” something. We are never told to pray to angels or for our guardian angel. We are never told to pray for more angels.

Angels are the messengers of God, sent to do any number of things for the ultimate purpose of bringing the will and glory of God to pass.

While the angelic order is involved in physical protection, only God can ultimately provide spiritual protection

3. Thirdly, while the angelic order is involved in physical protection, only God can ultimately provide spiritual protection.

This truth involves the here and now. In the book of Ephesians, chapter 6, we are told of the armor that allows us to withstand the evil one and his fallen angels. There is a full description of everything we need in that passage. And, Paul does not come to the end of that list and say, “Now that you are dressed for battle, make sure your guardian angel is standing by.” No, there is no mention of angelic help. Instead, we are told to be dressed for battle and then, to pray with all prayer and supplication, in the Spirit.

Spiritual protection includes the hereafter as well. I fear that many people who have had some sort of mystical experience or angelic vision have been deceived into believing they are children of God. The infatuation with angels and their ever available readiness to help anyone, simply ignores the biblical truth that angels minister for the benefit of believers only.

- Hebrews, chapter 1, verse 14, says,
Are they [angels] not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?
In other words, angels are ministering agents to those who have inherited eternal life.
- David wrote, in Psalm, chapter 34, verse 7,
The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them.
- We are told in Luke, chapter 15, verse 10, that angels rejoice at the conversion of sinners to Christ.
- Angels have dramatically delivered believers from the threat of death, as, for example, the book of Acts records in chapter 5, verse 19, and chapter 12, verses 6 through 11.
- I have read numerous accounts from the journals and books of missionaries who testify to dramatic deliverances.
- Paul wrote in I Corinthians and I Timothy that the angels are uniquely interested in and

even somewhat curious about the Christian’s life.

The truth is, when the unbelieving world comes in contact with the hosts of heaven, it will not be a pretty sight. Angels are the agents of God in the final earthly judgments. Matthew records that the angels will separate the true believers from the false. The book of revelation, in the first part of chapter 20, records that angels will throw Satan into the abyss. Later in that chapter, as all unbelievers are cast into lake of fire, the implication follows that it is the angelic host who casts them in. What people are so warmly attracted to, may, in the end, be the very agents of terror who seal their doom.

The point is, the distraction needs to be removed. Our eyes and hearts should yearn for the power, protection, illumination, and guidance from God alone.

Well, back to our story. The next miracle Elisha requests involves blindness. He asks God, in verse 18b,

*“Strike this people with blindness, I pray.”
So He struck them with blindness according to the word of Elisha.*

Continue to verses 19 and 20.

Then 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.” And he brought them to Samaria. When they came into Samaria, Elisha said, “O Lord, open the eyes of these men, that they may see.” So the Lord opened their eyes, and they saw; and behold, they were in the midst of Samaria.

Imagine this scene – the enemy army is taken to the capital city of Samaria, where they are surrounded by soldiers. And, the gates of the city are shut, so there is no way out. Look at verse 21.

Then the king of Israel when he saw them, said to Elisha, “My father, shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?”

The king is acting like an excited kid. He is repeating, “Can I have it? Can I, can I?”

Continue to verses 22 and 23.

He answered, “You shall not kill them. Would you kill those you have taken captive with your sword and with your bow? Set bread and water before them, that they may

eat and drink and go to their master.” So he prepared a great feast for them; and when they had eaten and drunk he sent them away, and they went to their master. And the marauding bands of Arameans did not come again into the land of Israel.

I guess not! The Arameans learned that their strategy could never win against a God so powerful, nor an enemy so gracious as to feed them instead of execute them.

The hero of these stories is not a group of angels, nor even a courageous prophet; the hero is almighty God.

Application – Wonderful Truths About Our Wonderful Lord

From this chapter, we can cultivate several wonderful truths about our wonderful Lord.

God not only intervenes in issues of national importance, but He intervenes in issues of personal concern as well

1. First, God not only intervenes in issues of national importance, but He intervenes in issues of personal concern as well.

You could draw a line between verse 5 and verse 15 of chapter 6. They include the exact same words, although spoken by two different men in two different situations. Both men, when faced with a crisis, cried out to Elisha,

... Alas, my master! ...

I do not believe these two stories were coincidentally placed side by side. God intervenes in great concerns of national importance and in the personal crisis of just one individual.

Your concerns are God’s concerns. Peter could write, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, with great confidence, in I Peter, chapter 5, verse 7,

casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.

The word “anxiety,” according to one of my Greek dictionaries, is defined as, “whatever monopolizes the heart”. Isn’t that good? Whatever it is that fills your heart with anxiety and concern, cast it on Christ.

That word “casting” is the word that referred to a person putting something onto something or someone else. It is used only one other time in the New Testament. In Luke, chapter 19, verse 35, when the disciples had found the young donkey for Jesus to ride upon, they “cast” their coats onto the donkey to make a comfortable saddle.

Think of the humility in God’s love for us, “My son; My daughter, I will be your sovereign Bearer of burdens; I will carry your load.”

God is never too big for your concerns. Psalm, chapter 46, verse 1b, tells us that He is,

... a very present help in trouble.

God not only cares about great prophets who are in danger, but He cares about anonymous servants who are afraid as well

2. Secondly, God not only cares about great prophets who are in danger, but He cares about anonymous servants who are afraid as well.

Imagine, displaying the hosts of heaven. If I were God, I would display my power to the mighty; the wealthy; the important. But for whom did God peel back the blinders so as to see the splendor of His majestic host? For whom?! An anonymous servant whose heart was filled with fear!

The truth is, in the family of God, no one is insignificant; no one is overlooked; no one is unimportant.

Did you also notice that Elisha never prayed for God to send help? He simply prayed that his servant be given the perspective that help was already there.

Perhaps that is the lesson we need to learn afresh. Perhaps that is what David had in mind when he wrote,

God is ... a very present help in trouble.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/17/1996 by Stephen Davey.

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