

The Sound of Silence

Elisha: Living the Impossible Life – Part VII

II Kings 6:24-7:20

Introduction

Luigi Tarisio was found dead one morning. His rundown home was nearly barren of furniture, giving the appearance that he had little time or money for creature comforts. However, as relatives searched through his home, they eventually came to his attic and discovered two hundred forty six exquisite violins. Some of the violins were stuffed in drawers and boxes and some were wrapped in blankets. There was even, found in the bottom drawer of a dusty cabinet, a Stradivarius.

Luigi Tarisio's obsession with violins was startling. He had robbed the world of much wonderful music during the time that he had treasured his instruments and kept them hidden. Can you imagine – instruments designed for beautiful music had purposefully been kept silent?!

William Meyer, in his book, *The Image Makers*, tells the stories behind many of the large-budget advertising wars. These wars are between modern giant corporations that endeavor to communicate the message of their product with greater zeal and effectiveness than that of their competitors. One example is cola advertising.

Back in the 1970's, Pepsi was going to come out with one of its biggest "warm-fuzzy, tear-jerker" campaigns – the "Marry Me, Sue" spot. In this thirty second soap opera, folks from a prairie town are out under the broiling midday sun watching a skywriting show. Among the spectators is a cowboy and a young woman. As the camera pans the crowd, all of whom are drinking Pepsi, we notice that these two are

exchanging shy glances at one another. There is definitely something going on between them. The viewer is then shown some of the skywriting and more shots of the perspiring audience drinking Pepsi. Finally, the camera scans the heavens where the skywriter's ultimate message, "Marry Me, Sue," takes form. Sue, with tears welling up in her eyes, nods her head. The cowboy reaches over and hugs her. The theme music, which has been playing throughout this half minute, suddenly builds to a crescendo.

Meanwhile, Coca Cola had had a six month advance warning of this impending campaign for Pepsi. They told their ad agency that they had to come up with an equally mushy and moving commercial to beat Pepsi to the punch, or lose a seven hundred fifty million dollar worldwide account. Coke's agency worked around the clock for several weeks and came up with the famous Mean Joe Greene commercial. Mean Joe is offered a coke by a little kid and downs it in one long gulp. Coke and a little kid have brought Mean Joe Greene back to the "land of the living". Then, Joe tosses his jersey to the kid.

The cola wars continue. By the early 1980's, Pepsi was spending nearly three hundred million dollars on promoting the "Now" theme. Coca Cola was shoveling out close to four hundred million dollars to tell us that "Coke Is It". Do not tell Coke or Pepsi that communication is not important. Together, they spend nearly one billion dollars a year telling you there really is a difference.

The question is, “What are you and I doing to communicate to our generation that Jesus Christ really makes a difference?” Are we silent Stradivarius’ hidden in some safe place, while a world spends billions in order to sell flavored water? Do we sit on our hands and collect dust?

That question is put into living drama in the book of II Kings. Four lepers are faced with the question, “What do we do with the good news?”

I want to invite you back to our study in this book to chapters 6 and 7. The prophet Jeremiah, under divine influence and inspiration, utilizes a style of writing that allows us to see behind the curtain; he tells this story in a behind the scenes way. While the center stage is occupied with the scenes of war, we are taken backstage and shown several behind the scenes views. First, we see the horror of cannibalism at the hands of starving Israelites; then, we are taken behind the scenes to the home of Elisha as he handles an attempt on his life; finally, we are whisked offstage and away from the primary action to watch four lepers make an amazing discovery that saves the day and reveals God’s plan.

Behind the Scenes #1 – The Despair of the Forsaken

Let us pick up the narrative at verse 24.

Now it came about after this, that Ben-hadad king of Aram gathered all his army and went up and besieged Samaria.

I want to stop here because an astute student will pin me into a corner and ask about the apparent contradiction between verses 23 and 24. I will, in a couple of sentences, say that I think the apparent contradiction can be handled simply by taking both verses at face value.

Verse 23, which we studied previously, tells that the raiding bands of Arameans no longer came – and they did not. Then, some amount time elapses between verse 23 and verse 24. It might have been a day, or a month, or even years – we do not know. Verse 24 then tells us that Ben-hadad launches not a raiding party, but a full scale war with his entire army. They come and surround Samaria, the capital city of the Northern Kingdom, and cut off their food supply.

The horror of starvation

Let us look at the results of this in verse 25.

There was a great famine in Samaria; and behold, they besieged it, until a donkey’s head was sold for eighty shekels of silver, and a fourth of a kab [two quarts] of dove’s dung for five shekels of silver.

Yuck! I will not say any more than that, other than to tell you that it is going to get a lot sadder than this. Continue to verses 26 and 27.

As the king of Israel was passing by on the wall a woman cried out to him, saying, “Help, my lord, O king!” He said, “If the Lord does not help you, . . .”

(implying that He is not helping her),

“. . . from where shall I help you? From the threshing floor, or from the wine press?”

(which are empty, by the way).

Continue to verses 28 and 29.

And the king said to her, “What is the matter with 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.”

When you read this, you ask, “Is it possible for anyone to digress to the point of committing such a terrible deed?”

It may help to remember that in this day, in idolatrous nations among people who would sacrifice children to please their gods, children were given a very low view. Even in this day, where the gospel of Jesus Christ is absent, life is cheap.

The hardness of the king’s heart

Look at verse 30.

When the king heard the words of the woman, he tore his clothes – now he was passing by on the wall – and the people looked, and behold, he had sackcloth beneath on his body.

This is interesting. The implication is that on the outside, the king was wearing the kingly robe and looked like any normal king. However, underneath, he was wearing the standard garb of a man confessing and repenting before God. He is wearing sackcloth.

It is interesting that this passage is tied together with people keeping secrets. There are lepers who are keeping a secret that will save a city, and in this verse, there is a king who, as he should, is repenting, as the leader of the people before God, for forsaking Him and yet, he is keeping it a secret; he is silent; he has not gone public with his confession. People are shocked, as he rips his clothing, to see sackcloth.

The truth was, the king's half-hearted repentance was not repentance. It becomes obvious in verse 31.

Then he said, "May God do so to me and more also, if the head of Elisha the son of Shaphat remains on him today."

In other words, "Let's kill the prophet."

Behind the Scenes #2 – The Blaming of the Innocent

This introduces us to another behind the scenes look. We are taken to the home of Elisha. However, Elisha, by way of revelation, knows that the executioner is on his way to behead him.

Peace, though surrounded by panic

Let me say briefly that the king has announced the execution of the best friend that, at this moment, Samaria ever had. If there was anyone who could lead them to safety; who could speak for God; who could help them get out of this predicament, it would be the very man that the king is ordering to be put to the death.

I could not help but read this and think about the execution of Jesus Christ, by means of crucifixion. Jesus was the best friend that the world could ever have; the friend of sinners. And, the very city, Jerusalem, that He wept over, would be the one that would raise their voices and shout, "Crucify Him!"

They had nothing to do with the Word from God and now, they will set out to kill the messenger of God.

Look at chapter 7, verse 1. At this point, the king and the royal officers and elders have arrived at Elisha's.

Then Elisha said, "Listen to the word of the Lord; thus says the Lord, 'Tomorrow about this time a measure of fine flour will be sold for a shekel, and two measures of barley for a shekel, in the gate of Samaria.'"

Unwavering, though scorned by unbelief

This is startling news. Look at verse 2.

The royal officer on whose hand the king was leaning answered the man of God and said, "Behold, if the Lord should make windows in heaven, could this thing be?" Then he said, "Behold, you will see it with your own eyes, but you will not eat of it."

Now this officer represents to the Bible student, the voice of rational unbelief. The royal officer, at this moment, makes great sense, while Elisha makes no sense at all. The royal officer says, "Look, if the Lord opened the windows of heaven, that still doesn't solve the problem. We don't have flour and barley. Surely that could never happen; it just can't be done. I've never seen God do that before in my life, so God certainly won't do it now."

I cannot help but make an analogy to the church in this. The model of a dying church has always been, "We've never done it that way before." And, the other dying church counterpart is, "We've always done it this way."

I have to admit to you that my mind and heart have been stretched recently. Our church, a couple of weeks ago, sponsored a ten mile run. We had banners flying outside the church building, and we had the dedicated team that put the run together to try to introduce our church to a community that would never perhaps, come to a service.

The team introduced the run to all the running clubs; they garnered police to stop traffic as the runners ran out of the parking lot and came back over the finish line; they garnered corporate sponsors, and had tables lining the parking lot loaded down with huge containers of gourmet coffee, boxes of fresh bagels, and piles of bananas. I noticed they had not gotten Krispy Kreme to donate anything, but we will fix that next year!

The only thing they asked me to do was to pray before the race began. I prayed for a beautiful day and thanked the Lord – it was very generic. At the end, the runners came back, gathered around, and we had a small awards ceremony, during which I was asked me to say a few words. I was able to tell them that this church is glad to be a part of what they were doing and what they enjoy and also that we believe life is like a race and we want to help them to learn to run that one. That was it.

You would not believe how many runners came up and said, "What a first class run. Great traffic control." When the runners crossed the finish line, the team would bellow out their name over the speakers and the policeman would stop the traffic. The traffic was backed up further than it is on Sundays. I could just imagine someone in their car thinking, "What's that church up to now?"

What an interesting way to communicate the truth. For me, it was brand new.

I think the words of the unbelieving Jewish soldier contain the words, "Look, if God is going to save us, there is going to have to be a little more conventional method used. There is no way that twenty four hours from now, we are going to have flour and barley. It's impossible!"

And Elisha prophesies, in verse 2, that he will see it, but he will not enjoy it.

Behind the Scenes #3 – The Message of the Outcast

Now, the final scene, on which we want to focus, takes us outside the city walls, away from the panic of the city and the horrible tales of cannibalism and even from the prophet.

God's strange choice of messenger

It takes us by way of this inspired pen, to watch four lepers who make an amazing discovery. The text tells us, in verse 3, that they are in the entrance of the gate; that is, they are on the outside of the city walls. That was common in this day. According to law, in fact, lepers were not allowed to enjoy life within the city. As a result, historians tell us, lepers would often build small crude huts just outside the main gates of the city, and would beg for their food. I also found it very interesting that many of the rabbis of old believed and taught that these four lepers were none other than Gehazi, the former servant of Naaman who was stricken with leprosy, and his three sons.

Now I want you to climb into this scene and follow these lepers. Let us read a few verses that will explain themselves. Look at verses 3 through 8.

Now there were four leprous men at the entrance of the gate; and they said to one another, "Why do we sit here until we die?"

If we say, 'We will enter the city,' then the famine is in the city and we will die

there; and if we sit here, we die also. Now therefore come, and let us go over to the camp of the Arameans. If they spare us, we will live; and if they kill us, we will but die."

They arose at twilight to go to the camp of the Arameans; when they came to the outskirts of the camp of the Arameans, behold, there was no one there.

For the Lord had caused the army of the Arameans to hear a sound of chariots and a sound of horses, even the sound of a great army, so that they said to one another, "Behold, the king of Israel has hired against us the kings of the Hittites and the kings of the Egyptians, to come upon us."

Therefore they arose and fled in the twilight, and left their tents and their horses and their donkeys, even the camp just as it was, and fled for their life.

When these lepers came to the outskirts of the camp, they entered one tent and ate and drank, and carried from there silver and gold and clothes, and went and hid them; and they returned and entered another tent and carried from there also, and went and hid them.

Can you imagine being one of these lepers? Your life has been one scrap for food after another. You have begged for food outside the city gates. Your clothing is nothing more than a collection of rags. You have nothing that you can call your own except for, maybe, some little hut. Imagine, the sight of this camp to them!

Now, you need to understand that these ancient camps were not like a camp created by our soldiers in Desert Storm. These ancient camps were moving oases. In fact, Herodotus, who lived four hundred years before the time of Christ, wrote a history that helps us understand. He told of the time that the Greeks conquered Mardonias and plundered the army's camp. Let me quote Herodotus,

In it was found, many tents richly adorned with furniture of gold and silver, many couches covered with plates of gold, and many golden bowls, goblets and drinking vessels. On the carriages were bags containing gold and silver kettles. And the bodies of the slain furnished bracelets and chains and golden ornaments, not to mention

embroidered apparel, of which no one seemed interested.

This camp was a beggars paradise! I can just imagine that these four lepers were probably pinching themselves to see if they were really and truly awake. I imagine them laughing and crying at the same time, as they ran from one spot to another. One of them would say, "Hey, come over here and look at the food I've found in this tent!" And they would gather and stuff their mouths with delicious food. And maybe another would say, "Hey, look over here at this bag of gold! I'm rich! It's all mine!" And another would say, "Oh, look in this tent, there are garments for us! We can take off these filthy rags and put on these silk robes! Here's a 42 long and it fits perfectly!"

Can you imagine discovering this?! They are set for life!

A school teacher was trying to impress her students with the importance of honesty. She asked her class, "Suppose you found a briefcase with a half million dollars in it. What would you do?" Johnny raised his hand immediately and replied, "If it belonged to a poor family, I'd return it."

Imagine this story – you can keep it all! At some point, in all of this excitement, one of them, or maybe two of them, stopped and said, "Hey, wait a second fellas."

"Why? What? What is it? What's wrong?"

"Well, I was, you know, thinking about our countrymen in Samaria. Tonight there will be more people dying; more children sacrificed. This isn't right."

What would you do if you found a Stradivarius? Would you hide it away and keep it a secret? Or, would you allow the world to hear the music?

Continue to verse 9a.

Then they said to one another, "We are not doing right. . . ."

I like the King James translation, which says,

. . . ***"We do not well . . ."***

Continue to verse 9b.

". . . This day is a day of good news, but we are keeping silent; if we wait until morning light, punishment will overtake us. . . ."

(the implication is, "We will be consumed by our own guilt."),

". . . Now therefore come, let us go and tell the king's household."

This is the point! This is the lesson for every generation – good news is to be shared! The message of Jesus Christ that you have received is not to be hoarded, it is to be heralded! The grace of God that has shone into your heart is not to be retained, it is to be reflected! A Stradivarius is to be played!

I think it is ironic in this scene, that outcast, despised men were chosen to announce the wonderful news. Isn't that interesting? So also the shepherds, if you remember. Shepherds were outcasts; considered unclean; denied access to temple worship. Yet, it would be the shepherds, according to Luke, chapter 2, who would be the first announcers that, ". . . there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Do not ever think that God cannot use all of His children. Those who have received His Son can be used as heralds for that Son and to communicate the message to his or her generation.

Skip to verse 16.

So the people went out and plundered the camp of the Arameans. Then . . .

(note this),

. . . a measure of fine flour was sold for a shekel and two measures of barley for a shekel, according to the word of the Lord.

God's unique method of judgment

Now look at verses 19 and 20.

Then the royal officer answered the man of God and said, "Now behold, if the Lord should make windows in heaven, could such a thing be?" And he said, "Behold, you will see it with your own eyes, but you will not eat of it." And so it happened to him, for the people trampled on him at the gate and he died.

It is interesting to me, as the judgment of God fell on that mocking, unbelieving soldier, that it is a striking illustration of all who scoff at God's plan and grace and power. One day *all* unbelievers, will stand before our great God and see and know, at that moment, the truth of everlasting paradise. They will see, yet they will not be able to enjoy.

Application

I want to apply this story to our own generation and to our own church in two ways.

If the church is to communicate the message, it must first repent of its pathetic failure

1. If the church is to communicate the message to its generation, it must first repent of its pathetic failure.

The blunt truth is that eighty-two million Americans do not own a Bible. One hundred million Americans do not attend a church of any kind, not even on Easter or Christmas. In the year 1900, there was one Protestant church for every twelve thousand people in America. Today, there is one Protestant church for every twenty seven thousand people. The average church reaches less than two hundred of those twenty seven thousand. We do not well!!

We have discovered paradise and yet, it is our secret. The church at large, does not move like a mighty army. It moves more like a tortoise that is looking for a soft hole in some sandy beachhead in which to wait until Jesus takes us home. We are not doing well.

If our church was responsible for meeting the quotient that it should be meeting, we would be reaching twenty seven thousand people. Do not ever get carried away in thinking we are doing well. We have yet to begin to reach our city for Christ.

If the church is to communicate the message, it must rekindle its primary focus

2. Secondly, if the church is to communicate the message to its generation, it must rekindle its primary focus.

I want to read a parable to you. It is one that I like to think of as a parable with a punch. It is rather humorous, sadly, but true.

Now it came to pass that a group existed who called themselves fishermen. And, lo, there were many fish in waters all around. Streams and lakes were filled with fish, and they were all very hungry. Week after week, month after month, year after year, people who called themselves fishermen met in meetings and talked about their call to fish, the abundance of fish, and how they really should go fishing.

They built large buildings for local fishing headquarters, and issued pleas on a regular basis for more fishermen. But they didn't fish. They organized a board to send out fishermen to other places where there were many fish. Their great vision and courage to speak out about fishing was seen in their promotion brochures and spirited rallies to wish these fishermen well. But the staff and committee members just never got around to fishing. Large, elaborate training centers were built to teach fishermen how to fish. Persons with doctorates in "fishology" were hired to do the teaching. But all they did was teach fishing – they didn't fish.

After one stirring meeting on "The Necessity of Fishing," one young fellow left the meeting and went fishing. He caught two outstanding fish. He was honored for his excellent catch and scheduled to visit all the big meetings, to tell about his experience. So he quit fishing to travel about telling his story to people who claimed to be fishermen, even if they never found time to fish.

And Jesus said, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men, and women and boys and girls . . ." Matthew 4:19 (Loose Translation).ⁱ

It is time for you to ask yourself, "What business am I in?" You might mistakenly think you are in the computer business. You are not. You might, in error, think you are in the medical business. You are not. My friend, you are in the business of the King; you are God's ambassador on earth, placed by His plan in the medical profession, or in the computer world, or in pharmaceuticals, or sales, or repairs. Your business is His commission; that is, sharing with people, one at a time, that you have found a treasure that has satisfied your soul, cleansed your conscience, and reserved a place for you in eternal paradise, and you want them to have it too. We need to blow off the dust and tune the strings and allow the world to hear the wonderful music that we may have been keeping silent up to this point.

If you want to know what the sound of the church is today – it is the sound of silence. While the world grows louder and louder and louder, communicating the value of sugared water, we have discovered eternity. May God help us to break the silence and share the secret.

How tragic it is to keep the good news to ourselves. Have you invited someone to go to heaven with you? Will you ask God to give you a passion for those around you, so that you can echo the words of an anonymous poet:

*When I enter that beautiful city,
And the saints in glory draw near,
I want someone to greet me and tell me,
It was YOU who invited me here!*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/24/1996 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Bruce Rowlison, Presbyterian Church, Gilroy, CA.