

# Sermons on 2 Kings by Robert Morgan

## THE COAT FROM THE CLOUDS

2 Kings 2:1-25

We've begun a series of sermons entitled "Miracle Man" on the life and times of the prophet Elisha, one of the heroes of the Old Testament. In the history of ancient Israel and during the times of the monarchs, two great miracle-working prophets lived in the northern kingdom of Israel—Elijah and Elisha. Elijah came first; and after a lifetime of exciting ministry he was snatched away into heaven, and his follower Elisha took over the work. The story of the transfer of power from Elijah to Elisha is full of incredible lessons for us, and it's told in 2 Kings 2. Look at 2Kings 2:11-13a:

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....

This week I was supposed to have a quick in-and-out trip to Denver, but it didn't work out that way because I was stranded in Chicago. I was flying on the airline that brags about its friendly skies; and I think the skies really would have been friendly if we could have gotten up to them. Instead I was stuck in a Quality Inn that didn't live up to its name. I would say it was seedy, but that'd be an insult to plant life everywhere. The motel was either under renovation or demolition; I couldn't tell which. But at any rate, I tried to accept my fate with resignation and seek the silver lining. About the only thing I had to do was to read and ponder and study this passage from 2 Kings 2 about Elijah and Elisha. I found that these two men made good roommates, and more I read over this passage, the more I realized how prophetic and predictive it is.

It seems to me—and this is the point of my message today—that this Old Testament chapter of 2 Kings 2 gives us a miniaturized depiction of New Testament living. It is Pentecostal living in advance.

I don't want to arbitrarily turn 2 Kings 2 into an analogy or allegory; but I do think there are clear biblical patterns here that border on being "types" of New Testament truth. We know that Elijah was a type or pre-figuration of John the Baptist, but there are also some remarkable parallels between Elijah and Christ Himself. For this message today, think of Elijah as a type, or at least as a symbol, of Christ; and think of Elisha as a type or symbol of you and me and the church overall.

With that in mind, let's go through this chapter and let me show you the four scenes that make up the story. There are four movements or stories in this chapter, and each one of them speaks of a different adventure in our own lives.

### Ascension: We Have a Whirlwind of Hope

First, there's an adumbration of the ascension here, showing us that we have a whirlwind of hope. It's interesting that we're studying this passage at the very time the new Superman movie has been released. I haven't seen the movie, but there have been many social commentaries written on how the world needs a figure like superman, who is sort of a messiah from another world who comes to help and save the human race. He embodies this innate dream we have to be able to levitate into the air, defy gravity, and fly. Well, the last and final miracle in the early life and ministry of Jesus Christ was that very thing. He levitated into the air, defied gravity, and ascended into the skies where He disappeared into the clouds.

In the old Star Trek programs, Captain Kirk was always saying, "Beam me up, Scotty"—and that is sort of what happened with Elijah. Let's begin reading this chapter with verse 1:

When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way to Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the Lord has sent me to Bethel." But Elisha said, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, "Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?"

"Yes, I know," Elisha replied, "but do not speak of it."

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here, Elisha; the Lord has sent me to Jericho." And he replied, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went to Jericho. The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, "Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?"

"Yes, I know," he replied, "but do not speak of it."

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; the Lord has sent me to the Jordan." And he replied, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live,

I will not leave you.” So the two of them walked on. Fifty men of the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up, and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground. When they had crossed over, 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. “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.” 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.

In the Bible, three people were caught up to heaven at the end of their earthly lives. The first was Enoch, whose story is told in Genesis 5 and Hebrews 11. The Bible says that he walked with God, and he was not for God took him. Second, there was Elijah. The same thing happened to him, and it’s described here in vivid detail. As he was walking along, suddenly a chariot of fire drawn by angelic horses swept down out of the sky, snatched him up, and translated him to heaven. This story was in inspiration for that old Black spiritual that said, “Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.” The third person was the Lord Jesus Himself. Forty days after His resurrection, He hiked with His disciples to the Mount of Olives. They asked Him a simple question, “Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel.” Jesus replied, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Lord has put under His prerogative; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you shall be my witnesses, both in Jerusalem, and Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the world.”

Then, while the disciples were watching in wide-eyed wonderment, Jesus raised His hands in blessing and He floated into the air, rose into the sky like a helium balloon, and disappeared into the clouds. He made His exit from this world as supernaturally as He had made His entrance.

All three of these occurrences are predictors of the coming rapture that is described for us in 1 Thessalonians 4, when the dead in Christ will rise first, then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up onto heaven to meet the Lord in the air. Some glad morning when this life is o’er we’ll fly away.

Elijah left this world in a whirlwind, in the chariots of the angels, and for our purposes today I’d like for you to think of it as a prefiguration of the ascension of Christ Himself.

Pentecost: We Have a Cloak of Power

But then what happened? Having ascended into the sky and returned to heaven, Jesus sent down the Holy Spirit upon His church on the day of Pentecost. And that is emblemized by Elijah’s cloak—the coat from the sky. Look at verse 13:

(Elisha) picked up the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and went back and stood on the bank 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.

There can be no doubt that this cloak represents the Holy Spirit, the double portion of power that Elisha requested. Look at the next verse, 2 Kings 2:15: The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, “The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha.” And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him.

Elijah ascended into heaven, and the cloak of his power fell to earth to clothe his follower with the power to continue the work. What a vivid and unmistakable picture of the ascension of Christ, followed by Pentecost. Jesus ascended into the skies and the cloak of His power—the Holy Spirit—fell to earth to clothe His followers to continue the work.

The interesting thing about the Holy Spirit’s work is that sometimes it is spectacular and sometimes it is hidden; and I find that so very encouraging. There are times when there are great results and there are times when the results are “out of season,” but the Holy Spirit is nonetheless working and our work is not in vain.

A few weeks ago, at the invitation of Curt and Mary Holland, I traveled to Brazil to see the church they planted there and to meet some of the national workers and to teach and preach. I can’t tell you how I was impressed and deeply moved. When Curt and Mary arrived in the city of Campinas some years ago, they started witnessing, won their first convert (whom I had the pleasure of meeting), won others to the Lord, and established a church. It met in their garage and then built a beautiful facility on its own property. The Lord raised up some national leaders who, after seminary training, took over the work; and I was greatly impressed with the passion and intelligence of these young pastors. The church has grown and multiplied, and now there are several thriving churches in that area. I was amazed at the maturity and vitality of the work.

Two things happened to me on that trip that I’d like to share with you. The first was the Sunday night worship service, where I was

invited to preach. I wasn't sure what to expect, but the large, central building was packed to capacity with crowds standing along the back and along the walls. The service began and I've seldom heard such singing. They sang and praised the Lord for an hour and a half, with a full praise team and a full praise band and with clapping and cheering and joy and exuberance. I didn't recognize most of the songs, so I knew there weren't just American songs translated into Portuguese. They were indigenous songs of praise from the Latin culture written by Brazilian Christians.

After the singing, they had a baptismal service where Pastor Osmir baptized fifteen new adult believers, each one standing in the baptistery and giving his or her testimony. Pastor Osmir had asked me to preach an evangelistic sermon, so I spoke from John 3, the story of Nicodemus, and the words: "You must be born again." At the invitation, six people indicated they wanted to become Christians including an older man who had been so resistant to the Gospel that people in the church had said he would never be saved. The power of the Holy Spirit was palpable and evident that you could feel it, and I almost felt like it was Pentecost right there in that room.

But something else happened to me that night that was just as meaningful. A young man had come from a neighboring city to translate my sermon and to serve as my interpreter. He was very fluent in both Portuguese and English. When he arrived at the church, he shook my hand and said, "I've been looking forward to this because I want to tell you something." Then he asked me if I recalled speaking on a college campus in the Midwest many years ago. At first I did not, but as I began to reconstruct my memories, I realized I had a vague recollection of speaking at this school. I seemed to recall a set of bad acoustics and of being in the gymnasium and of feeling that I just hadn't really captured the attention of the students.

The young man said, "I was in that audience, and you spoke on the story of David and Jonathan. Do you remember that?"

I did not. He went on to say, "I can't tell you how the Holy Spirit used that message in my life. I was transfixed by it and transformed by it, and I listened to the tape recording of it over and over and over. In fact, I still have it. And after all these years, I want to tell you what an impact that had on me and to express my appreciation."

Now, I'm not telling you that in any kind of boastful way; just to say that the Holy Spirit is working when we think He is working, and He is working when we don't see any signs of it. Sometimes His presence is so real we can almost feel it, and other times we think things are as dead as a doornail, or that we ourselves are pursuing our work in vain.

But the Bible says, "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit." If we work for Christ in the power of our own energy and personality, all is in vain. But when we wear the cloak from heaven, there is life-transforming power even when we can't see it or sense it; and our prayer should be that God will give us a double portion of His Holy Spirit.

Proclamation: We Have a Bowl of Salt

But let's continue with this chapter. There's another scene. We not only have ascension and Pentecost, we have proclamation. In this chapter there's whirlwind of hope and a cloak of power, but there's also a bowl of salt. Look at what happens next, as recorded in 2 Kings 2:19-22:

The men of the city said to Elisha, "Look, our lord, this town is well situated, as you can see, but the water is bad and the land is unproductive."

"Bring me a new bowl," he said, "and put salt in it." So they brought it to him. Then he went out to the spring and threw the salt into it, saying, "This is what the Lord says: 'I have healed this water. Never again will it cause death or make the land unproductive. And the water has remained wholesome to this day, according to the word Elisha had spoken."

What a perfect picture of the church of Jesus Christ in this world—we are a bowl of salt. Jesus said that we are the salt of the earth, and the bowl represents the church. When the Holy Spirit descended on the day of Pentecost, the church was born, and the church is made up of men and women who, who, as witnesses of Jesus Christ, are the salt of this earth. We're thrown into the waters of this world to improve them, to sweeten them, and to bring healing wherever we are.

We help the world both spiritually and socially. There are hundreds of millions of illustrations of this throughout history, but I'll give you just one of them. One of the blights of western history was the exploitation of children in the workforce of the 19th century. There were no child labor laws, and boys and girls down to age seven were put to work in the cold, wet, and dangerous coal mines. Some of them had to crawl on their hands and knees through narrow, blackened tomb-like tunnels, crawling in tattered clothing, cold, soaked to the skin because of water dripping on them from the mine shafts. Other children worked in the factories and endured similar abuses.

But one man rose up against the exportation of children, a Christian leader by the name of Anthony Ashley Cooper, better known as Lord Shaftsbury, who was a member of England's Parliament. He was a godly follower of Christ and a great student of the Word of God, and he stood virtually alone against the popular opinions of his day and he worked tirelessly in the name of Jesus Christ until

the first laws were finally passed to curb the abuses of society.[1]

The greatest society-changers and humanitarians the world has ever known have been born-again, Spirit-filled Christians who are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. The church not only delivers a message of hope and eternal life through Jesus Christ, but in His Name we perform good works and change the very texture of society.

We're a bowl of salt thrown into the morally polluted fountains of this world, and our presence has a healing effect upon the souls of men and women.

Persecution: We Have a Band of Critics

But does this world appreciate the Christian influence? Christians in this world have advanced education, combated illiteracy, elevated the status of women, protected the status of children, fought for the sanctity of life, and enriched the culture more than any other single influence—but what do we get in return?

Persecution. We have a band of critics. That's the fourth and final scene in this chapter. Look at the last paragraph of 2 Kings 2—verses 23-25:

From there Elisha went up to Bethel. As he was walking along the road, some youths came out of town and jeered at him. "Go on up, you baldhead!" they said. "Go on up, you baldhead!" He turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the Lord. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the youths. And he went on to Mount Carmel and from there returned to Samaria.

This is a disturbing story, so let me make some observations about it. First, some of the older translations say that these were children, but the Hebrew word can mean they were young men, and that seems to be the case. Second, they weren't just making fun of Elisha because he was bald. I believe they were hardcore Baal worshippers who were jeering him out of hatred and anger. Third, it doesn't say that the bears killed these young people, only that he mauled them. I don't know whether they were killed or whether the bears just gave them a good scare and a few claw marks across their backs. But the point is—Elijah was God's man on this earth to do good, and He was attacked and jeered and persecuted. And that's par for the course.

This persecution is happening all over the world. Just last week, the news came that a prominent house church leader in the People's Republic of China has been sentenced to over seven years in prison. He is 55 years old and in poor health, suffering from severe diabetes. He was last seen in a hospital where he was chained and handcuffed to the bed. It's not an isolated case. Last year, the Chinese government arrested 1,958 pastors and church leaders because of their faith in Jesus Christ.[2]

And here in the United States, Christians have never been so ridiculed and attacked as now. But the criticism validates our work, and persecution is our seal of approval.

So here in this chapter you have the four life-stages of church ministry—ascension, Pentecost, proclamation, and persecution. We have a whirlwind of hope, a cloak of power, a bowl of salt, and a band of critics.

We're walking in the footsteps of Elisha, and what we need in times like these is a double-portion of the Holy Spirit.

Holy Ghost, come down upon Thy children,

Give us grace and make us Thine;

Thy tender fires within us kindle,

Blessèd Spirit, Dove divine.

(Frederick W. Faber)

## A DOUBLE PORTION OF THE SPIRIT

2 Kings 2:9f

Tonight I want to revisit the story from 2 Kings 2 that we looked at this morning and focus on one incredible phrase that hard to forget once you hear it, and that's the phrase, "a double portion of the Spirit." Look with me at 2 Kings 2:9ff:

When they had crossed over, 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. "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." 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 bank of the Jordan. Then he took the cloak that had fallen from him and stuck 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.

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I grew up in a wonderful church, and I felt a deep love and admiration for my pastor; but I don't remember hearing a great deal in my childhood or youth about the Holy Spirit. I don't recall a specific sermon that gave clear teaching on that subject, and I don't recall a Sunday School lesson devoted exclusively to the topic of the Holy Spirit. But when I arrived at Columbia Bible College as an incoming student, I began hearing and learning a great deal about the Holy Spirit and about the importance of living a Spirit-filled life. That information has made a huge difference in the way I live and in the way I practice my Christian experience. I've tried to make it a theme of my ministry ever since, and I believe that a lot of us constantly need that double portion of the Holy Spirit requested by the prophet Elisha.

Let me begin by giving you a definition for the Holy Spirit. I believe the Holy Spirit is the presence of Jesus in invisible form. That's an accurate and a practical description of who He is. After Jesus had finished His earthly ministry, He returned to heaven and sent the Holy Spirit as a way of disseminating His presence throughout the church around the world.

### The Acts of the Spirit

Someone said that the book of Acts should not be called "the Acts of the Apostles" but the "Acts of the Spirit," and that's true. Look at the way Luke begins the book of Acts:

In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day He was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles He had chosen.

There are two significant phrases here. First, referring to his first book, the Gospel of Luke, the writer/historian Luke said that it was an account of all that Jesus began to do and to teach. It wasn't just an account of all that Jesus did and taught, but of all that Jesus began to do and to teach; indicating that this new book, the book of Acts, is the account of all that Jesus was going to continue to do and to teach—through the Holy Spirit.

And then notice the phrase, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles He had chosen.

Even during His earthly lifetime on earth, Jesus performed His ministry through the empowering of the Holy Spirit. The very word *Messiah* means Anointed One, and we think of how the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus at His baptism and anointed Him with power. Now, Jesus was going to tell us that just as the Father had anointed Him with the spirit for spiritual work, so He—Jesus—was going to ask the Father to likewise anoint us. Look at verse 4:

On one occasion, while He was eating with them, He gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard Me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

That baptism of the Holy Spirit was the special descent of the Holy Spirit upon the church that was about to take place on Pentecost Sunday, as described in Acts 2. But we aren't finished with chapter 1 yet. Verse 6ff. says:

So when they met together, they asked Him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by His own authority. But you will receive power, when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Then He ascended to heaven, and ten days later the Holy Spirit fell on the church as we read about in Acts 2. Up until then, through the history of the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit had only come upon certain people at certain times for certain tasks. But now the Holy Spirit came upon every follower of Jesus Christ – all the Christians – dwelling with them and in them.

Now the baptism of the Spirit was a one-time event birthing the church of Jesus Christ; but the filling of the Holy Spirit is something that occurs repeatedly in the lives of Christians.

Look at Acts 2: When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit....

On the day of Pentecost there were several supernatural phenomena. The sound of the rushing wind was emblematic of the Spirit blowing into this world from heaven. The Greek word *pneuma* can be translated with wind or spirit. The tongues of fire represent that

now the power of God rests on every believer and burns within him or her. The tongues represented the fact that now the church was born and commissioned to take the Gospel of Jesus Christ to every tongue and tribe on the face of the earth.

So the church was baptized with the Spirit, and the moment you receive Jesus Christ as Savior, you have a part in this one-time, history-shaking, church-birthing baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes to live within you. According to 1 Corinthians, He makes His home in your very body.

1 Corinthians 3:16 says: Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

Here I believe Paul is talking, not about our human bodies, but about the local church. The word "you" is plural. The Holy Spirit lives here among us in our church. This church is the body of the Holy Spirit; He does His work through us.

But now look at chapter 6. This passage is about sexual purity. Look at 1 Corinthians 6:18ff: Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside His body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

Here Paul is talking about my human body and your human body. Our bodies are the earthly temples of the Holy Spirit, and when we all get together this church is corporately the temple of the Holy Spirit. And if the Holy Spirit is Jesus Christ Himself in invisible form, then He is here among us and we are His temple, His body, His instruments.

So now what do we need to do? We need to be filled with the Spirit, and that filling is a recurring process. Just like your car runs out of gasoline and has to be refilled, just as your cell phone battery has to be recharged, just as your body needs to be constantly replenished with water and hydration, so we need a constant filling with the Holy Spirit.

When you read the book of Acts, it says, "They were filled with the Spirit and did this," and "They were filled with the Spirit and did that."

The Bible's classic passage on this subject is Ephesians 5:15ff:

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

In the original Greek, this is one long passage with one major command and several participles. It says, don't be under the control of alcohol, but be under the control of the Holy Spirit; and if you are under the influence and control of the Holy Spirit—if He is filling you up—you will be singing, you will be thankful, and you will be submissive to each other. And then he goes on in chapters 5 and 6 to show how this will make a difference in our marriages, in our parenting, in our employer-employee relationships, and so forth.

So the question is—how can I be filled with the Holy Spirit? How can I have a double portion of the Holy Spirit? I have two words for you.

First, petition. If the Bible tells us to be filled with the Spirit, that's a command; and we know that we have access to prayer as a means of grace in obeying the Lord's commands. This is what Elisha did. He prayed for a double portion of the Holy Spirit. When King Solomon had just begun his reign in Judah, the Lord said to him, "Ask me for whatever you want." He requested wisdom; and that was a good request. Elisha was given the same offer. Elijah said, "Ask me for whatever you want." And Elisha prayed for a double portion of the Holy Spirit, which is even better than wisdom, for when you get the Holy Spirit, you automatically get the wisdom of the Spirit as part of the bargain.

Jesus said in Luke 11:9-13: So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!

I have a little list of six things which I request from the Lord every day, and number 2 is that I might be filled with the Spirit. So the first word is petition.

The second word is submission. Petition and submission are the secrets to Spirit-fullness. What would you think of a man who bought a house that had been closed up for a long time and was musty from basement to attic? When he turned the key and

opened the door, the fetid, stale air nearly suffocated him. He wanted fresh air to circulate through the house, but he refused to open the doors and windows of the house to let in the breezes.

When we let the Holy Spirit into our lives, we have to open all the doors and windows, all the closets and cupboards, and let Him have full control. He can only fill what is yielded to Him, and the secret of having more of the Spirit is to let the Holy Spirit have more of you.

Let me close with this illustration. I've been reading the memoirs of William Zinsser, who is one of my favorite writers. He was serving in the army in North Africa just before the D-Day invasion of Europe in 1944. He was stationed near Algiers. One day he went into Algiers and he saw a huge map that had been erected across the façade of the main post office, several stories high. It was a map of France, and France was entirely green. The whole nation was colored green. Then came the news of the Allied Invasion of Europe, and overnight that map became the symbol of the collective hopes of the people who gathered day by day before it, staring at it. Painters went to work, and they were painting the areas of the Normandy coast white. So now the map of France was green, with a little white swath along the Normandy coast.

For a long time, the great bulk of the map remained green as the Allied Armies were stalled by German divisions dug into the hedgerows of Normandy; but after a while the white ribbons began extending out of that area, and by late July the map just exploded. Clusters of white burst toward Paris, and by mid-August the map was white from the English Channel to the Seine. Eventually, as France was liberated, the entire map changed from green to white.[1]

I think that's something of what it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Without Jesus Christ our lives are occupied by the evil one, but when Jesus comes into our lives, He begins making progress and bit by bit we surrender and submit to the Lord Jesus, and a wave of white begins to sweep over our hearts and lives. This is sanctification. This is Christian growth. This is the progressive liberation of the Holy Spirit. And every day it helps to say, "All to Jesus, I surrender; all to Him I freely give."

So it's a matter of petition and submission. And then it's a matter of walking by faith, trusting that the Holy Spirit is possessing, filling, and using you day by day, in season and out. And when we have enough people living like that, then we are a Spirit-filled congregation. And there's no limit to how the Lord may use a church like that.

So, Lord, give us a double portion of Your Spirit, and we say:

Have Thine own way, Lord, have Thine own way;

Hold o'er my being absolute sway.

Fill with Thy Spirit, tell all shall see,

Christ always, only, living in me

## THE LITTLE POT OF OIL

2 Kings 2:1-25

Tonight is one of those holy and historic nights in the life of a church when we set aside one of our members for cross-cultural and overseas missionary service. Angela Emerick grew up in Norfolk, Virginia, and became a Christian at age sixteen at a youth camp. She has been coming to our church here for the last eight years or so. It was during a short term trip to the Ivory Coast ten years ago, in 1996, that she felt God was calling her to missions, and she has a burden to work among Muslim peoples in Central Asia to advance the cause of Christ. We're pleased to have just about all her family and very many of her friends with us tonight.

For our Scripture this evening, I'd like to turn to the next passage we're coming to in our pulpit studies of Elisha. If I were to search the whole Bible for a better text, I couldn't find one that is any more fitting than the one we're naturally and providentially coming to in our current sermon series entitled "Miracle Man." It's the story of the little pot of oil, found in 2 Kings 4:

The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that he revered the Lord. But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves."

Elisha replied to her, "How can I help you? Tell me, what do you have in your house?"

"Your servant has nothing there at all," she said, "except a little oil." Elisha answered, "Go around and ask all your neighbors for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few. Then go inside, shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side."

She left him and afterward shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her and she kept pouring. When all the jars were full, she said to her son, "Bring me another one." But he replied, "There is not a jar left." Then the oil stopped flowing.

She went and told the man of God, and he said, "Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left." (2 Kings 4:1-7)

This is one of the most picturesque and poignant stories in the Old Testament; it's one of those that we can visualize very easily. There was a widow whose husband had been a faithful preacher and prophet, but he had died leaving her a single mother with children and with tremendous needs. The home was about to be broken apart, and her sons were in danger of being seized as slaves. So she cried out to the Lord and to Elisha. And God performed one of the sweetest little miracles in the entire Bible.

Tonight there are three phrases in this story I'd like to bring to your attention and we may want to underline them together in our Bibles; so let's work our way through these verses, trolling it for lessons and principles.

### **God Asks Us: What Do You Have?**

The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that he revered the Lord. But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves." Elisha replied to her, "How can I help you? Tell me, what do you have....?"

There's the first phrase: What do you have? And look at her response: "Your servant has nothing there at all, except...." Nothing at all, except a little oil. Nothing at all, except a little time. Nothing at all, except a little tongue for witnessing. Nothing at all, except a little gift. Nothing at all, except for a little opportunity for teaching. Nothing at all, except a little part in this ministry or that ministry. We just have a little oil.

What do you have? Oh, Lord, I don't have very much. I don't have a lot of skills or gifts or abilities. I don't have fame and fortune. I cannot preach like Peter and I cannot pray like Paul. Lord, I don't have much to offer you, but what I have I give to you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. There's an old hymn that says, "Little is much when God is in it."

As I mulled over this, I couldn't help but think of the great missionary Gladys Aylward, whose story I've told here before; but would you mind if I told it again?

It had started on a bus in England. Gladys Aylward, a poorly-educated 28-year old parlor maid, was reading about China and the need for missionaries there; and from that moment, China became her life and passion. She applied to a missionary agency only to be turned down. Crushed with disappointment, she returned to her small servant's room and turned her pocketbook upside down. Two pennies fell on top of her Bible. "O God," she prayed, "Here's my Bible! Here's my money! Here's me!" That's all she had.

But Gladys began hoarding every cent to purchase passage to China. She knew she couldn't afford to travel by ship, so she decided to go overland by train right across Europe and Asia, though it meant slicing through a dangerous war zone on the Manchurian border. On October 15, 1932, a little bewildered party gathered at London's Liverpool Street Station to see Gladys Aylward off for China. The journey was hair-raising and nearly cost her life. But eventually Gladys reached China, showing up at the home of an older missionary who took her in — but didn't quite know what to do with her.

And yet — to make a long story short — Gladys Aylward eventually became one of the most amazing single woman missionaries of modern history. Her mission's career was so extraordinary that the world finally took notice. Her biography was made into a movie starring Ingrid Bergman. She dined with such dignitaries as Queen Elizabeth and spoke in great churches. She even became a subject of the television program "This is Your Life."

But Gladys never grew accustomed to the limelight, for her heart was always in Asia. "I wasn't God's first choice for what I've done for China," she once said. "There was somebody else... I don't know who it was — God's first choice. I don't know what happened. Perhaps he died. Perhaps he wasn't willing. And God looked down... and saw Gladys Aylward."

I think He's looking down tonight and seeing Angela Emerick and you and me; and some of us don't have a lot to offer, but we're willing to give God what we have.

Paul wrote, "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, to that no one may boast before Him."

None of us has very much to offer the Lord. Not many skills. Not many gifts. Not much wealth or fame or ability. But He just asks us, "What do you have?" He asked Moses, "What is that in your hand?" Only a staff. He asked the disciples, "How many fish do you have?" Only two, and five small loaves." What do you have in your house? Only a little pot of oil. But such as I have, Lord, I give to Thee.



## **Pour Oil Into All the Jars**

But there's a second phrase. Let's continue reading:

"Your servant has nothing there at all," she said, "except a little oil." Elisha said, "Go around and ask all your neighbors for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few. Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars...."

God asks us to take the little bit that we have and to pour it out. You and I are little pots of oil; and oil in the Bible represents the Holy Spirit; and we're called on to pour ourselves out in ministry and sacrifice and evangelism for the world.

At the very end of His earthly ministry, Jesus took the cup at the Last Supper and passed it around saying, "This is my blood which is poured out for you." While in prison, the Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians and said, "Even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you." At the very end of his earthly life and ministry, Paul wrote, "For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure." The Psalmist said on one occasion, "I am poured out like water." And Isaiah 53 says that Jesus poured out His soul unto death.

Sometimes we grow tired and weary and wonder if we can press on. Sometimes in the Lord's work, our souls are vexed, our nerves are stained, and our strength is small. But the Bible says, "Pour oil into all the jars." All around us are empty vessels, and we must be alert to opportunities, even if we must be broken and spilled out.

One of the most powerful speakers I've ever heard and one of my favorites is Jill Briscoe, who, with her husband Stuart, travel the world for the cause of Christ. It was Stuart who once preached a sermon that changed the direction of my life. Well, in one of her books Jill tells about a time when she and Stuart had just started out as missionaries, and Jill ran terribly low in stamina, patience, and the inner resources for the job. But nearby was a senior missionary's wife, and one day Jill went to see her and poured out all her frustration. She told her about Stuart's many extended travels, about his long absences from home, about her worries for the children, about the difficulties of juggling the roles of missionary, wife, and mother. Jill felt a certain amount of resentment as well as confusion and emptiness.

The senior missionary wife listened kindly and patiently, and then she firmly directed Jill's attention to the little pot of oil within her. She had forgotten her greatest resource; she had discounted the work of the Holy Spirit.

"You have all that you need within you, Jill," said this woman, "in the person of the Holy Spirit. You have heavenly help a heartbeat away."

"How does it work?" asked Jill.

"It works as you begin to appropriate what you have," replied the woman. "Go home, shut the door, and spend time with the Lord. Then begin to pour out whatever you have into the empty vessels of your neighbors."

Well, that wasn't exactly what Jill expected to hear. She was already depleted; how could she empty herself further? She felt she had nothing; how could she give what little she already had away? But she decided to do it. She went home, shut the door, prayed, and asked God to show her where to begin pouring out. "Give me an idea, Lord," she prayed. Then she got up from her knees, called in a babysitter, and took off to the town center of their town. Now, I need to tell you that Jill has always had a very engaging way with young people, and she went to one of the trouble spots where teenagers like to hang out, and she just started talking to kids. She began to connect with high-risk young people, and she said, "As I began to talk to these beautiful kids, I was able to draw on the limitless power of the Holy Spirit, and as I poured out, He poured in. It was one of the most incredible evenings of my life."

That evening was just the beginning of a long and fruitful ministry of working with young people, and even her children became involved—just like the children in the story in 2 Kings. They watched the oil begin to flow and saw the vessels fill up one by one. Mother and children begin to minister to troubled young people, and they saw kids come off drugs, sign up for Bible studies, and have their lives transformed. In fact, many years ago, I heard Jill describe this period in her life, still amazed at the young lives that were transformed. And Jill now says that the years since have been just one moment after another of pouring herself out for the needs of others, and seeing God multiply the oil until the vessels are filled.[1]

Peter told us to always be ready to explain the hope that is within us; and the Christian ministry is one of sharing and giving and working. But as we pour ourselves out...

## **God Himself Provides the Overflow**

There's one other final phrase. Look at verse 5: She left him and afterward shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her and she kept pouring. The implication is that she wasn't just pouring out her oil; God was supernaturally multiplying it, and there was an invisible pipeline that went all the way to heaven. The Holy Spirit was funneling an invisible supply that perfectly

matched both the need and the opportunity.

This reminds me of the Zechariah's vision in Zechariah 4, when the prophet saw a lampstand with pipes or channels leading to an great upper-story reservoir, and the message was: Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts.

The danger, of course, is that if God doesn't supernaturally supply the oil, we'll run dry very quickly. No profession in the world is so subject to burnout as Christian ministry. Jeff Nichols showed me an article on this just a week ago.

If we try to do God's work in the power of our own strength and personality, we'll run dry, burn out, and collapse. The great secret of the Christian ministry is that God Himself provides the overflow. When you read this story of the little pot of oil, you say, "What a lovely little miracle." The very same thing can be said for whenever we do anything for Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. What a lovely little miracle. As the widow poured from the cruse of oil, the flow of oil kept on coming and coming and coming as God preformed a miracle of multiplication and expansion and kept the oil coming.

I'd like to show you two passages in the New Testament that teach us the same truth. Look at John 4:13-14. In the conversation by the well, Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water, welling up to eternal life."

Now think about those words. After this service, some of you will go home and drink a glass of water before bedtime. What if, when that water hit your stomach, your stomach turned into a fountain and you became like one of those garden fountains that kept bubbling out water over and over?

And then, three chapters later, Jesus said at the Feast of Tabernacles, "On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.' By this He meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were later to receive."

When we minister in the power of the flesh, we run dry. When we minister in the power of the Spirit, the flow continues on and on and on; because it's the overflow of the Spirit. Ministry is overflow. And so we send out our sister, Angela Emerick, to pour out her life for the sake of Christ and His Kingdom, depending of God's infinite supply of the oil of the Holy Spirit.

Does the place you're called to labor  
Seem too small and little known?  
It is great if God is in it,  
And He'll not forget His own.

Little is much when God is in it!  
Labor not for wealth or fame.  
There's a crown and you can win it,  
If you go in Jesus' Name.  
(Kittle Louise Suffield, c. 1924)

[1] Jill Briscoe, A Little Pot of Oil (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2003), pp. 54-59

## **Digging Ditches**

2 Kings 3:1-27

The other day I was in a waiting room and I happened to hear a conversation a few seats away. I didn't really mean to eavesdrop, but it was unavoidable; plus the subject caught my attention. A group of people—I have no idea who they were—was talking about the kind of church they wanted to attend; and this is what one of the women said: "Well, I'm looking for a church where the preacher tells a little story and makes a nice point; I don't want a church that has one of those verse-by-verse preachers!"

Well, I smiled to myself, because I am one of those verse-by-verse preachers; and today we have an interesting set of verses to look at from the life of the prophet Elisha in 2 Kings, chapter 3. This chapter gives us a rather long Bible story that isn't as well known as most. It's not as famous as David and Goliath or Jesus walking on the water. For some of you, this might be the first time you've ever been introduced to this story; but it's a very interesting account with several great life-lessons to it that I'd like to point out as we go along. So let's begin in 2 Kings 3. The chapter begins:

Joram son of Ahab became king of Israel in Samaria in the eighteenth year of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, and he reigned twelve years.

At this time, the nation of Israel had divided into two rival kingdoms, the northern kingdom of Israel, which was idolatrous; and the southern kingdom of Judah, which still retained to some extent semblance of the worship of Jehovah.

Up in the northern kingdom, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel were two of the most despicable people in the Bible. They had a son, Joram, who became the heir apparent to the throne; and when King Ahab was killed, Joram ascended to the throne and he was evil, though not as evil as his father. Down in Judah, the reigning king at the time was named Jehoshaphat; and he was a relatively good king. Now, in this chapter, the two of them are going to join their armies to attack the nation of Moab, and they also recruit the king of Edom and his army; but things don't go as planned; and this chapter is about what happened. Let's continue with verses 2ff:

(Joram) did evil in the eyes of the Lord, but not as his father and mother had done. He got rid of the sacred stone of Baal that his father had made. Nevertheless he clung to the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit sin (referring to the worship of the golden calf); he did not turn away from them.

Now Mesha king of Moab raised sheep, and he had to supply the king of Israel with a hundred thousand lambs and with the wool of a hundred thousand rams. But after Ahab died, the king of Moab rebelled against the king of Israel. So at that time King Joram set out from Samaria and mobilized all Israel. He also sent this message to Jehoshaphat king of Judah: "The king of Moab has rebelled against me. Will you go with me to fight against Moab?"

"I will go with you," he replied. "I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses."

"By what route shall we attack?" he asked.

"Through the Desert of Edom," he answered.

So the king of Israel set out with the king of Judah and the king of Edom. After a roundabout march of seven days, the army had no more water for themselves or for the animals with them. "What!" exclaimed the king of Israel? "Has the Lord called us three kings together only to hand us over to Moab?"

We don't know why the kings and the generals of these two armies didn't have enough provisions or enough water; perhaps they underestimated the length of the march or perhaps their anticipated water sources had dried up or maybe the king of Edom was a weak link in the alliance; but for whatever reason, they found themselves in the middle of the mid-eastern desert sands without any water in their canteens; and the situation was desperate.

To Know God's Will, Seek His Guidance

And here we come to the first life-lesson in this story: To know God's will, seek His guidance. Look at verse 11f:

But Jehoshaphat asked, "Is there no prophet of the Lord here, that we may inquire of the Lord, through him?" An officer of the king of Israel answered, "Elisha son of Shaphat is here. He used to pour water on the hands of Elijah." Jehoshaphat said, "The word of the Lord is with him." So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat and the king of Edom went down to him.

I have been struck by that phrase: ...that we may inquire of the Lord. I looked it up in a concordance and I found that it is an Old Testament phrase that occurs two dozen times, but only in the Old Testament.

Ø The first time we see it is in Genesis 25, when Rebekah became pregnant with twins, and the Bible says: The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord gave her an explanation.

Ø The next time is in Exodus 33:7: Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the tent of meeting. Anyone inquiring of the Lord would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp. This seems so picturesque and practical to me. Do you have a tent of meeting? A regular place where you can go to inquire of the Lord? I have two ways of describing my tent of meeting. First, the little computer counter behind the desk in my office is my primary tent of meeting. Every morning I go there to inquire of the Lord. But second, my tent of meeting is wherever my journal and my Bible are. If I have my journal and my Bible, even if I'm on an airplane 30,000 feet in the atmosphere, I can pitch my tent of meeting. We all need some place or some system for inquiring of the Lord in a regular, methodical way.

Ø In Judges 20, the children of Israel inquired of the Lord about going into battle.

Ø In 1 Samuel 23, David inquired of the Lord regarding a conflict he was entering. In fact, as you read through the story of David, this phrase occurs over and over. David inquired of the Lord about this; and he inquired of the Lord about that. He did nothing of significance without inquiring of the Lord.

Ø But the most interesting occurrence of this phrase to me is found in the book of Joshua, chapter 9, when the enemy village of Gibeon sent a delegation to trick and deceive the Israelites. They brought stale bread and claimed to have traveled from a vast distance, when in fact they were a nearby enemy. Even Joshua himself was taken in and deceived, and the Israelites committed a

far-reaching mistake. Why? Listen to the way it's put in Joshua 9:14: "The men of Israel sampled their provisions but did not inquire of the Lord." And they made a wrong decision.

If you want to know God's will, you have to inquire of the Lord. You have to make it a matter of regular, thoughtful prayer.

#### To Hear God's Voice, Sing His Songs

But now, we come to a second life-lesson in this passage. I want you to notice Elisha's response when the kings approached him for counsel. Remember that good king Jehoshaphat had allied himself to the apostate king Joram and the secular king of Edom; and Elisha was rather blunt in his comments. He didn't feel a compelling need to interact with Joram, for whom he had little respect. Let's continue with verse 13:

Elisha said to the king of Israel, "What do we have to do with each other? Go to the prophets of your father and the prophets of your mother."

"No," the king of Israel answered, "because it was the Lord who called us three kings together to hand us over to Moab."

Elisha said, "As surely as the Lord Almighty lives, whom I serve, if I did not have respect for the presence of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, I would not look at you or even notice you. But now bring me a harpist."

And notice this interesting verse: While the harpist was playing, the hand of the Lord came upon Elisha....

The lesson here is: To hear God's voice, sing His songs. From the very beginning of the Bible, music has been God's gift for the soul and for the heart, and one of the simplest definitions of Christian songs is that it is truth emotionalized. Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs allow the truth of God to resound in our heart on an emotional basis, and that's why we're to fill our lives with God's music. That's one of the ways He speaks to us.

Recently I received a letter from a dear couple named David and Denise Long who served as missionaries in the nation of Columbia. Denise told me of a terrible phone call they received some years ago. It came at 3 o'clock in the morning. Dave's brother, a police officer, had been murdered in a senseless crime.

Dave, in great anguish, took a quick shower, dressed, and then he turned to Denise and said, "Would you please sing that hymn, 'Be Still My Soul'?" She did. As she drove him to the airport, he asked her to sing it again, and she did. As they waited for the airplane, he asked for her to sing it yet again, and as she did so a sense of peace came over his face.

A year passed, and on the night of the anniversary of that horrible event, Denise thought of that hymn and asked him, "Why did you keep asking me to sing 'Be Still My Soul'?"

"Didn't I tell you?" he replied. "When I got in the shower the ceiling suddenly parted and the angels in heaven sang that hymn to me. It gave me the strength I needed to make it through the next painful days." (Personal letter to the author; used with permission.)

The Lord speaks to our hearts in song. If I had time, I'd share my own testimony about a time many years ago when the Lord spoke to me so strongly with the hymn, "All the Way My Savior Leads Me." But many of us have such a testimony. Ephesians 5 says: Do not be drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord.

#### To Lighten Your Problems, Remember God's Power

So to know God's will, seek His guidance; and to hear God's voice, sing His songs. But as we continue with this story, I want to show you another important life-lesson, which is this: To lighten your problems, remember God's power. Let's keep reading with verses 15bff:

While the harpist was playing, the hand of Lord came upon Elisha and he said, "This is what the Lord says: Make the valley full of ditches. For this is what the Lord says: You will see neither wind nor rain, yet this valley will be filled with water, and you, your cattle and your other animals will drink. This is an easy thing in the hands of the Lord."

I love that phrase. The older translations are good, too, when they say, "This is a simple thing in the hands of the Lord." Now, I know that each one of us is facing a challenge right now. We all have a problem somewhere in our lives that we can't solve. We're like an army that has run out of water and we can't find any springs. What do you do with those problems? What do you do with that difficulty? You give it to the Lord and remind yourself that it isn't a hard problem for Him. Several times in the Bible we find phrases like, "Is there anything too hard for the Lord." Here in 2 Kings 3, it's put in the positive and we can underline that phrase, apply it to our situation, and make it your own: This is an easy thing in the hands of the Lord.

## To Experience God's Blessings, Dig Ditches

And now we come to one final life-lesson from this story—God experience God's blessings, dig ditches. Continue reading with verse 15ff.

While the harpist was playing, the hand of Lord came upon Elisha and he said, "This is what the Lord says: Make the valley full of ditches. For this is what the Lord says: You will see neither wind nor rain, yet this valley will be filled with water, and you, your cattle and your other animals will drink. This is an easy thing in the hands of the Lord; He will also hand Moab over to you. You will overthrow every fortified city and every major town. You will cut down every good tree, stop up all the springs, and ruin every good field with stones." The next morning, about the time for offering the sacrifice, there it was—water flowing from the direction of Edom! And the land was filled with water.

I can visualize the perplexity and oddness of this scene. Here you have platoons of soldiers who are thirsty and hot and dry and upset. They want some guidance from their generals, and suddenly this command filters down through the ranks. Take your personal shovels and start digging trenches and ditches in the red-rock desert of Edom. It was a lot of work, and it was counter-intuitive and it seemed to be senseless. But the order was firm and the men obeyed. Perhaps they thought they were digging battle trenches. But soon the trenches and ditches were shimmering with cool, life-giving water. They had done the work, and God had supplied the water. They had done the possible, and God had done the impossible. They had obeyed the command, and God had sent the blessing.

When I was a boy, my parents used to tell me to study hard in school, to be diligent, to do my lessons, or else, they said, I would grow up to dig ditches. Somehow ditch digging was at the bottom rung. It was always, you don't want to grow up to dig ditches.

And now I've grown up, and all I am is a ditch digger after all. In fact, all we are doing here at this church is digging ditches and asking God to fill them. All we do in our personal lives and ministries, if we do anything at all for God, is to dig ditches and trust that God is going to supply the living water.

Let me give you one example. Florence Littauer is a popular Christian motivational speaker who has ministered to women and to groups around the world. She sometimes tells about one of her first speaking engagements. She was a new Christian, and she was asked to speak at a retreat near Mount Shasta, California. She prepared her notes very carefully, but when she arrived she discovered the campgrounds and cabins were extremely primitive and rustic. Her idea of camp was to open the window of the Holiday Inn, and so she was far from delighted at the arrangements. Then she learned that her opening message was to be given outdoors, in the dark, by the campfire. It never dawned on her she shouldn't have a podium and lights and a microphone. But there she was, by the crackling fire, for the service. And then the fire went out and the mosquitoes came out. Some voice in the darkness introduced her, and she found herself trying to speak in virtually pitch blackness without any sound system; but she did her best and ended by asking those present to commit their lives to Jesus Christ. There was no apparent response, and as the years passed she began speaking in bigger and brighter arenas and she forgot all about that humble beginning on the rocks in the darkness.

Eighteen years passed, and Florence was speaking at a large retreat for women in an elegant hotel. A woman approached her. "Do you remember sharing your testimony at Mount Shasta State Park?" asked the woman. "It was the night in the dark that I prayed with you to receive Christ. I'd been looking for God, but I'd never seen Him in the light. Somehow the protection of darkness gave me courage, and I dared to ask Jesus into my life without letting anyone know."

The woman went on to describe the changes in her life and the Christian ministry God had given her, and she ended by saying, "Thank you for being willing to come to the state park and speak. Your obedience to God changed the direction of my life." (Florence Littauer, *The Gift of Encouraging Words* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995), pp. 48-49.)

That's what I mean by digging ditches. Every time we try to say a word for the Lord, or give out a Bible or a piece of Christian literature, or help our children memorize a Bible verse, or do an act of kindness in Jesus' name, we're digging ditches for Him. And we depend on Him to fill the ditches with the water of life. We can't do that part. We can't transform or change or win or save. We can't send down the water of life; but we can dig the ditches. I want to spend the rest of my life digging ditches for Jesus Christ—and asking Him to fill them with water; and I'd like for you to do the same. And I want you to notice one other thing. As God provided the water, it not only gave life to His people; it thwarted and frustrated the enemy and brought about the victory. Let's conclude our reading with verses 21ff:

Now all the Moabites had heard that the kings had come to fight against them; so every man, young and old, who could bear arms was called up and stationed on the border. When they got up early in the morning, the sun was shining on the water. To the Moabites across the way, the water looked red—like blood. "That's blood!" they said. "Those kings must have fought and slaughtered each other. Now to the plunder, Moab!" But when the Moabites came to the camp of Israel, the Israelites rose up and fought them until they fled....

The enemy was defeated, the war was won, the cause prevailed, and the Lord received the glory. And it will be the same for you and me if we're faithful ditch-diggers. To know God's will, keep His guidance. To hear His voice, sing His songs. To lighten your burden, remember His power. And to experience God's blessings, dig ditches for Christ and His Kingdom

## Seven Sneezes

2 Kings 4

We're in a series of sermons entitled Miracle Man on the life and times of Elisha, the Old Testament prophet. For the last several years in my preaching, I have used various translations as they have seemed appropriate, especially the New International Version and the New King James Version. And for most of my message today, I'm going to use the NIV, because this is a narrative, a story, and I think the NIV words it very nicely. But I want to begin by reading you a verse from the old King James Version, which is sometimes called the Authorized Version. The text we're coming to is 2 Kings 4:8, and this is the way it's put in our old, tried-and-true KJV:

And it fell on a day, that Elisha passed to Shunem, where was a great woman; and she constrained him to eat bread. And so it was, that as oft as he passed by, he turned in thither to eat bread.

Now, the thing I want you to notice is the adjective used to describe this woman. She was a great woman. That is not a word that is used very often about human individuals in the Bible. We read about our great God, and about the greatness of the Lord Jesus Christ, and even about some great angel or another, and we read of great actions and great events. But here was a great woman.

There are not very many great men and women in the world—and each of us must beware the temptation to want to be great. The Moravians used to pray, “From the desire of being great, good Lord deliver us!” Charles Spurgeon said, “Many through wishing to be great have failed to be good.”

The Lord told Jeremiah's scribe, Baruch, “Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not” (Jeremiah 45:5, KJV).

I know that all of us want to be used, we want to have purpose and significance, we want to be respected, and we want to leave a legacy. But we must also remember Paul's words, “I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ...”

But here was a woman described as great in the Holy Scriptures, and as I studied this wonderful chapter I came to better realize what true greatness is in the eyes of the Lord, and that's what I'd like to share with you today. So let's turn to 2 Kings 4. I'm going to revert to my New International Version—you can follow in whatever translation you have—and I'd like for us to study this intriguing story of the Shunammite woman.

One day Elisha went to Shunem.

Shunem was a city near Mount Gilboa in north central Israel, not all that far from the Sea of Galilee on the road to Mount Carmel where Elisha evidently made his home.

And a well-to-do woman....

This is the way the NIV renders this word great. Other translations say she was a notable woman or a wealthy woman. She and her husband were evidently very well off, with a large farm, servants, and a large house. But as we study this we discover the secrets of true greatness.

### Great People Extend Great Kindness (2Ki 4:8-10)

First, great people exhibit great kindness. Let's read on...

A well-to-do woman was there, who urged him to stay for a meal. So whenever he came by, he stopped there to eat. She said to her husband, “I know that this man who often comes our way is a holy man of God. Let's make a small room on the roof and put in it a bed and a table, a chair and a lamp for him. Then he can stay there whenever he comes to us.”

Elisha apparently had a home or somewhere he stayed in the vicinity of Mount Carmel, but he also had a circuit ministry, and he traveled from town to town teaching and preaching and ministering to the people. This woman wanted to honor the man of God and to provide for his needs. She was a godly woman, and she prepared meals for Elisha and eventually had a special upper room built just for his use. It was a small room, but it had a bed where he could sleep, and a table, chair, and lamp so he could study and pray and prepare his sermons.

I grew up in a home like this, and I'm so thankful for it. Very often, we'd have the preacher for supper or for Sunday lunch; and when we had revivals and guest preachers, they would often stay with us. At the time, I thought we had a large house; but recently I took one of my daughters down the street where I grew up, and I was surprised at how small the house seemed. Yet my parents were

very hospitable.

Now, hospitality doesn't necessarily mean just having someone into your home for food, fellowship, or lodging. Times have changed some, and, when I travel to preach somewhere I'm usually put in a hotel; and, frankly, I like the privacy and solitude. But hospitality is a timeless quality, and it means taking that which is yours and sharing it with another person in a way that meets his or her needs. It's a form of kindness, and kindness is in short supply.

The other day I was at the hospital, and upon leaving I went over to the coffee kiosk to get a cup to go. A woman was there, searching through her billfold and asking the attendant "Is there an ATM here? I've got to have a cup of coffee, and I don't have a penny." I told him, "I'll buy her coffee; just take it all out of this five dollar bill." She looked at me with surprise and thanked me and said, "Do you know what you just did? You just committed a random act of kindness."

I said in jest, "Well, I'm glad I got that out of the way for the week." The truth is, I don't always do very well in this area; but we can train ourselves, we can work on it, we can be more deliberate and intentional, can't we? And this woman opened her dining room and her home to Elisha and even built a special room for him to stay in during his travels.

### **Great People Experience Great Blessings (2Ki 4:11-17)**

But there's a second greatness in this passage. Great people experience great blessing. Let's continue reading.

One day when Elisha came, he went up to his room and lay down there. He said to his servant, Gehazi, "Call the Shunammite." So he called her, and she stood before him. Elisha said to him, "Tell her, 'You have gone to all this trouble for us. Now what can be done for you? Can we speak on your behalf to the king or the commander of the army?'"

She replied, "I have a home among my own people."

In other words, "I'm here in my hometown among my friends with a house to live in. I'm grateful for that and I'm content. I really don't need one more thing in life."

"What can be done for her?" Elisha asked.

Gehazi said, "Well, she has no son and her husband is old." Then Elisha said, "Call her." So he called her, and she stood in the doorway. "About this time next year," Elisha said, "you will hold a son in your arms."

"No, my lord," she objected. "Don't mislead your servant, O man of God!"

But the woman became pregnant, and the next year about that same time she gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had told her.

And what unexpected joy came into her life. One of the verses that has come to mean a great deal to me in the past year is one that I preached on during the Christmas season last December—John 1:16: From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another. Every one of us is under pressure. I've never seen a time with more people facing more burdens than now. But that's just when it is important for us to count our blessings; name them one by one. And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.

### **Great People Encounter Great Sorrow (2Ki 4:18-21)**

But there's a flip side to that as well. Great people encounter great sorrows. Keep reading:

The child grew, and one day he went out to his father, who was with the reapers, "My head! My head!" he said to his father.

His father told a servant, "Carry him to his mother." After the servant had lifted him up and carried him to his mother, the boy sat on her lap until noon, and then died. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, then shut the door and went out.

I have seen this happen one time in my years as pastor and I hope to never see it again. A little fellow, five-years-old grew very ill, and as he sat on his mother's lap, he died in her arms in my presence; and when it was clear he was gone, the experience of grief was more than anyone could bear. And look down at the way this woman is described in verse 27. Elisha said, "Leave her alone! She is in bitter distress."

I do not know why it is that we have perplexing sorrows in life. This woman had a million questions. Why did God give me a son in this supernatural way only to let him die? It doesn't make any sense. If He is good, why did He let this happen? And if God is great, why didn't He stop it from happening.

### **Great People Have Great Peace (2Ki 4:22-27)**

But there was something else that was great about this woman. She has an inner strength that, frankly, I envy. There is phrase that

she used not once but twice, and it is very, very significant. Let's continue reading:

She called her husband and said, "Please send me one of the servants and a donkey so I can go to the man of God quickly and return."

"Why go to him today?" he asked. "It's not the New Moon or the Sabbath."

"It's all right," she said.

Many translations say, "It is well." It's all right, it's OK, it is well.

She saddled the donkey and said to her servant, "Lead on; don't slow down for me unless I tell you." So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel. When he saw her in the distance, the man of God said to his servant, Gehazi, "Look! There's the Shunammite! Run to meet her and ask her, 'Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is your child all right?'"

"Everything is all right," she said.

Again she said, "It is well."

Now, on one level, it was not well. Humanly speaking, it wasn't well. But this woman knew her God, and she knew that He was aware, that He had a plan, that He was in control, that whatever happened, it would be all right because there is a God in heaven who makes all things right in the lives of those who love Him. So she could honestly say:

Though Satan should buffet, though trials arise,

Let this blessed assurance control,

That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,

And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

It is well with my soul; it is well with my soul.

It is well; it is well with my soul.

You and I have the same set of promises that she had, and we have even more because we have all the subsequent books of the Bible that she did not yet have, with all their verses and all their truths and all their reassurances and all their promises.

### **Great People Rely on Great Prayer (2Ki 4:28-35)**

And here's another thing—great people rely on great prayer. Continue reading:

When she reached the man of God at the mountain, she took hold of his feet. Gehazi came over to push her away, but the man of God said, "Leave her alone! She is in bitter distress, but the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me why."

"Did I ask you for a son, my lord? She said. "Didn't I tell you, 'Don't raise my hopes'?"

Elisha said to Gehazi, "Tuck your cloak into your belt, take my staff in your hand and run. If you meet anyone, do not greet him, and if anyone greets you, do not answer. Lay my staff on the boy's face." But the child's mother said, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So he got up and followed her.

Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the boy's face, but there was no sound or response. So Gehazi went back to meet Elisha and told him, "The boy has not awakened." When Elisha reached the house, there was the boy lying dead on his couch. He went in, shut the door on the two of them, and prayed to the Lord. Then he got on the bed and lay upon the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out upon him, the boy's body grew warm. Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room and then got on the bed and stretched out upon him once more.

The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes.

When I was a little boy, the dime store in our town had a little display with gags and jokes and little magic tricks and so forth. One of the products was a little packet of sneezing powder. I think I bought some and tried to on myself to see what would happen, but I don't remember the outcome. But in this story, the Lord just sprinkled some sneezing power on the boy's nose, and in that way he was resurrected from the dead.

And some people don't think God has a sense of humor!



But the thing to notice is the intensity with which Elisha prayed. He went into his upper chamber and it says he shut the door. It reminds me of Mathew 6:6, when Jesus said, "When you pray, go into your closet and when you have shut the door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly." Elisha did not know that verse, for it hadn't been given; but he knew the habit. And the hospitality room became a hospital room; the place of relaxation became a place of intense intercession. It says that Elisha literally stretched himself out on this hopeless problem; and he prayed as earnestly as he knew how, with great intensity and unction and earnestness. At length he saw a little progress, but the answer was not forthcoming. Elisha got up from the bed, paced back and forth, clearing his mind and mustering his strength, and then he stretched himself out again and literally poured his life into the situation through the medium of prayer. He was chest to chest, arm to arm, leg to leg, and mouth to mouth.

And at last, the breakthrough was achieved and the answer came in the form of seven sneezes.

There are some problems that require that kind of prayer; and it is earnest, agonizing, and exhausting; but the Bible says, "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous person avails much." There are some times when, like Jacob of old, we wrestle with the Lord in prayer.

### **Great People Have Great Hope (2Ki 4:36-37)**

But there's one final thing about this story—Great people have great hope. Look at the ending of the story:

Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite." And he did. When she came, he said, "Take your son." She came in and fell at his feet and bowed to the ground. Then she took her son and went out.

Some time ago, I was sitting beside a young man named Mario on an air flight. He was a graduate law student in Canada, and was reading one of Dan Brown's novels, so it was easy to begin talking to him about The Da Vinci Code, which he had read with great interest, and from there I was able to bring up the whole issue of the credibility of Christianity. In the course of our conversation, he said, "I have one problem with Christianity. It involves dead people coming to life again, and we know that's a medical impossibility. I have real problems with the whole idea of resurrection."

I said, "No you don't." He looked at me in surprise and said, "Yes I do."

"No, truly you don't," I said, "You have a problem with the concept of God. Once you admit to the possibility of God, then the problem of resurrection goes away; because the very nature of the definition of the word God implies the ability to do the supernatural and to perform the unexpected. If there is a God, then for sure He can raise the dead if He wants to, or else He wouldn't be God at all. Being God, He can do whatever He wants. If there is a God, He can raise the dead. If there is no God, there is no resurrection. Your problem is not with the concept of resurrection, but with the concept of God."

My friend said, "Well, I'd never thought of that before." And I'm happy to say that I had a wonderful opportunity to explain the Gospel and plant the seed of Jesus in his mind.

But this is the biblical perspective. The apostle Paul made exactly that point in Acts 26:8 when he said, "Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?"

The central resurrection in the Bible, of course, is that of Jesus of Nazareth who rose from the dead on Easter Sunday in the Garden Tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. The entire Bible, both in its narratives and in its theology, revolves around this one central event. But what if the resurrection of Christ were the only example or case in the Bible of someone rising from the dead? We might say to ourselves, "Well, I know that Jesus rose from the dead; He Himself is God; but that didn't happen to anyone else in the Bible, so how can we be certain that we ourselves will be raised?"

So throughout both the Old and New Testament we have a scattering of resurrection stories. I believe that God gave these to us to show us that God can, does, and will raise His children physically and bodily from death to life everlasting; and every one of them is very sweet, reassuring, and strengthening, and give us a great hope.

But our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus blood and righteousness. He said, "Because I live, you will live also." We aren't great because of fame or fortune; our greatness is simply due to the fact that we have a great Savior. He died on Calvary's cross for our sins, He rose on the third day, He ascended into the Heavens, He is sitting on the right hand of the Father, and He is coming one day soon with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. And I want to urge you and beg you and appeal to you, if you have not embraced Him as your Lord and Savior to do so now, today, while there's still time, before the death angel draws near. For His children have great hope, joy inexpressible, and a peace that passes understanding.

And Lord, haste the day, when our faith shall be sight,

The clouds be rolled back as a scroll,  
The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend,  
Even so, it is well with my soul

## **Death in the Pot: What God Does With Our Mistakes**

2 Kings 4:38-41

Today I want to continue our series of sermons entitled Miracle Man on the life and times and ministry of the prophet Elisha, reading today from 2 Kings 4:38-41.

Elisha returned to Gilgal and there was a famine in that region. While the company of the prophets was meeting with him, he said to his servant, "Put on the large pot and cook some stew for these men."

One of them went out into the fields to gather herbs and found a wild vine. He gathered some of its gourds and filled the fold of his cloak. When he returned, he cut them up into the pot of stew, though no one knew what they were. The stew was poured out for the men, but as they began to eat it, they cried out, "O man of God, there is death in the pot!" And they could not eat it.

Elisha said, "Get some flour." He put it into the pot and said, "Serve it to the people to eat." And there was nothing harmful in the pot. (2 Kings 4:38-41, NIV)

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I considered opening today's sermon with a joke about cooking, but I was afraid it would sound canned. But I can really identify with the man in our Scripture text today. My wife, Katrina, is a wonderful cook and in all these years I can only remember a couple of bad experiences in the kitchen. One was a lamentable occasion when company was coming and she badly misjudged the amount of time necessary for a roast to cook in the crock-pot. And on another occasion, as she was taking the lasagna out of the oven, she dropped it, top side down. But I really don't remember any other disasters in 30 years of marriage. In recent years, however, as she has become more disabled, I've had to take over much of the cooking—and disasters are now a way of life. Katrina has grown accustomed to the smoke alarms going off, the biscuits being hard as rocks, and little goof-ups like red pepper flakes instead of candy sprinkles on top of the vanilla cake. I tend to eyeball measurements and substitute ingredients freely; and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

Most men, if they cook at all, like to brag about their barbequing skills. They think they're great on the grill. But there's another side of the story, as someone pointed out in these ten steps to a great barbeque:

1. The woman goes to the store.
2. The woman fixes the salad, vegetables, and dessert.
3. The woman prepares the meat for cooking, places it on a tray along with the necessary cooking utensils, and takes it to the man.
4. The man places the meat on the grill.
5. The woman goes inside to set the table and check the vegetables.
6. The man takes the meat off the grill and hands it to the woman.
7. The woman prepares the plates and brings them to the table.
8. After eating, the woman clears the table and does the dishes.
9. Everyone praises man and thanks him for his cooking efforts.
10. The man asks the woman how she enjoyed her 'night off' and, upon seeing her annoyed reaction, concludes that there's just no pleasing some women.

Well, in today's story we have the worst chef in all the Bible. In fact, his cooking was a disaster. He nearly poisoned all the students in Elisha's School of the Prophets. In this story, Elisha had gone to the city of Gilgal where there was a school or a guild of prophets, and Elisha held classes for them. It was a sort of preacher's conference or ministerial seminar. While he was teaching, the kitchen help was working on dinner; and they decided to prepare a large kettle of vegetable stew. One of the men went out to look for vegetables, and he found a delectable looking gourd, so they invented a dish we could call "Gourd Goulash."

Unfortunately, the gourd turned out to be highly poisonous and it must have also been bitter tasting. When the famished students sat down to eat, they spewed it out of their mouths like so many geysers going off at once. Perhaps some of the men who ate a few

bites had violent cramps or bad reactions which I'll not describe. The men cried out, "O Man of God, there is death in the pot." My wife, Katrina, has occasionally cried out the same thing.

Elisha decided this was a good occasion for a miracle, so he called for some flour, which he tossed into the pot like a secret ingredient and stirred it into the mixture; and suddenly Poison Porridge became Succulent Stew, a blue-ribbon dish worth of Emeril, the best-tasting soup ever, perfectly seasoned with not a hint of bitterness or poison.

Now, there are several lessons here. Like all Elisha's wondrous works, this wasn't just a miracle but a sign. It had meaning and significance. It underlined and illustrated the teaching that Elisha was no doubt imparting in his messages to these prophets attending the conference. The message of Baal looks attractive, but it's poison to the mind and soul. The job of the preacher is to teach and preach the true message, to stir God's truth and His grace into the melting pot of society, so that healing and nourishment can satisfy the hungry soul.

But on a simple, human level, there's another lesson, which is obvious and practical and relevant; and I want to focus on that today. Here's the observable truth to this story: God not only forgives our sins, He redeems our mistakes. We confess our sins to Him, and He forgives them. But in the same way, we can admit our mistakes and He transforms them with a liberal handful of His amazing grace.

I want you to notice there is no indication that this man sinned as he gathered the gourds. He certainly had a sinful nature that allowed mistakes to occur; and he was working in a fallen world that contains poisonous plants. He wasn't a very good botanist and perhaps he was an even worse cook. He was a sinful man working in a fallen world. But that said, he was not trying to sabotage the stew or to poison the prophets. He was a hard-working servant trying to do his best, but he made a tragic mistake.

Yet a handful of God's grace transformed the goof into glory. God redeemed his mistake, and much good came from it. It became an object lesson for those days and a story for all time. It allowed the Lord's power to be shown and His glory demonstrated. And it teaches us an important lesson. Sometimes we commit sins, and these are to be confessed in deep remorse and repentance. They are covered by the blood of Christ. Sometimes we make mistakes, and these are to be entrusted into the providence of God with the knowledge that He not only forgives our sins He redeems our mistakes and turns all things for our good.

This is incredibly comforting for us, because we all make mistakes. I've certainly made my share of mistakes and mis-steps. Looking back on them, some of them seem funny now; but others have stayed with me a long time and some I'll take with me to my grave. A lot of us, if we could go back, would do some things different. We make mistakes as parents. We make mistakes as husbands and wives, as leaders and workers. We make mistakes in our relationships and our reactions, and in our life-decisions. We make mistakes out of good intentions, and we make mistakes out of sinful impulses.

But the lesson of this story is: In the Lord's hands, our sins become white as snow and our mistakes become His keepsakes. Let me give you three ways in which God redeems our mistakes.

#### Mistakes Are Learning Opportunities

First, mistakes are learning opportunities. I venture that this poor man in the story never made that mistake again; he was a better cook from that day forward and more careful about his ingredients. Every time he spotted that particular gourd, he said to himself, "I'll never touch that plant again." But he would also think of Elisha and his handful of miraculous flour; and he learned much about the grace of God.

We can say that mistakes are God's schoolrooms to teach us how live better and to think clearer. There's a well-known story about a manager of an IBM project that lost \$10 million before it was scrapped. He was called into a meeting at the corporate office and he expected to be fired. "I suppose you want my resignation?" he said with trepidation.

"Resignation nothing!" replied the boss. "We've just spent \$10 million educating you." [Alan Loy McGinnis, *The Power of Optimism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1990), p. 128].

Someone said, "If you don't learn from your mistakes, there's no sense making them!"

There's another oft-told story about a young cashier in a bank who showed great promise. One day the young man happened to be alone with the president of the bank and he said to him, "I would like to rise to a high position like yours one day. Do you have any advice for me?" The head of the bank said two words: "Right Decisions!" The young man thought about that for a moment, then asked, "But how do I learn to make right decisions?" The man replied in one word: "Experience!" The young man absorbed that piece

of counsel, then asked, "But how do I get experience?" To which the president of the back said: "Bad decisions!"

"Who doesn't make mistakes!" exclaimed Norman Vincent Peale. "But the greatest error of all is to let any mistake destroy your faith in yourself. The only sensible course is to study and analyze why you made the mistake. Learn all you can from it, then forget it and go ahead. Figure on doing better next time." [Norman Vincent Peale, *Stay Alive All Your Life* (Carmel, NY: Guideposts Associates, Inc., 1957), p. 138.]

I learned a long time ago that day is never lost if a lesson is learned.

#### Mistakes Are Occasions for God to Providentially Work All Things for Good

Second, mistakes are occasions for God to providentially work all things for good. When we look back at this story, we're quite happy this poor man goofed up because it occasioned one of Elisha's great miracles. The record of Elisha's teaching on that day is long gone. No one remembers the sermon he preached to the Sons of the Prophets that afternoon. It wasn't written down or recorded. But we've been reading the miracle of the poisonous stew for 2500 years.

The grace of God that's available to us is strong enough to turn our mistakes into His masterpieces. In his book, *How To Be Born Again*, Billy Graham wrote: "There is a well-known story of some men in Scotland who had spent the day fishing. That evening they were having tea in a little inn. One of the fishermen, in a characteristic gesture to describe the size of the fish that got away, slung out his hands just as the little waitress was getting ready to set the cup of tea at his place. The hand and the teacup collided, dashing the tea against the whitewashed walls. Immediately an ugly brown stain began to spread over the wall. The man who did it was very embarrassed and apologized profusely, but one of the other guests jumped up and said, 'Never mind.' Pulling a pen from his pocket, he began to sketch around the ugly brown stain. Soon there emerged a picture of a magnificent royal stag with his antlers spread. That artist was Sir Edwin Landseer, England's foremost painter of animals."

Mr. Graham went on to say, "This story has always beautifully illustrated to me that fact that if we confess not only our sins but our mistakes to God, He can make out of them something for our good and His glory. Sometimes it's harder to commit our mistakes and stupidities to God than it is our sins. Mistakes and stupidities seem so dumb, whereas sin seems to more or less be an outcropping of our human nature. But Romans 8:28 tells us that if they are committed to God He can make them work together for our good and His glory. [Billy Graham, *How To Be Born Again* (Waco: Word, 1977), pp. 129-130. Another version of this story is written by J. Stuart Holden and appears in *Mrs. Charles E. Cowman's Springs in the Valley* (Los Angeles: Cowman Publications, Inc., 1939), p. 353.]

J. I. Packer wrote, "Our God is a God who not merely restores, but takes up our mistakes and follies into His plan for us and brings good out of them. This is part of the wonder of His gracious sovereignty." [J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 219.]

#### Mistakes Allow God to Gain the Glory

Finally, mistakes allow God to gain the glory in our lives. Notice how the story ends—not with a group of preaches clutching their stomachs and rolling in pain; but with them talking with one another about how great was their God who can even turn poison into porridge. It reminds me of something Corrie ten Boom once said: "God can give a straight blow with a crooked stick. He blesses us in spite of our blunders."

I want to end by showing you how two mistakes led to two plane crashes which have had far-reaching results for God's glory.

In 1946, there was a young family of three souls who needed to be transported by plane from their missionary station in Peru to Mexico City. Their names were Cameron Townsend, his wife Helen, and their six-week-old daughter, Grace. Mr. Townsend was the founder of Wycliffe Bible Translators, and they were going to Mexico City to visit recruits at one of their training centers.

A young, inexperienced pilot came to pick them up in a Piper Super Cruiser, and the young family squeezed into the cabin. They went bouncing down the runway and took off; but the pilot banked the plane too soon, and the tail of the plane struck the top of a tree, sending the aircraft crashing into a ravine. The pilot survived but was unconscious for several days. Cameron survived with injuries. Helen survived, but her leg had nearly been totally severed; and the baby survived unhurt.

As Cameron waited for the stretcher, a powerful thought came into his mind. There has got to be a reliable and safe missionary aviation service for Bible translators going into the jungle; and during his recuperation, his plans took shape more and more until finally an organization was born known as the Jungle Aviation And Radio Service, or JAARS.

Had there been no mistake, there would have been no crash; and had there been no crash, there might never have been a Jungle Aviation Program. But the story doesn't end there.

The years passed, and JAARS had a remarkable safety record. Their pilots logged millions of miles in all kinds of weather, ferrying missionaries and translators to remote spots in the jungles of South America, Asia, and other places. They boasted of twenty-five years of flying ministries without a fatality.

And then in 1972, tragedy struck. A missionary pilot named Doug Hunt returned from a much needed vacation and resumed his work by taking the controls of an Aztec aircraft, heading toward the Wycliffe center in Ukarumpa in Papua New Guinea. The plane carried seven people, included a noted and brilliant missionary linguist. Doug took off and the plane reached an altitude of 6500 feet. Suddenly Doug saw a brilliant flash out his right window and realized the engine was on fire. He brought all his skills to bear, sending a mayday signal and trying to find a place to land the plane; but he lost control, and the Aztec began spiraling downward. They lost 6000 feet in two minutes, and Doug tried to level off about 100 feet above the ground. Suddenly there was another brilliant flash of light, and the plane began breaking apart. The next instant, the seven people were with the Lord.

Back at the Ukarumpa station, a man named Ken Wiggers received the tragic news by radio transmission just as the church and Wycliffe family were in the middle of a worship service. As he approached the little building, he heard to the sounds of joyful singing. He pushed open the door, interrupted the service, and broke the news that their friends and family members had died in the plane crash.

As Ken finished, someone else took over the service and began seeking to comfort the family and friends of those who had perished, and Ken, who had immediate tasks to attend to, left the building. As he did so, someone burst out of the shadows and grabbed him by the shirt, holding on to him and weeping uncontrollably. It was one of the mechanics. The man said, "I was sitting there in that meeting, wracking my brain trying to remember. Now I know. It was my fault. The whole thing is my fault."

This mechanic went on to explain that the day before, he had worked on the engine; and he was just finishing hooking up the fuel line when another worker asked for his help. He had tightened the nut on the fuel line with his fingers but had intended to give the nut one extra twist with the wrench, but had forgotten to go back and do it. The lack of that final twist of the wrench meant that a fine spray of gasoline could have escaped, struck the hot engine, and ignited.

A subsequent investigation revealed that was exactly what had happened. This mechanic was nearly suicidal in his anguish over his tragic mistake. When he saw the seven caskets lined up in the little tropical church a few days later, it nearly drove him insane. He later said, "(It) hit me in the stomach. I wanted nothing but to get out of there.... How could I face my friends? How could I face myself? I was overwhelmed with guilt. I was a failure."

But a few days later he forced himself to sit down with the widow of the pilot, and through sobs and tears he confessed his error. He looked at his right hand and told her, "That hand there took Doug's life." Mrs. Hunt took that hand and held it in her own, and she extended her full love, comfort, and forgiveness. That was the significant first step in the healing process.

Some time later, Jamie Buckingham wrote an account of the history of JAARS entitled *Into the Glory*, and he devoted a chapter to the story of what happened. Thousands upon thousands of people were inspired and moved by the story, and some gave their lives to missionary service. And this is what the mechanic later wrote:

"Time went on and heart-healing continued. But it was a long time before I could talk about the accident. In fact, not until after I learned how God was blessing lives as a result of the book about JAARS—*Into the Glory* by Jamie Buckingham—did I realize my story could be a blessing to others. Readers seemed to find a special encouragement in the chapter about the Aztec crash and a young mechanic who thought he was a failure, but God kept him going."

And then he said this: Except for God's grace I'd be somewhere cowering in a corner in guilt-ridden despair—the eighth fatality of the Aztec crash." [Jamie Buckingham, *Into the Glory* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1974), chapter 18. Ruth A. Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1983), pp. 403-404. Also [www.jaars.org](http://www.jaars.org) and [www.bible.org/illus.asp?topic\\_id=576](http://www.bible.org/illus.asp?topic_id=576)].

"Except for God's grace..."

It reminds me of the song by Larnelle Harris that says:

Were it not for grace  
I can tell you where I'd be...  
Forever running but losing this race  
Were it not for grace

I believe that when Jesus Christ died on the cross of Calvary, His blood was an acid strong enough to dispense with all our sin and guilt, and His grace was a force strong enough to turn our sorrows into songs. His redemption covers both our sins and our mistakes—and everything in between; for by His stripes we are healed.

If you've made mistakes in your life, don't wallow in them any more. Write Romans 8:28 over that page in your story. Give your foul-ups to God. Claim His promise that all things work together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. Claim the promise of Ephesians 1:11 that God works all things together according to the counsel of His will. Give it all to Him and trust His grace.

He alone knows how to turn poison into porridge, mistakes into masterpieces, snafus into songs, and errors into alleluias

### **When a Great Man Listened to a Little Girl**

2 Kings 5:1-15

The term paradox comes from an unusual Greek word meaning contrary to expectation. We can define a paradox as a statement that appears to be self-contradictory, but actually has a basis in truth. The world is full of paradoxes. We're living in an age of paradox, in which we buy more things but enjoy them less. We have larger houses but smaller families. We have more conveniences, but less time. We have more channels on our television, but nothing worth watching. We have more knowledge, but less discernment. These are the paradoxes of our times.

But God also has His own set of paradoxes. The Bible is full of paradoxes. In fact, Jesus Himself began His ministry by issuing a set of paradoxical statements that we call "The Beatitudes."

Ø Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Ø Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Ø Blessed are the meek, for that shall inherit the earth.

These are all paradoxical. They appear to be self-contradictory, yet they are true. And they are true because from the vantage point of Jesus Christ, things are not always as they seem. Today I'd like for us to look at a passage of Scripture that is full of paradoxes. It is one of the most paradoxical stories of Scripture, and we're coming to it in our on-going series of sermons entitled "Miracle Man" on the life and ministry of the prophet Elisha. It's the story of Naaman, in 2 Kings 5.

#### 1. It's Possible to be Successful but Miserable (v. 1)

We come to our first paradox in verse 1—It's possible to be successful, but miserable.

Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy.

Notice this sentence. It gives us five superlatives about this man Naaman, followed by that terrible conjunction, but.

He was:

Ø Commander of the army of Syria

Ø A great man in the sight of the king

Ø Highly regarded

Ø Victorious - Through Him the Lord had brought victory

Ø A valiant soldier

But he had contracted the dreaded disease of leprosy. Leprosy was a sort of external cancer that ate away the skin and the digits and parts of the body. There was no cure and no treatment and no hope. Perhaps it had begun on his finger or on a toe, and now that finger or toe was rotting and becoming just a putrefied stump. And it was spreading to the rest of his body; and none of his

achievements or renown or valor could stop the spread of this miserable disease. He was a great man, but he was self-destructing because of this miserable disease.

This is counter-intuitive to us; because we think that to be great or successful or wealthy is to be happy; but there are other factors that enter the equation.

Last year at a book sale, I picked two biographies. One was the memoir of Priscilla Presley in which she talked about her life with Elvis. The other was about Princess Diana by her personal aide. Elvis was the “King,” and Diana was the “People’s Princess.” They were popular, wealthy, successful, and had everything that anyone could ever want. But what surprised me was how very unhappy they both were. Priscilla said, “Elvis and I couldn’t be happy together because he was so unhappy....” He kept pumping himself full of pharmaceuticals in an effort to escape anxiety and unhappiness, and it finally killed him. Princess Diana’s butler described her as constantly suffering from low self-esteem and a constant feeling of rejection, and she turned to psychics to help her cope with the pressures of life. Her desperate longing for happiness is part of the reason she died so young. She was only 36, and Elvis was only 42. The king and the princess—successful beyond belief, but miserable and destined for an early grave.

I read an interesting article the other day about people who win the lottery, and there was a long list of the disasters that seemed to follow lottery winners, such as:

Ø Lottery millionaire Michael Allen was bludgeoned to death in Lewiston, Maine.

Ø Lottery winner Billie Bob Harrell, who won \$31 million in the Texas lottery, committed suicide.

Ø Patrick Collier won \$1 million in the lottery and two weeks later was arrested for allegedly choking and punching his fiancée in the face.

Ø Lottery winner Phil Kitchen was found dead on his couch from the over consumption of whiskey.

Ø Lottery winner Dennis Elwell died from drinking cyanide.

Ø Lottery winner Jody Lee Taylor was arrested in Virginia for driving naked down the wrong side of the highway with his headlights off and trying to run over a sheriff’s deputy.

Ø A 16-year-old lottery winner on the UK named Callie Rogers said, “Some days I don’t even want to leave my house because people scream abuse at me. Two months ago I thought I was the luckiest teenager in Britain, but today I can say I have never felt so miserable.”

Ø Lottery millionaire Kevin Lee Sutton was charged with attempted murder for attempting to shoot another man in the head with a .22 caliber pistol.

Ø Seattle lottery millionaire Rick Camat was shot to death by police in a parking lot after he refused to drop his pistol.

Ø Gerald Muswagon won \$10 million in the lottery, spent it all in seven years, and then hanged himself.

Ø William Post III, who won \$16.2 million in the Pennsylvania lottery, died in bankruptcy. He told an interviewer, “Everybody dreams of winning money, but nobody realizes the nightmares that come out of the woodwork.”

This is the paradox of our times—that it’s possible to achieve great things in this world, yet be miserable.

## 2. It’s Possible to be Unknown but Influential (vv. 2-3)

But with verse 2, we encounter another paradox: It’s possible to be unknown but influential.

Now bands from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman’s wife. She said to her mistress, “If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.”

We don’t know this little girl’s name. She was kidnapped from her home in Israel by Syrian marauders. I picture her as a young teenager; and her story was tragic—torn away from her mom and day, removed from her siblings, taken into captivity and sold in a foreign nation to a wealthy family. But she was a witness there and she pointed Mrs. Naaman toward Elisha and toward the God of Israel. And though her name isn’t recorded and her position was humble, she cast a long shadow and had an impact that we’re still talking about and preaching about today, 2500 years later.

It’s possible to be unknown and of a low and obscure position, but influential.

I’m sure every one of us and every school child knows about Paul Revere and his famous midnight ride; but have you ever heard of a man named Israel Bissell? He was a 23-year-old dispatch rider who, on that same April evening of 1775, also took off to warn the

colonies that British troops had opened fire on colonial farmers at Lexington. He went south with the news, and he rode like the wind. According to local legend, he made it to Worcester—normally a day's ride—in just two hours, and his horse dropped dead when he got there. With a new horse, he took off again, racing through Connecticut, New York, and Pennsylvania, spreading the alarm. He rode 350 miles in six days, an unheard of feat.

Paul Revere, on the other hand, only rode twenty miles.

So why is it we remember Paul Revere and not Israel Bissell? It's because Paul Revere was immortalized in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem:

Listen my children and you shall hear

Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,

Nobody wrote a poem about Israel Bissell, and he is virtually unknown today; but he helped saved the Colonies, leading to the establishment of these United States of America.

And, I'm happy to report, about ten years ago a Massachusetts poet, Clay Perry, did write a poem. It began:

Listen my children, to my epistle;

Of the long, long ride of Israel Bissell;

Who outrode Paul by miles and time;

But didn't rate a poet's rhyme.

[Rick Beyer: *The Greatest Stories Never Told* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2003), pp. 52-53.]

In any event, one man made did the hard work but another man got the fame and glory; and that's the way it's been throughout history and even throughout Christian history. As we look back across the 21 centuries of the church, there are a handful of names that everyone knows—Peter and Paul, Augustine and Chrysostom, St. Francis and Thomas Aquinas, Calvin and Luther, D. L. Moody and Billy Graham.

But the real work of the church and the real evangelism of the nations has been done by simple, nameless, ordinary people like you and me who just take every opportunity to say, "There's a great man named Jesus Christ who can help you with your sad condition. If only you would go to Christ, you could find healing." We are links in a chain; we are part of a chain reaction of evangelism that is reaching this world with the Gospel; and the important thing isn't whether or not we're famous, but whether or not we are faithful. It isn't being well known, but making Him well known. It isn't by might nor by power, but by His Spirit.

### 3. It's Possible to be Powerful but Useless (vv. 4-9)

That leads to the third paradox in this passage—it's possible to be powerful but useless. Look at verses 4ff:

Naaman went to his master [Ben-Hadad II] and told him what the girl from Israel had said. "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver [about 750 pounds], six thousand shekels of gold [about 150 pounds] and ten sets of clothing. The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of leprosy."

Somehow the message got bungled up as it went from the servant girl to Mrs. Naaman to Mr. Naaman to Ben Hadad to the King of Israel. The letter quoted here said nothing about seeing a prophet. The Syrian king wrote to the Israeli king saying, "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of leprosy." And when King Joram received the letter, he was incredulous.

As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!"

Kings can set policies, start wars, impose taxes, and make speeches. But they can't change hearts, forgive sins, or give abundant life. In reality, they cannot even direct the course of history.

Several years ago, one of the most insightful political consultants was a Washington lawyer named Robert Strauss, a prominent Democrat. He said something one day in an interview that I read and copied into my notebook: "Everybody in government is like a bunch of ants on a log floating down a river. Each one thinks he is guiding the log, but it is really just going with the flow."

There's only one King who can direct the course of history, and He alone can heal diseases, forgive sins, and give eternal life—and



that is King Jesus.

#### 4. It's Possible to Do Something Simple but Be Changed Forever (vv. 8-15)

That leads to the final paradox in this story: It's possible to do something simple, but to be changed forever. Continue reading in verse 8ff:

When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel."

So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed."

Have you ever noticed that the number "seven" is very significant in the Scriptures?

Ø There were seven days of creation, and the seventh was a day of rest.

Ø Noah took seven of every clean animal into the ark.

Ø There were seven years of plenty and seven years of famine in Joseph's day.

Ø There were seven branches on the lamp (the menorah) in the Tabernacle.

Ø The blood was to be sprinkled on the mercy seat seven times.

Ø The children of Israel were to march around Jericho seven times.

Ø The Psalmist said that the words of Scripture were like silver tested in the furnace seven times.

Ø Proverbs 6 lists seven deadly sins.

Ø In the book of Daniel, seventy "sevens" are decreed for Israel.

Ø Jesus taught us to forgive others seventy times seven times.

Ø The early church chose seven deacons to oversee the work of waiting on tables.

Ø Revelation was written to the seven churches of Asia

Ø The scroll in Revelation 5 was sealed with seven seals.

Ø There are seven trumpets in Revelation, and seven plagues and seven bowls of wrath.

Ø The fiery dragon in Revelation has seven heads.

Ø And the Tribulation will last for seven years.

Seven seems to be a number indicating completion and thoroughness. It also requires a certain perseverance and faith. It's one thing to march once around Jericho, but to do so every day for seven days—and seven times on the seventh day—that requires faith and perseverance. The same is true for dipping seven times in the Jordan, which is what Elisha told Naaman to do.

But Naaman wasn't impressed with Elisha. He seemed a little offended that Elisha just send a message to him instead of coming out to see him himself. Second, he had expected a more immediate and impressive miracle. And third—dipping in the Jordan? The muddy Jordan? The rivers of Syria were far more accessible and beautiful. Verses 11ff say:

But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot, and cure me of my leprosy. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the water of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage.

God's ways of doing things don't always fit our preconceived ideas. But Naaman had good people around him, and they reasoned with him.

Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed'!" So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

But that wasn't the greatest miracle. The great miracle was something that happened on the inside of Naaman. He was healed of his

spiritual leprosy, and He acknowledged the God of Israel. In today's language, we would say that he was born again. Verse 15 says:

Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel."

When you drive from Nashville to Atlanta, you pass by a place called Chickamauga. The Chickamauga is a river in North Georgia, and it's also a battlefield. The Battle of Chickamauga was fought between the Army of Tennessee and the Army of the Cumberland in September of 1863, and some historians say that it represented the last real opportunity for the Confederacy to win the Civil War. It was a two-day battle, and a very costly one. There were 35,000 casualties and over 4,000 fatalities.

The ironic thing about the Battle of Chickamauga is its name. Chickamauga is Cherokee word. It means, literally, "the River of Blood."

When Jesus Christ died on the cross of Calvary, a river of blood flowed from His wounded side, from His thorn-pierced brow, from His nail-pierced hands and feet, and from His lacerated back.

Ø Mark 14:24: This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.

Ø Ephesians 1:7: In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.

Ø Colossians 1:19: For God was pleased...through Him to reconcile to Himself all things... by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross.

Ø Hebrews 9:22: Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

Ø 1 Peter 1:18: You were redeemed...with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

Ø 1 John 1:7: And the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin...

If we want forgiveness of sin and everlasting life, we have to go to God's Chickamauga—the River of Blood—and there we can wash away our guilt and stain. We have to be washed and cleansed by the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. We have to trust Him as our Lord and Savior, and live our lives for Him alone. We have to be justified by grace through faith, and that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works lest anyone should boast. For...

There is a fountain filled with blood,

Drawn from Emmanuel's veins,

And sinners plunged beneath that flood,

Lose all their guilty stains.

If you want inner, spiritual healing, you can find it in Christ alone by being willing to pray this simple prayer: Dear God, I acknowledge my sins before You, and with Your help I am willing to turn from them. I believe that Jesus Christ died and rose again for me. I now receive Him by faith into my heart and life, and I ask Him to become my everlasting Savior and Lord. I pray in Jesus' Name. Amen

## **A WORLD OF EVIL**

2 Kings 6; Exodus 22:18

Today we are continuing our study entitled "Double, Double, Toil, and Trouble" on the subject of witchcraft in the Bible, and I would like to begin by reading the story of the most effective spy who every lived. There was a man in the Bible who was a mastermind of espionage and military intelligence, 2500 years before James Bond or the CIA. He was the prophet Elisha, and the story about him that I want to read is in 2 Kings 6:1-33

Now the king of Aram [ancient Syria, the nation whose capital is still Damascus and whose president today is Hefez Assad. They are still in a state of conflict with Israel] 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 [the prophet Elisha] sent word to the king of Israel: "Beware of passing that place, because the Arameans [the Syrians] 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. 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 that 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.

This passage gives us graphic evidence that we are surrounded by an invisible supernatural, spiritual world. Syria was seeking the destruction of Israel, but God was giving his prophet Elisha inside information about Syrian troop deployments and military tactics. When the Syrian king realized what was happening, he sent his army to surround the city of Dothan and to capture Elisha. But God encircled the city with a legion of angels, invisible to human sight. When Elisha's servant awoke and looked out the window, all he could see were thousands of Syrian troops encircling the city. But Elisha said, "Those who are for us are more than those who are against us. Lord, open his eyes." And suddenly the servant saw the hills full of angelic, heavenly troops, and those angelic troops kept Elisha and his servant absolutely safe.

This story teaches us that our planet is a spiritual battle zone, and it is blanketed with spiritual forces, both good and evil.

The Bible teaches that God's people are surrounded by angels who are ministering spirits sent to serve those who inherit salvation. Psalm 24 says, "The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers him." Psalm 90 says, "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways."

But there is also an invisible army of evil angels, of demons and evil spirits, all around us, enveloping this world. The apostle Paul said, "Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

Some people like to dabble and speculate about this strange, dark, invisible world of evil. One of the popular movies currently showing in theaters is called Practical Magic. According to the reviews, it is about two young ladies who are taught skills in casting spells and practicing the ancient arts of white magic that have been handed down through the family from generation to generation. Their family is under a curse, and their actions release a swarm of supernatural forces.

Witches have been a regular feature of modern entertainment, with everything from the Wicked Witch in the Wizard of Oz, to the good, everyday housewife on the old television program Bewitched, to the popular Friday night family program Sabrina the Teenage Witch.

But apart from television and movies, there is a resurgence of serious witchcraft in the United States and around the world. I found thousand of web sites on the Internet devoted to witchcraft. In the US today there is an estimated 80,000 people practicing white magic, and every high school in the nation is said to have its own witch. In France, an estimated two hundred million dollars are spent each year on witches and sorcerers. CNN recently did a major story on a coven of witches and wizards who used their supernatural powers to try to change Moscow's weather, with the backing of the city government. The nation of Haiti is totally given over to witchcraft and voodoo, having been dedicated to Satan in 1791. Africa today is filled with its witchdoctors who still hold sway over entire tribes and nations.

We have a lady in our church who is a home-school mom. The other day she was approached by a woman who wanted to become part of a home school group, but the woman said, "We don't want to be part of a Christian home-school group; we want one that is pagan. Our religion is that of witchcraft."

Well, while witchcraft is very old, dating back to biblical times, most of today's witches are part of a neo-pagan movement that reflects New Age thinking, and there are many different approaches to witchcraft. In researching this subject, I found a variety of definitions of witchcraft. Here, for example, is a sample definition I pulled off the worldwide web: A witch is a practitioner of a nature-based religion which recognizes the femininity of divinity and follows the seasonal cycles. A witch believes that the divine exists within himself or herself as well as without, and therefore feels a direct connection with the god or goddess of self.

One witch said she did not believe in Satan, but she believed that if she practiced black or harmful magic, her soul would be punished via the laws of karma. Karma can follow a person from one life to the next, and effect the process of reincarnation. She said that witches can be either male or female, they do cast spells, but they consider a spell something like a prayer. She also said that in witchcraft there are no rules prohibiting homosexuality, nudity, or premarital sex.

#### What The Bible Says

In this series, I do not want to explore or elaborate on the darker side of witchcraft. I scanned a few of the web sites on witchcraft and read some of the material on this subject; but I did not review any of it very closely or study any of their magical arts or spells. I

didn't want to expose my mind and soul to that kind of darkness and evil. Instead I went to the Scriptures to see what God has to say, and this is where I would like to take you as well--on a little tour through the Bible, isolating some of our Lord's words and warnings on this subject.

In Exodus 22, Moses was establishing the legal system for the newly-formed nation of Israel. In verse 18 he had very strong words regarding witchcraft: "Do not allow a sorceress to live." The King James Version uses the word "witch." The NIV and the NKJV and most modern translations use the word "sorceress," but there is little difference. Moses was referring to one who practiced sorcery or witchcraft. In ancient Israel, in other words, witchcraft was considered a capital crime, no doubt because it opened the door for satanic infiltration and influence into God's holy people. I am by no means suggesting that our nation today should view witchcraft as a capital crime as they did during one unfortunate period of history in Salem, Massachusetts. Our society isn't regulated by the legalisms of ancient Israel. But this verse in Exodus 22 is a reflection of what God thinks of witchcraft and sorcery, that it is a dangerous evil that runs counter to his character and his will for his people.

The same theme crops up in Leviticus 19:26—"Do not practice divination or sorcery." And in the same chapter, Leviticus 19:31 says: "Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the Lord your God."

Leviticus 20:27 says: "A man or woman who is a medium or spiritist among you must be put to death. You are to stone them; their blood will be on their own heads."

Deuteronomy 18:9 says: "When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord, and because of these detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be blameless before the Lord your God."

In 1 Samuel 15:23, Samuel told Saul, "For rebellion is like the sin of divination (KJV: witchcraft), and arrogance like the evil of idolatry."

The writer of 2 Kings 17 explained why God allowed the northern kingdom of Israel to be defeated and exiled by the Assyrian Empire. He said that the Israelites "forsook all the commands of the Lord their God and made for themselves two idols cast in the shape of calves, and an Asherah pole. They bowed down to all the starry hosts, and they worshipped Baal. They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire. They practices divination and sorcery and sold themselves to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, provoking him to anger."

2 Kings 21:3 describes Manassah, one of the most wicked man who ever lived. He "bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshipped them. He built altars in the temple of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, 'In Jerusalem I will put my Name.' In both courts of the temple of the Lord, he built altars to all the starry hosts. He sacrificed his own son in the fire, practiced sorcery and divination, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, provoking him to anger."

In 1 Chronicles 10:13 we read that King Saul died because he "was unfaithful to the Lord; he did not keep the word of the Lord and even consulted a medium for guidance and did not inquire of the Lord. So the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse."

Isaiah predicted that during his days the Egyptians will lose heart, and "I will bring their plans to nothing; they will consult the idols and the spirits of the dead, the mediums and the spiritists" (Isa 19:13).

The last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, says: "'So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers, and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows, and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me,' says the Lord Almighty." (Mal 3:5).

When we turn to the Gospels, we see that during his earthly ministry, Jesus frequently encountered activity and static from the demonic world, and so did the Apostle Paul in the book of Acts. Paul had no sooner launched his first missionary journey in Acts 13 than he was confronted with a Jewish sorcerer named Elymas who opposed him and tried to discredit the Gospel. The Bible says, "Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, 'You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?'"

Now let's read Galatians 5:19-21: "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft..."

Our tour of these passages ends with these words at the end of the Bible in Revelation 21: "But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters, and all liars—their place will be in the fiery

lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."

The teaching of the Bible, from the first books of Moses through to the final book of Revelation is clear. Sorcery and witchcraft are manifestations of Satan's power and influence in this world. They are evil and wrong, they are destined for eternal judgment, but in the meantime they have the potential of causing great harm in many lives. How can we protect ourselves? What do we need to do?

- First, pay no attention to superstitions. Don't worry about black cats, broken mirrors, four-leaf clovers, or spilled salt. Don't follow old wives' tales.
- Second, avoid anything remotely connected with the occult such as ouiji boards, seances, etc. Don't call the psychic hotline, and don't consult the horoscopes in the newspapers. Avoid entertainment that majors on these elements. Otherwise you could be opening your soul to demonic invasion.
- Third, be a student of the Scriptures. Isaiah 8:19 says, "When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony!"
- Most of all, make sure you are covered with the blood of Christ. Take Jesus Christ as your Savior. Make him your Lord. Appropriately the power of his blood over your life. There's an old Gospel song that says, "Would you be free from the burden of sin? There's power in the blood, power in the blood. Would you o'er evil a victory win? There's wonderful power in the blood."

Revelation 1:5 says that Christ has freed us from our sins by his blood.

Revelation 5:9 says, "With your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation."

Revelation 12:11 says, "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto death."

Roy Rosedale has served with Campus Crusade for Christ both here and abroad for 29 years and currently teaches at the International School of Theology. Once while he and his wife Eleanor were serving in Indonesia, they faced a strange and dangerous situation. He writes:

/I was away on a ministry trip when this occurred, as such attacks usually did. Eleanor had noticed earlier in the day that a former helper walked into our yard, around the back and then out again, without speaking to anyone. We had dismissed her because Eleanor had repeatedly caught her stealing. Later the same day, at the edge of our lawn by the street, Eleanor noticed something ugly that was also part of the curse ritual, though she wasn't aware of the significance of either one at the time. But late that evening, as she stepped out into our living room she was overwhelmed by a sudden chilling awareness that she was surrounded by a circle of malevolent, invisible adversaries, focusing on her. Filled with fear, she whispered "Jesus!" Then, "In Jesus' Name get out of here, whatever you are, in Jesus' name get out!" But nothing changed. Filled with terror, she whispered, "Oh God, show me what to do." She got down on her face on the tile floor before Him, arms covering her head, and He caused her to say what no one had ever taught her to say, the thing that drove the adversary back: "The blood, Lord, the Blood ... over me, over the children, over Roy wherever he is, this house, oh I don't know what's happening, but the blood, Lord, the blood." Whatever forces were arrayed against her began to recede until they were gone. She sat up and wept and thanked God for delivering her. We learned later, from the evidence, that the dismissed employee had bought a death curse from a black witch. It was intended to stop her heart in fear. Eleanor could understand how that could occur, particularly if the victim had to see what surrounded him--which mercifully God did not permit. Those who are not Christians have no way to dispel such forces. They literally are frightened to death. But to my knowledge, no Christians have died. Invariably they cry out for their King, and He saves them (I heard their inability to kill Christians so frustrates Indonesian witches that some of them will no longer attempt it.). It is my belief that just as witches call on Satan and gain demonic assistance, when Christians call on Jesus, God's angels come to their aid.

We are in a spiritual battle. But Elisha told his servant, "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Jesus said, "Greater is he that is in us than he that is in the world." Our great responsibility is to resist the devil and he will flee from us. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

## **The Floating Axe Head**

2 Kings 6:1ff

In our study of the life of the prophet Elisha, we're coming to a simple little story that conveys a couple of things. It's found in 2 Kings 6:1ff.:

The company of the prophets said to Elisha, "Look, the place where we meet with you is too small for us. Let us go to the Jordan, where each of us can get a pole; and let us build a place there for us to live." And he said, "Go."

Then one of them said, "Won't you please come with your servants?"

"I will," Elisha replied. And he went with them. They went to the Jordan and began to cut down trees. As one of them was cutting down a tree, the iron axe head fell into the water. "Oh, my lord," he cried out, "it was borrowed!"

The man of God asked, "Where did it fall?" When he showed him the place, Elisha cut a stick and threw it there, and made the iron float. "Lift it out," he said. Then the man reached out his hand and took it.

#### God's Power Through Us

There are two great lessons here. The first concerns God's power and how it operates through us. When I was a young minister just starting out, my favorite preacher was the old North Carolina evangelist, Vance Havner. Some of you undoubtedly heard him preach, and there was no one like him. One of his greatest sermons was one that was first published in 1938 on the lost ax head of this passage; and I'd just like to read you a little of this old sermon because Havner said it better than I could. After having told the story in 2 Kings 6, he said:

Many of the Lord's workmen today have lost the axe head of power. They have lost the joy of salvation, they have not the upholding of God's Spirit. The axe head of the Spirit's unction has fallen into the waters of worldliness, ponds of indifference, swamps of sluggishness. They have ability, training, earnestness, but they are chopping with the handle.

Observe, first, that this axe head was borrowed. The believer's power for service is from God, he has nothing he did not receive. He may study, have personality, enthusiasm, but the axe head is borrowed....

Consider, next, that this workman lost his axe head. The tragedy of lost power! Was there a time when you could pray with liberty, teach with power, preach with freedom? Was there a time when you had influence with your children, and your neighbors had confidence in your testimony? And now you have lost the axe head; it has fallen into the water of business cares, pleasure, worldly living, evil habits, indifference or laziness.... You are going through the same old motions of wood chopping, but it is all a vain show, for the power is not there....

Consider, again, that the prophet stopped chopping until the axe head was recovered. That is natural, but would to God that His workmen would stop hollow motions in His service until power be recovered.... Men work all the harder to hide their lack of power as sometimes the preacher pounds the pulpit all the harder when he has run out of something to say. But there is no sense in working doubly fast with the handle just to keep men from seeing that there is no axe head on it!...

Elisha asked the distressed workman, "Where fell it?" The place to find lost power is where you lost it. If you have disobeyed God, go back there and confess it.... There must be confession before God can cleanse and empower....

[Vance Havner, *The Secret of Christian Joy* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1938), chapter 7].

That's so well put, so wisely stated, that I can't improve on it. Without the empowering and unction of the Holy Spirit, we're just workers flaying away with a headless axe. Or, to use another analogy, have you every gotten stuck in the mud and all you could do was spin your tires? You can sit in the driver's seat all day, gunning the engine and feeding the gasoline; but there's no forward progress. In fact, you just run yourself deeper and deeper into the mire.

That's what it's like without the traction of the Holy Spirit. We're chopping without an axe head. We're spinning our tires. We're doing the work and going through the motions, but it isn't by work or by motion—it's by the empowering of the Spirit of God.

The old song says, "All is vain unless the Spirit of the Lord come down." We read in the book of Acts that they were filled with the Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness. That's why I think it's important every morning to have a time of prayer in which we confess our sins, yield ourselves afresh to God, and ask Him to fill us with His Holy Spirit.

#### Fill with Thy Spirit

Till all shall see

Jesus only always

Living in me.

#### God's Care for Us

But there's another lesson in this story, for it speaks not only about God's power in us, but of God's care for us.

Many of you know the story of John Newton, the English sea captain who was a transporter of slaves and a vile and wicked man.

He was wondrously converted and became a prominent London pastor. Several years ago while I was in London, I searched out the church where he preached. It was a relatively small church sitting in the heart of London's financial district. The church was empty, but the doors were unlocked. I went in and spent a wonderful half-hour, and I even had the audacity of climbing the steps and standing in Newton's old pulpit. Newton was not only a great preacher and a great leader in the movement for the abolition of slavery; but he was a hymnist and the author of the hymn "Amazing Grace." He very often wrote hymns that went along with his sermons.

Steve Turner, who did quite a bit of research into this, wrote about it in his book, *Amazing Grace*, saying: "(John Newton's) self-imposed challenge was to complete at least one fresh hymn each week for use in conjunction with a sermon. The hymn would either reinforce the main points of the preaching or itself become the topic of the sermon that followed. Several times in his letters, Newton mentions 'expounding' a new hymn as though he had made its words the text for the day." [Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Song* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), p. 78.]

Well, we actually have a John Newton hymn based on the story of the lost axe head. Undoubtedly, Newton preached one day on this very passage and he wrote out the story in verse form; and even though it is a little archaic-sounding, I want to quote this hymn to you in its entirety, noticing especially the last verse, which must have been the main point of Newton's sermon.

The prophet sons, in time of old,  
Though to appearance poor;  
Were rich without possessing gold,  
And honored, though obscure.  
In peace their daily bread they eat,  
By honest labor earned;  
While daily at Elisha's feet,  
They grace and wisdom learned.  
The prophet's presence cheered their toil,  
They watched the words he spoke;  
Whether they turned the furrowed soil,  
Or felled the spreading oak.  
Once as they listened to his theme,  
Their conference was stopped;  
For one beneath the yielding stream,  
A borrowed axe had dropped.  
Alas! it was not mine, he said,  
How shall I make it good?  
Elisha heard, and when he prayed,  
The iron swam like wood.  
If God, in such a small affair,  
A miracle performs;  
It shows his condescending care  
Of poor unworthy worms.  
Though kings and nations in his view  
Are but as motes and dust;

His eye and ear are fixed on you,

Who in his mercy trust.

And here is the last verse and the main point:

Not one concern of ours is small,

If we belong to him;

To teach us this, the Lord of all,

Once made the iron swim.

One of the most comforting truths of Scripture is that God is concerned about the details of our lives.

Psalm 37:23 (NLB) says: The steps of the godly are directed by the Lord. He delights in every detail of their lives.

Matthew 10:30 (Message) says: God cares what happens... even more than you do. He pays even greater attention to you, down to the last detail—even numbering the hairs on your head!

Luke 21:18 (Message) says: There's no telling who will hate you because of me. Even so, every detail of your body and soul—even the hairs of your head!—is in my care.

And Romans 8:28 (Message) says: We can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.

One morning this week I came across Fanny Crosby's old hymn, "He Hideth My Soul," and I was struck the third verse, which I'd never really noticed before. When I was growing up, the song leader in my church would almost always skip the third verse of whatever song we were singing; so as I reviewed this song in my morning devotions it was as though I were reading it for the first time. The words say:

With numberless blessings each moment He crowns,

And, filled with His fullness divine,

I sing in my rapture, "O glory to God

For such a Redeemer as mine."

What a wonderful verse -- "With numberless blessings each moment He crowns." It reminds us that God is concerned about the details of our lives. We have a saying that we sometimes use when we have foul-ups and snafus. We say, "The devil's in the details." But for the Christian, the Lord is in the details. And one of the wonderful juxtapositional realities about God is that He guides the galaxies with one hand, and He counts the hairs of our heads with the other.

That is illustrated in a set of circumstances described by the Irish evangelist, J. Edwin Orr. Dr. Orr was the world's foremost authority on the subject of revival, and when he was an old man he spoke at Columbia Bible College. I was a student there, and was so impressed with what he said that I requested an interview and met with him for a few minutes. It was only later that I learned more about his early history.

As a young man, Dr. Orr had launched out as an itinerant evangelist, much to the distress of family and friends. He was a shy young man and without financial resources. But he felt God was calling him to travel across the British Islands and preach, and he had a remarkable set of experiences which he described in a little book entitled *Can God?*

Then he felt nudged to go further afield, and he traveled to the Continent, and one day showed up in Copenhagen, that beautiful city of canals, marinas, and Hans Christian Anderson. But Dr. Orr didn't know a single word of Danish, nor did he know a single person in the city. Arriving in the morning, he left his baggage with a sympathetic shop keeper and started walking back and forth on the streets, trying to pick up a few words of the local language and trying to figure out what to do. He had just enough money for one meal, which he ate at lunch. Then he was penniless, friendless, homeless, and helpless. He prayed for one thing—that God would give him a bed with four legs.

Suddenly it dawned on him that a friend of his had an acquaintance who lived in Copenhagen, and he wracked his brain until the name came up. In a phone book, he found the address and eventually located the house. Knocking on the door, he waited to see who would answer, and a woman—the man's wife—came to the door; but she spoke no English and the two struggled for quite a while to communicate. But all at once, a look of recognition came over the woman, and she disappeared into the house. A few



minutes later, she returned with a copy of Dr. Orr's book, *Can God?*, which had been sent to them by a missionary in China.

The woman sent for her husband who left his work and came home at once. He said that he had been praying earnestly for Dr. Orr to come to Copenhagen. In fact, there was a Gospel meeting that very night, and he addressed several hundred people. Afterward, his new friend said, "If you please, you must change your hotel. I have been praying much that you would come to Denmark. Now that you are here, I have arranged for you to become my guest at a hotel near the City Hall."

When Orr was shown to his room, he found that it contained four beds—all for him. "You can sleep in them turn about," said the bellhop with a smile. Instead of one bed with four legs, he had four beds!

His last meeting in Copenhagen was unforgettable. When the meeting started on Sunday evening, the ballroom of the TeknologiskInstitut was crowded, with over 700 people seated and many others standing both inside and outside. As Dr. Orr preached, many people made life-changing decisions for Christ. [J. Edwin Orr, *Prove Me Now* (London: Marshall, Morgan, & Scott, 1935), chapter 3].

It all goes to show that the Lord orders and arranges the lives of His children, down to the number of legs on their beds and the number of beds in their rooms. He sends others to us, and causes our paths to cross with those of others as He ordains it. He opens doors, closes doors, and performs little miracles.

Our God is not only a God of great miracles, like the parting of the Red Sea and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. He's the God of little miracles, too. He can make the axe head float like a cork. How wonderful to remember:

Not one concern of ours is small,

If we belong to him;

To teach us this, the Lord of all,

Once made the iron swim

## THE UNSEEN WORLD AROUND US

2 Kings 6:17

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.

(2 Kings 6:17)

We've been reminded this week that we're living in a terribly dangerous world, and that America is the target of hatred for growing sects on our planet.

When some of us were growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, we thought the world was a dangerous place then, mainly because of the nuclear threat posed by the U.S.S.R. I remember my teacher standing by the windows of our fifth grade classroom, listening to the radio during the Cuban Missile Crisis. She tried to teach the classwork, but she was distracted by the news bulletins; everyone knew we were on the verge of a nuclear war with the Soviet Union.

Now times have changed, and Soviet Communism has collapsed. America won the Cold War; but instead of being safer, we're in greater peril than ever. Some people are saying that World War III has already begun; and if it began on September 11, 2001, it has already lasted longer than World War II, with no end in sight. Someone has called it the "Long War," and there are growing signs it has only just begun.

Fortunately, authorities in the United States and England thwarted the most recent terrorist plot, a plan to blow up ten airlines over the Atlantic from Europe to America; but there was a report in the press this week that the airliner plot is not the big encore to 9-11 that al-Qaida is planning. This is what one article said:

Officials say (Osama) bin Laden is preparing a larger strike on U.S. soil targeting major U.S. cities. They cite the terror kingpin's message in January in which he warned Americans that sleeper cells were preparing a major new attack "on your own ground."

"Operations are under preparation, and you will see them on your own ground once they are finished, Allah willing," bin Laden said in Arabic. Some translations have him saying "in the heart of your land" or "in your houses."

The London plot, which may have rivaled 9-11 casualties, still did not involve ground targets....

Michael Scheuer, former head of the CIA's bin Laden unit (said about the airliner plot): "It simply wasn't a big enough operation for

what they intend, and it didn't occur inside the United States."

Experts say the London plot appears too ad hoc. Planning began only a year ago on the heels of the London subway bombings. Bin Laden's major attacks in the past have involved several years of planning. They've also been led by the A-team of al-Qaida's Martyrdom Brigade, who coordinated with seasoned lieutenants in the network to finance and refine the mission as it developed. The London bomber cells, in contrast, appear to have been composed of fresh recruits who were less disciplined, which may explain why they were caught.

"They're second-stringers," the official said. "He's holding his top operatives in reserve for a bigger operation."

Scheuer says bin Laden is lining up his ducks for a massive attack possibly using radiological weapons. The first step, he says, was getting a green light from Saudi clerics to kill possibly millions of Americans with such weapons. Then he offered the U.S. a truce and even recently invited President Bush to convert to Islam – all in keeping with jihadi military doctrine. And he has directly warned the American people on at least two occasions.

As absurd as such moves sound, they are necessary to satisfy any theological concerns among Muslim clerics, Scheuer says. It's more about "preparing Muslims" for the doomsday attacks than Americans.

Experts agree a plausible nightmare scenario involves al-Qaida shipping dirty nukes in uninspected cargo containers bound for ports in New York, New Jersey, Miami, Los Angeles, Houston and near Washington, and then detonating them once they are in position. The technology used could be as simple as GPS transmitters and cell phones. The radiological fallout from the blasts could render the cities uninhabitable for years, crippling the economy.

["Experts: London plot not Osama's encore," [http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE\\_ID=51535](http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=51535), accessed on August 16, 2006.]

We don't know what this world is in for, and we have no idea what tomorrow can bring. But on top of these staggering national and international problems, we all face a host of personal crises and challenges. It's no wonder that we're living in a world gripped by fear, despair, and uncertainty.

Well, the world may be gripped by fear, despair, and uncertainty, but not Christians. We have a God who knows the future as well as He knows the past, and can do the impossible as well as the improbable. He holds the future in His hands like a quivering cube of jello, and He holds us in His hands with omnipotent and dependable care. He stations His angels around us, and beneath us are the everlasting arms.

That's the theme of the story we're coming to today in our study entitled Miracle Man into the life and times of the prophet Elisha. This morning we're looking at the miracle of Dothan in 2 Kings 6. You've heard about the Miracle of Dunkirk in which over 300,000 British forces were evacuated in what can only be described as a miracle. Well, this is the Miracle of Dothan, in which one prophet was safeguarded in what can only be described as a series of miracles. It's one of the most revealing and encouraging stories in the Old Testament, and I'd like to look at it both morning and evening during today's services. There are a ton of personal lessons and applications in 2 Kings 6; the first thing we notice, as we read this story, is that we are under constant surveillance.

## 1. We Are Under Constant Surveillance

(2 Kings 6:8-12)

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.

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."

Some things never change, and one of the most prolonged antagonisms in history is the conflict between Syria (Aram) and Israel. It's in the headlines of today's newspapers, and it was in the headlines during the days of Elisha. But here we have one of the most interesting cases of espionage and international intrigue in the history of spying. In this story, the king of Syria would plan his strategy and deploy his forces; but the Lord would overhear his plans, read his mind, study his documents, and reveal the information

to Elisha, who, in turn, informed the king of Israel. After this happened several times, the enraged Syrian king demanded to know who the double-agent was. He thought the Israelis had planted a spy in his palace. He thought there was a traitor in his court. But the culprit was the prophet Elisha, who told the king of Israel the very words the Syrian monarch spoke in his bedroom.

This goes right to the issue of God's omniscience. The word omniscient means "total knowledge," and it has to do with the fact that nothing can be hidden from God; He knows everything about everyone. He hears every conversation, and He reads every thought.

The Bible says that God discerns the thoughts and intents of the heart. Proverbs 15:11 says: "Death and destruction lie open before the Lord—how much more the hearts of men!"

Psalms 139 says: "O Lord, You have searched me and You know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; You perceive my thoughts from afar."

In Jeremiah 17:10 we read, "I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind."

And 1 Samuel 16:7 says, "People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (TNIV).

The Puritan writer, Stephen Charnock, wrote, "The thoughts are the most closeted acts of man, hid from men and angels, unless disclosed by some outward expressions; but God descends into the depths and abysses of the soul, discerns the most inward contrivances; nothing is impenetrable to Him." [Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005. Originally published as *Discourses on the Existence and Attributes of God*, 1853), vol. 1, p. 424.]

God knows everything instinctively, instantly, perpetually, completely, infallibly, and eternally.

God even knows perfectly what we would do in circumstances that may never come to pass. One of the most interesting passages on this subject is 1 Samuel 23:9ff, when David is being chased by the armies of Saul and he has found refuge in a town called Keilah:

When David learned that Saul was plotting against him, he said to Abiathar the priest, "Bring the ephod." David said, "O Lord, God of Israel, your servant has heard definitely that Saul plans to come to Keilah and destroy the town on account of me. Will the citizens of Keilah surrender me to him? Will Saul come down, as your servant has heard? O Lord, God of Israel, tell your servant." And the Lord said, "He will."

Again David asked, "Will the citizens of Keilah surrender me and my men to Saul?" And the Lord said, "They will." So David and his men, about six hundred in number, left Keilah and kept moving from place to place. When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he did not go there.

This is a fascinating picture of God's omniscience. He not only knows every detail about the future, He knows exactly what will happen if certain contingencies were to occur, though they will not occur at all. God knows what would have happened if such and such take place, even though they will not take place.

If David had remained in this village, the villagers would have captured him and handed him over to Saul.

God possess total knowledge, and He even knows what will happen in all hypothetical circumstances. He is like a man playing chess who, with only one glance at the chess board, can see every ramification of every move of every game from now to eternity.

God knows everything about everything that now exists. The universe seems virtually infinite to us, yet God knows every particular thing about even the tiniest objects in the cosmos. Furthermore, He could create a new universe every day from now until kingdom come, and He would still know every detail about every object in every universe and He would know it instantly, He would know it permanently, and He would know it completely.

Hebrews 4:13 says, "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

That means that He knows all about us. He knows our thoughts, and He monitors our attitudes and actions. We are constantly under surveillance, which is a terrifying thought to those without Christ and an extremely comforting thought to those of us who know and love Him.

## 2. We Are Under Protective Custody

(2 Kings 6:13-17)

Second, we are not only under constant surveillance, we are under protective custody. Look at verses 13-17:

"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 reminds us of Romans 8:31: "If God is for us, who can be against us?").

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.

This is one of the most astounding scenes involving angels in the entire Bible. This servant—we don't know his name—woke up on a particular morning and looked over the walls of the city. Perhaps their hotel was built on the city wall, or perhaps it was built on a high level inside the city. Maybe the servant just woke up early and walked down the street to the city wall and climbed up for a look. At any rate, he was nonplussed to see that overnight the city had been surrounded by the Syrian army; and the buzz on the streets was that the enemy forces were demanding that the prophet Elisha be turned over to them.

But his vision was deficient, because he could only see the visible army that surrounded the city; he could not see the invisible army of angels that had gathered to protect God's man. Elisha, however, was utterly calm and composed. He simply said, "Lord, open his eyes." And for a few moments, the young attendant was allowed to see into the invisible realms of the atmosphere and see the angelic army that had placed Elisha under its own protective custody.

This is one of the passages that tells us that the army of the Lord encamps around us, and that God's children are in the care and keeping of His secret agents. There is an unseen army around us; and if we would just visualize that sometimes, what a difference it would make.

I wish that every Sunday I would remind myself that I'm preaching to angels, that there are an innumerable company of angels that meets here with us. You say, "Where do we have that in the Bible?"

It's in the writings of Paul. One of the most difficult verses in Paul's writing is 1 Corinthians 11:10, having to do with women wearing head coverings. I'm not going to get into that, except to say that Paul's broader theme in the 1 Corinthians 11 is that worship should be conducted in a dignified and orderly manner, and the reason he gives is because angels are watching.

In Ephesians 3:10, he wrote that it was through the preaching that occurred in the church that the angels learned the details of God's plan to make a great missionary organization out of both Jews and Gentiles which would be called the church.

In 1 Timothy 5:21, he wrote: I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions (about the ministries of the church) without partiality. In other words, the elect angels are watching; so conduct the ministries of the church with integrity.

So we are surrounded by great armies of heavenly angels, though we cannot right now visually see into that dimension.

One of the great titles for God in the Bible is the Lord of Hosts. Sometimes in newer translations, it is rendered the Lord Almighty; but that's not a literal way of looking at the Hebrew words used. The actual Hebrew term used is Yahweh Seba'ot, (se-va-ooth') sometimes rendered in English as "Lord Sabaoth." When we sing "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," there's a line that says:

Did we in our own strength confined, our striving would be losing;

Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing.

Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus it is He;

Lord Sabaoth His name, From age to age the same,

And He must win the battle.

The best English rendering is Lord of Hosts, or Lord of the Heavenly Armies, and it focuses on the fact that God is the Commander-in-Chief of all the forces of heavens, the layers upon layers of powerful angels that literally make up the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corp, and Coast Guard of heaven.

Psalm 68:17 says, "The chariots of God are tens of thousands and thousands of thousands."

Daniel 7:9-10 says, "His throne was flaming with fire... a river of fire was flowing, coming out from before Him. Thousands upon thousands attended Him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him.

Jude 14 says: The Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of His holy ones.

Hebrews 12:22 says: "But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly."

Revelation 5:11 says, "Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They circled the throne and the living creatures and the elders."

The Bible devotes a great deal of space telling us about the reality of these endless armies of innumerable angels in the universe. There are references to angels in 34 of the 66 books of the Bible -- 17 in the Old Testament and 17 in the New Testament.

The word angel is used 108 times in the Old Testament and 165 times in the New Testament. The Bible teaches that one of the primary duties of angels is to attend to our needs. Hebrews 1:14 tells us that angels are ministering spirits sent to serve those who inherit salvation; and so we surely underestimate the role they play in our own lives.

Psalm 91:11 says, "For (God) will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways."

Psalm 34:7 says, "The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them."

Isn't that exactly what happened to Elisha? And the same thing is true for us, even though we don't always recognize it.

In reading through the stories of American church history, for example, we sometimes come across stories that remind us of this incident in 2 Kings. There was a Boston pastor named Rev. H. L. Hastings, who was riding horseback through the mountains of New Hampshire one night. He was carrying a large sum of money on an errand. The moon was bright, and at a particular place, Hastings stopped his horse to readjust his stirrups. After fixing his saddle, he jumped on his horse, resumed his journey, and delivered the money.

Several years passed, and he was called to the bedside of a dying man who asked him if he remembered the experience of getting off the horse. Dr. Hastings did. The dying man said, "I was lying in wait for you there, and intended to kill you and take that money I knew you had; but when you got off your horse, I saw another man standing on the other side of your horse, and I was afraid to kill two men, so I did not shoot."

"Why, there was no other man with me," said Hastings.

"Yes, there was," the man insisted on his deathbed. And that illustrates two things. First, we have angelic protection; and second, we have angelic protection when we don't even know it. Hastings would never have known about this had he not attended to this dying man. He didn't even realize he was in danger, let alone that he was saved by what must have been an angel.

The Bible says: Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who inherit salvation.

If you are a child of God, you're under constant surveillance and under protective custody. But it's not the angels whom we worship, it's our Lord Jesus Christ, the Commander-in-Chief of the angels, who deserves our praise and adoration. Like the hymn that says:

All hail the power of Jesus' Name,

Let angels prostrate fall.

Or:

Jesus shines brighter, Jesus shines purer

Than all the angels heaven can boast

Or:

Crown Him the Lord of love, behold His hands and side,

Those wounds, yet visible above, in beauty glorified.

No angel in the sky can fully bear that sight,

But downward bends his burning eye at mysteries so bright.

There was an article some years ago in Christianity Today entitled "God in the Gulag," on the status of Christians who had been imprisoned for their faith in the Gulag Prison Camps during the Soviet Era. The article was by Anita Deyneka, who taught in the Institute of Slavic Studies, sponsored by the Slavic Gospel Association. She told of a Christian named Yuri, who was sentenced

for his faith. Confined to a Siberian prison, Yuri had no contact with other believers, but he prayed for the impossible, asking God to let him be with a group of believers with whom he could pray and observe the Lord's Supper.

One night shortly thereafter, Yuri was awakened from his sleep by a voice that said, "Come with me." He opened his eyes expecting to see a prison guard, but a stranger was standing before him.

He got up and followed the stranger through the door of the prison barracks and into the courtyard. The stranger led him outside the prison gates onto the road leading to the nearby village, and then the man disappeared.

Yuri hurried down the road toward the village where he discovered a brightly lit cottage, crowded with people. The sound of singing was coming from inside, and he entered the cottage to find a group of Christians having a prayer meeting. He sang, prayed with them, and partook of the Lord's Supper. Then he sensed a voice telling him to return to the prison.

Surprisingly, the guard at the first checkpoint was asleep, and at the other checkpoints, he was amazed to be waved through without comment. Soon he found himself back in his own barracks where his absence had been discovered, but his reappearance could not be explained. [Anita Deyneka, "God in the Gulag," in Christianity Today, August 9, 1985, p. 31.]

For those who read their Bibles, this sort of story isn't unusual. In the Old Testament...

Ø Hagar was comforted by an angel

Ø Abraham was visited by angels

Ø Jacob wrestled with an angel

Ø The Israelites were led by an angel through the desert

Ø Gideon was instructed by an angel

Ø David was disciplined by an angel

Ø The armies of Assyria were destroyed by an angel

Ø Elijah was fed by an angel

Ø Zechariah tells us that angels patrol the earth like secret agents from heaven

In the Gospels...

Ø Angels announced our Lord's birth to Mary, to Joseph, and to the shepherds

Ø Angels comforted Jesus when He was tempted by Satan in the wilderness

Ø Angels strengthened Him in the Garden of Gethsemane during His suffering

Ø Angels gathered in hushed amazement before the cross and waited should He have beckoned them to rescue Him.

Ø Angels announced His resurrection

Ø Angels dressed in white reminded the disciples at our Lord's ascension of His Second Coming

Elsewhere in the New Testament...

Ø Angels opened prison doors to free the disciples

Ø An angel directed Philip to a new place of ministry

Ø An angel directed Cornelius to send for Peter as the Gospel was given to the Gentiles

Ø The apostle Paul was strengthened by an angel during a turbulent storm at sea

Ø We learn in the book of Revelation that the angels of God congregate in vast multitudes around the throne of God for endless praise and worship and will accompany Him when He returns.

Charles Spurgeon said, "I do not know how to explain it; I can not tell how it is; but I believe angels have a great deal to do with the business of this world." [Charles Haddon Spurgeon in Spurgeon's Sermons, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1983), p. 191.]

A number of years ago, the chairperson of our Global Outreach Committee was Bethany Daily, who grew up on the mission field. She and her family have now moved to Florida, but before she left she sent me a letter with a personal story. A friend of hers, a missionary physician in New Guinea, wrote: "As a doctor and missionary in New Guinea, I lived in an area that I was required to travel two days by bike to purchase supplies and medicine. One those journeys I would spend one of the nights sleeping in the jungle along the way. One of the times I was going to buy supplies I saw a couple of men beating up a young man. I stopped and gave medical treatment to the injured party. I then went on and purchased my supplies and returned home. The next time I traveled to the town on a buying mission, I was stopped by one of the men who was involved in the beating of the young man I helped. He informed me that he and his friends knew that I carried money and drugs so they followed me into the jungle with the purpose of robbing and killing me. As they approached my campsite they said that I was asleep but I was surrounded by 26 armed guards. I assured him that I was very much alone that evening, but did have the opportunity to lead him to the Lord. As I returned to the States for furlough, I was sharing this story with a church. During the middle of the story a gentleman jumped up and asked me what date that would have been. I gave him the date. He stated that he had been on the golf course that day and was overcome by the desire to pray for me and my protection. He called some men of the church and they met at the church and started to pray for me. He asked all the men that came that day to stand up. Twenty-six men stood up."

That reminds me of a story that was told to me personally. On a New Year's Day several years ago, my wife Katrina and I entertained friends, Terry and Sue Hammack, who told us an amazing story. Terry and Sue are missionaries with Sudan Interior Mission who lived on a compound in Kano, a large city in northern Nigeria. On one occasion the population of Kano erupted in dangerous rioting against Christians. Terry managed to smuggle his family to safety, but he felt compelled to stay and help "hold down the fort," particularly as his job included operating the radio equipment. For several days they were trapped in the compound, surrounded by thousands of angry Muslims. Day after day, the missionaries expected an attack, and their lives were in jeopardy.

Finally everything settled down, and the assault on the compound fizzled. Terry wondered why. As he later talked to some of his contacts in Kano, he heard the explanation. To the frenzied crowds, it appeared the compound had been ablaze. Fire shot up from the walls, and these strange flames kept the rioters at bay. Yet there had never been any fire in the compound nor on the walls.

Let me tell you one more story. This one is found at the beginning of Billy Graham's book about angels. Dr. S. W. Mitchell, a celebrated Philadelphia neurologist, had gone to bed after an exhausting day. Suddenly there was a knocking on his door. He rose from bed and found a little girl, poorly dressed and deeply upset. She told him her mother was very sick and asked him to come with her. It was a bitterly cold and snowy night, but Dr. Mitchell dressed and followed the little girl.

He found the mother desperately ill with pneumonia. After treating the woman and arranging proper medical care, he complimented the woman on the intelligence and courage of her little girl. The woman looked at him strangely and said, "My daughter died a month ago." Then she added, "Her shoes and coat are in the clothes closet there." Dr. Mitchell, amazed and perplexed, went to the closet and opened the door. There hung the very coat worn by the little girl. [Billy Graham: *Angels: God's Secret Agents* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975), pp. 2-3].

Just because we can't see angels doesn't mean they aren't there. The Bible speaks of them too frequently and too vividly to be mistaken. We're under constant surveillance and under protective custody.

### 3. We are Under Divine Clemency

(2 Kings 6:18-23)

But third, we're under divine clemency. Sometimes we're so distracted by the army of angels in this story that we forget to read the rest of what happens, but notice how graciously and kindly Elisha treats this Syrian army that has come out to arrest him.

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.

The Lord didn't slay these men. He arranged for them to be cared for, fed with a great feast, returned to their homes, and blessed with a period of peace. That's the grace of God—and that's the grace every one of us enjoys in Christ Jesus. He cares for us, opens our blinded eyes, spreads a feast before us, restores our homes, and gives us a period of peace.

Wonderful grace of Jesus,

Greater than all our sin.

How shall my tongue describe it,

Where shall my praise begin?

Taking away my sorrow,

Setting my spirit free;

And the wonderful grace of Jesus

Reaches me.

Do you know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Do you have the wonderful assurance of knowing you are under constant surveillance, protective custody, and divine clemency?

Lord Sabaoth His name,

From age to age the same,

And He must win the battle

## **THE DAY OF GOOD TIDINGS**

2 Kings 6:24-7:12

We're not doing right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves. 2 Kings 7:9

Today we're continuing our series of messages entitled Miracle Man from the life and ministry of the prophet Elisha. The story we're coming to today is quite involved, and it occupies the last half of 2 Kings 6 and all of 2 Kings 7; but it is interesting because of today's headlines. Israel had two powerful enemies in Old Testament times—Aram (Syria) and Persia (Iran). The leaders have changed, the weapons have changed, the generations have come and gone, the technology is different now—but the conflict is still the same.

The Bible teaches that the existence of the nation of Israel is the linchpin of history and the trigger mechanism for the last days. For 2000 years, the nation of Israel didn't even exist; and in our own time it has been reborn, and suddenly the tides of current events and of human history are being directed to the Middle East in a way that portends a great and coming conflict.

It's fascinating to watch these events unfold, but they aren't happening in a vacuum. There are patterns here that are thousands of years old; and in our text today the Syrian king, Ben-Hadad, had built up his military resources until he felt confident attacking the capital city of Samaria in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. So the entire Syrian army surrounded Samaria, and the siege lasted until conditions became desperate and until they moved beyond desperation. Look at 2 Kings 6:24:

Some time later, Ben-Hadad king of Aram (Syria) mobilized his entire army and marched up and laid siege to Samaria.

There was a great famine in the city; the siege lasted so long that a donkey's head sold for eighty shekels of silver, and a quarter of a cab of seed pods for five shekels.

In other words, food was so scarce that even a handful of grain cost a fortune. There was no food left, and the richest people in town would give a vast amount of money for a loaf of bread.

And now there appears one of the most disturbing scenes in the entire Old Testament. This may be the single most repulsive and disturbing scene in all the Bible. It involves some of the most horrible thoughts and taboos in human experience, and it is repulsive and offensive even to read; but it's here in the Bible, and it reflects the reality of those days. So let me simply read it without comment, beginning with verse 26ff.:

As the king of Israel was passing by on the wall, a woman cried to him, "Help me, my lord the king!" The king replied, "If the Lord does not help you, where can I get help for you? From the threshing floor? From the winepress?" Then he asked her, "What's the matter?" She answered, "This woman said to me, 'Give up your son so we may eat him today, and tomorrow we'll eat my son.' So we cooked my son and ate him. The next day I said to her, 'Give up your son so we may eat him,' but she had hidden him." When the king heard the woman's words, he tore his robes. As he went along the wall, the people looked, and there, underneath, he had sackcloth on his body. He said, "May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if the head of Elisha son of Shaphat remains on his



shoulders today!"

He was blaming Elisha for the siege of Samaria and for the famine and starvation, even though Elisha was the only one who could provide hope for the desperate city. Elisha, in fact, was trapped in the city as well, and he was teaching and preaching. Look at verses 32ff.:

Now Elisha was sitting in his house, and the elders were sitting with him. The king sent a messenger ahead, but before he arrived, Elisha said to the elders, "Don't you see how this murderer is sending someone to cut off my head? Look, when the messenger comes, shut the door and hold it shut against him. Is not the sound of his master's footsteps behind him?"

While he was still talking to them, the messenger came down to him. And the king said, "This disaster is from the Lord. Why should I wait for the Lord any longer?"

Elisha said, "Hear the word of the Lord. This is what the Lord says: About this time tomorrow, a seah of flour will sell for a shekel and two seahs of barley for a shekel at the gate of Samaria."

In other words, right now a loaf of bread costs fifty dollars, but tomorrow you'll be able to buy it for fifty cents. Right now, food is scarce, but by this time tomorrow the siege will be lifted and food will be abundant.

The officer on whose arm the king was leaning said to the man of God, "Look, even if the Lord should open the floodgates of the heavens, could this happen?"

This officer was mocking, spurning, and rejecting the message.

Elisha replied, "You will see it with your own eyes, but you will not eat any of it."

Now the scene changes. Outside the city of Samaria, trapped in no-man's land, caught between the Syrians and Samaria, there were four lepers. Outcasts. Rejects from society. Terminally ill. They, too, were hungry; but they devised a plan. Look at 2 Kings 7:3ff.:

Now there were four men with leprosy at the entrance of the city gate. They said to each other, "Why stay here until we die? If we say, 'We'll go into the city'—the famine is there, and we will die. And if we stay here, we will die. So let's go over to the camp of the Arameans and surrender. If they spare us, we live; if they kill us, then we die."

At dusk they got up and went to the camp of the Arameans (Syrians). When they reached the edge of the camp not a man was there, for the Lord has caused the Arameans to hear the sounds of chariots and horses and a great army, so that they said to one another, "Look, the king of Israel has hired the Hittite and Egyptian kings to attack us!" So they got up and fled in the dusk and abandoned their tents and their horses and donkeys. They left the camp as it was and ran for their lives.

Here was a miracle of noise. God routed an entire army with sound effects. How creative our God is. Think of the many different ways in which He accomplishes His purposes. With the Assyrians, He sent an angel to slay thousands of them. With the Philistines, He used a shepherd boy with a sling shot. With the Midianites, He used Gideon's band of 300 with their torches and pitchers. With the Egyptians, He used the Red Sea. But here He used a unique miracle of sound effects and made the Syrian army to suddenly hear the noises of massive troop movements coming in their directions. They heard the sound of the horses neighing. They heard the sound of the chariots rumbling. They heard the sound of the soldiers shouting. They heard the sound of the trumpets giving the battle cry. They heard the sound of sword clashing against sword. It was loud and sudden and immediate—and in a sheer panic, the entire army ran for its life, leaving behind their camp and all their provisions.

God uses an infinite number of ways to resolve our problems. If you and another person have exactly the same problem, God will probably use two totally different methods of resolving them. If two churches are growing and making progress, He's probably using two totally different methods in accomplishing it.

We see the same thing when we observe the variety of ways in which Jesus healed the blind and the lame in His day, in the Gospels. Sometimes He spoke a word. Sometimes He touched. Sometimes He sent the person somewhere. Sometimes He spit on the ground, made some mud with His spittle, and dabbed it on the person's eyes.

There's no telling what God is going to do in your life. There's no telling how He's going to resolve that problem when you bring it to Him. There's no predicting how He's going to cause His church to grow. He is a God who does things differently every time.

Now look at what happened—2 Kings 7:8ff.:

The men who had leprosy reached the edge of the camp and entered one of the tents. They ate and drank, and carried away silver, gold, and clothes, and went off and hid them. They returned and entered another tent and took some things from it and hid them

also.

But now we come to the crux of the story, in verse 9: Then they said to each other, “We’re not doing right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves. If we wait until daylight, punishment will overtake us. Let’s go at once and report this to the royal palace.”

It’s virtually impossible to read that without jumping right to the Great Commission, to New Testament truth, and to our obligations about the Gospel. The whole world is under siege, and conditions are desperate. People are dying. Men and women and children are perishing. But the enemy has been routed, and some of us have discovered the secret. This is a day of Good News—and we are not doing right if we keep it to ourselves.

So they went and called out to the city gatekeepers and told them, “We went to the Aramean camp and not a man was there—not a sound of anyone—only tethered horses and donkeys, and the tents left just as they were.”

These men were not world-famous evangelists. They were not trained theologians. They were not gifted orators. They were not educated students of the Torah. They were outcasts and lepers, but they had discovered a secret; and they had enough sense and gumption to tell someone about it.

The gatekeepers shouted the news, and it was reported within the palace. The king got up in the night and said to his officers, “I will tell you what the Arameans have done to us.

He thought it was a ploy; subterfuge. So he sent a small contingent of soldiers who confirmed the story. It was true! The enemy had vanished, as it were, into thin air; the siege was lifted, the famine ended abruptly, the nightmare was over; there was food in abundance, and the people were saved—all because the Lord accomplished a miracle of salvation and a handful of lepers shared the Good News.

I think it takes two factors to effectively share your faith. The first is initiative; we have to make up our minds to do it. The second is intuition, and by intuition I mean the intuitive prompting of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes I just don’t feel at all free to share my faith with someone, and other times it comes out of my mouth as though it were predestined to do so. So I have to take the initiative and I have to be sensitive to the direction of the Spirit.

Let me give you an example. Back in April, I took a trip to France and, while there, met an old acquaintance for lunch. At the table was a man who was unsaved, and I felt burdened and concerned. All through the meal, I wondered if I should say something for the Lord. I didn’t have in mind to preach a sermon or to give a formal explanation of the plan of salvation, for it didn’t seem like the right time to do that. But I did want to somehow plant a seed. But I didn’t say a word and gave up too easily on trying to insert the Gospel into the conversation. We finished the meal, walked out onto the street, and went our separate ways; and I’ll probably never see that unsaved man again in my life. I’m not sure I could have led him to the Lord that day, but I did want to plant a Gospel-seed in his mind; but I didn’t.

I felt very badly about it afterward, and I prayed about it. I said, “Lord, give me another chance to share a word for You.”

The next morning, I woke up early, dressed, and walked down the street to the little café on the corner for breakfast. It was Saturday, and I had not realized that on Saturday the café opens an hour later, so I decided to wait. But another man was there, also waiting. He had a suitcase with him, and he wanted to have breakfast before leaving France to return to Africa. He was from Burkina Faso, from the capital of Ouagadougou. Only the two of us were there, in the doorway, and it was spitting rain just a little. His name was Pierre.

As we stood together, we began to talk. His English was poor, and my French is worse; but we kept working on it. I learned that he was born in Lebanon, but is now the owner and CEO of an export/import business in Ouagadougou that deals specifically with tires and rubber products. When I told him I was a pastor in America, he was intrigued by that and asked about it. I was able to begin explaining the Gospel and to my great surprise, when we finally went into the café, he wanted to continue our discussion. In fact, he went to the counter, ordered breakfast for both of us, paid for it, and found a table where we would have privacy to talk. He opened up and told me some of his troubles. His father had been killed several years ago in the violence in Beirut, and his wife’s parents had both been killed in a plane crash on Christmas Day several years ago. The crash was evidently an act of Lebanese terror. The man, his wife, and two small children had moved to Africa.

Pulling a little New Testament from my pocket, I turned to John 3:16 and explained that verse as well as I could. Because of our language barriers, it took several attempts at every point. Pierre had a lot of questions about life and about Christ, and I spent a solid hour with him, going over the Gospel again and again in the simplest terms possible. As we finished breakfast and rose to leave, he had one final question. He said, “If what you are saying is right and the Bible is true and Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world—that is important information. How is God going to let everyone know about it?”

I said, "Well, sometimes He arranges for people to meet in a French café for breakfast."

For a moment Pierre looked surprised, then a warm smile spread over his face; and I've since sent him French-speaking Bibles and evangelistic materials. I believe this man and his family will come to Christ, and I fully believe my meeting him was no accident. It was arranged by the providence of God in answer to my prayer.

Ø Jesus said: You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden... Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your father who is in heaven.

Ø Paul said: I planted, Apollo watered, but God caused the growth.

Ø Peter said: But sanctify the Lord Jesus in your hearts and always be ready to answer everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is within you.

Ø The Lord said: Go into all the world and preach the Gospel.

Ø In Acts 1, He said, You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you shall be my witnesses.

Ø Follow Me, said Jesus, And I will make you to become fishers of men.

Let me give you five simple rules for being a good witness.

1. Pray about it. In France that day, I specifically asked God to give me another chance and to open a door for me to share. If you're nervous about witnessing, tell God. If you're afraid, tell Him. If you feel you've failed at it, tell Him. If you're not interested in doing it but know you should, tell Him. Pray for open doors.

2. Be excited about being a Christian. These four lepers in 2 Kings were effective witnesses because they were so very excited themselves. One moment they were starving, homeless, desperate men; the next moment they had discovered an entire army camp with the tents still standing, the food still on the fire, the horses still tethered to the hitching posts, the money and clothing and supplies stashed away; it was like finding the cave of Aladdin. It was so exciting they could not possibly have kept quiet. It reminds me of the old story about the two prospectors who discovered a vein of gold in the California Mountains. After making the discovery they make a pact with each other to say nothing of their discovery to any other human being. It was imperative they keep the news from getting out. But they had to go to town for supplies, and when they returned to their camp, the whole town was following them. They said, "How did you know? We didn't breathe a word of it." But someone said, "No, but we saw it on your faces and in your eyes." We've discovered life abundant and life eternal—and people need to see it on our faces and in our eyes. We should be too excited to keep quiet.

3. Memorize an evangelistic verse. Have a plan, even if it's as simple as quoting John 3:16. We teach a more extensive plan for winning people to Christ during our FAITH studies, and sometimes I just like using the old tried-and-true Romans Road. But you can lead someone to Christ with just one verse, such as John 3:16 or Romans 6:23.

4. Do your best and leave the rest to God. Most of the time when we witness we're sowing seed. We may or may not see the results, but the Lord promises that our labor is not in vain in the Lord.

5. Invite people to church. The easiest and simplest way in the world to be a witness is to invite someone to church. Just look for the right person to invite on the right occasion. If we invite enough people, some will come; and if they come, some will be saved in God's timing.

I read the other day about a missionary couple in an Asian country who was discouraged by the sheer numbers of unsaved people. They looked at themselves and their little apartment and their feeble efforts, and they seemed so small and unknown compared to the masses of people around them. The couple was also frustrated because in this particular city, the electrical supply was uncertain. They never knew when the power would go out, as it usually did several times during the week.

One night when the power went out, the husband stepped onto the balcony into the pitch darkness. There was no house lights, no streetlights, no lights from cars or motorcycles. It was a total blackout. Nothing but darkness. They faced a hill some distance away, which was peppered with houses.

As they peered into the darkness, one candle was lit across the way, and they saw its small light shine. Then two more were lit, then five more, then twenty more. At an increasing rate, the hill became illumined with small lights.

That's the way we're doing it, too, the couple realized. They had won a small handful of people into whom they were pouring their lives. Those few were, in turn, winning others, and the candles were coming on, one and two at a time. And the light was spreading.

Philippians 2 tells us that we should do everything with complaining or arguing so that we might be blameless and spotless, children

of God without fault in a crooked and depraved world, among whom we shine like stars in the universe.

This is a day of Good News! We must not keep it to ourselves

## **NOT A CHANCE! COINCIDENCES OR DIVINE APPOINTMENT?**

2 Kings 8:1-6

We're nearing the end of our series of sermons entitled Miracle Man on the life and ministry of the prophet Elisha. Next Sunday will be our final message on this subject; and looking back on the material we've covered, it seems to me that the theme of this series is about everyday miracles.

The record of Elisha is simply a series of stories about the miracles he performed. We don't have many of his sermons recorded for us—none of them in fact. We have a few words of utterance from him; but for the most part the record of Elisha in the Bible is the story of his signs and wonders; and those miracles, by and large, were quiet, quaint little miracles. Lovely little practical miracles. Everyday miracles—like a widow's little pot of oil, a cook's poisonous kettle of soup, and a worker's axe head that fell into the river.

One of the lessons we can learn is that for God's children, our lives are tinged by the powerful miracle-working hand of the Lord. All who are in Christ Jesus experience a scattering of miracles around our lives—and this includes a category of miracles that we sometimes call coincidences.

Do you know what a coincidence is? Here's one definition from the dictionary: A sequence of events that although accidental seems to have been planned or arranged.

For the Christian, we have a definite theology about it. We don't believe that these events are accidental at all. They are, in fact, planned and arranged in advance by the hidden hand of God's personal providence. There is not a better example in all the Bible than the story we're coming to today in our study of Elisha; but to really understand it we need to go back and review just a little from a few Sundays ago. So would you turn with me to 2 Kings 4:8.

One day Elisha went to Shunam. And a well-to-do woman was there, who urged him to stay for a meal. So whenever he came by, he stopped there to eat. She said to her husband, "I know that this man who often comes our way is a holy man of God. Let's make a small room on the roof and put in it a bed and a table, a chair and a lamp for him. Then he can stay there whenever he comes."

And so they built a little guest room for Elisha's use. Now, the story goes on to say that this couple was infertile and had no children; and so Elisha prayed for them and announced that God would give them a child, a son, a little boy. A year later, that little boy was born and he lit up their lives like a Roman candle. But one day when he was, perhaps five or six years old, he was out in the field and he cried out, "My head! My head!" He collapsed and died.

The Shunammite woman saddled up her donkey and went to Mount Carmel where Elisha was, and she begged him to come help her. Elisha returned with her, took the dead boy into the upstairs guest room, stretched out over the body, and prayed with great anguish and earnestness. And the boy's body grew warm and he suddenly sneezed seven times and was restored to life.

All of that is in 2 Kings 4, and we studied that passage a few weeks ago. But now in today's sermon, several chapters have passed and several years have passed, and suddenly this Shunammite woman shows up again. She makes an encore appearance in the Bible. And this is the passage we're coming to today; this is our subject. It's found in 2 Kings, chapter 8:

Now Elisha had said to the woman whose son he had restored to life, "Go away with your family and stay for a while wherever you can, because the Lord has decreed a famine in the land that will last seven years." The woman proceeded to do as the man of God said. She and her family went away and stayed in the land of the Philistines seven years.

At the end of the seven years she came back from the land of the Philistines and went to the king to beg for her house and land. The king was talking to Gehazi, the servant of the man of God, and had said, "Tell me all about the great things Elisha has done." Just as Gehazi was telling the king how Elisha had restored the dead to life, the woman whose son Elisha had brought back to life came to beg the king for her house and land.

Gehazi said, "This is the woman, my lord the king, and this is her son whom Elisha restored to life." The king asked the woman about it, and she told him. Then he assigned an official to her case and said to him, "Give back everything that belonged to her, including all the income from her land from the day she left the country until now."

Here is one of Elisha's simplest miracles. It's so simple that we question whether it's even a miracle at all; and technically it isn't, but practically it is. It's the miracle of coincidence. A coincidence, remember, is a sequence of events that although accidental seems to have been planned or arranged.

Here's what happened. Elisha had warned this woman and her family to move away for a period of time because a devastating

famine was going to ravage their region. The woman moved away for seven years; and when they returned their property had fallen into the hands of others and only the king could restore it.

But the king of Israel wasn't known for being a fair and godly and benevolent man. I can imagine it was a stressful thing for this woman to come before his presence. She had been defrauded, but would the king of Israel even care? She must have spent hours gathering her documents and preparing her arguments, but the result was in jeopardy. But at length, she stuffed everything into her briefcase, rehearsed her presentation one last time, prayed to the Lord, and set off for the palace. It must have been nerve-wracking for her.

Just imagine how you would feel if someone had stolen your identity, was living in your house, was spending your money, and harvesting your crops. And the only person who could help you was a crooked politician.

But when she got to the palace and went in to see the king, imagine her surprise to discover that she walked into the room at the very moment when the king was talking about her with Elisha's old servant, Gehazi. The servant was telling the king about Elisha's unusual ministry and all his miracles; and just as he related the story of the Shunammite woman, in she walked with her son—as if on cue. "Look, here she is right now," said Gehazi. "This is the woman. And this is the young man who was raised from the dead. Look, he can tell you about the experience himself."

And as a result of that remarkable timing—that coincidence—the king instantly assigned a palace official to make sure that all the woman's property was restored to her, along with all the income from the past seven years. God orchestrated the events with impeccable timing so that the circumstances turned for good in the woman's life.

Now, why did God include this story in the Bible? It wasn't a spectacular miracle. It didn't contain a prophecy, prediction, or sermon. The prophet Elisha wasn't even present in the story. Why does the Bible devote six precious verses to this incident?

It's to show us that miracles occur every day for God's people under the guise of coincidence. Behind this little story is an enormous doctrine which I'd like to call the doctrine of personal providence, which is this: God in His grace orchestrates apparently random incidents and events in our lives into a series of everyday miracles which, taken together, fulfill for us His preplanned and precious will.

I've never seen this as clearly as when I read an editorial written some years ago by A. W. Tozer. I've quoted it many times, but I want to do so again today because it speaks to this very issue:

To the child of God, there is no such thing as an accident. He travels an appointed way. The path he treads was chosen for him when as yet he was not, when as yet he had existence only in the mind of God.

Accidents may indeed appear to befall him and misfortune stalk his way; but these evils will be so in appearance only and will seem evils only because we cannot read the secret script of God's hidden providence and so cannot discover the ends at which He aims.

When true faith enters, chance and mischance go out for good. They have no jurisdiction over them that are born of the Spirit.... The man of true faith may live in the absolute assurance that his steps are ordered by the Lord. [A. W. Tozer, *We Travel an Appointed Way* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications 1988), pp. 3-4].

I could devote the rest of today's message by telling you how this has been born out in my own life. So many unlikely events have happened to me, and all of them have been arranged by God as representative of His will for my life. But my story isn't unique in this. All of us who are followers of Jesus Christ can say the same; and we see the same truth at work in one another.

Last year, for example, Reader's Digest told the story of Jerry and Jennifer Sneed, who suffered a life-shattering tragedy during the Christmas holidays. They live in eastern North Carolina where it seldom snowed; but on this particular evening, the roads were slick and as the family returned from the grocery store, a car careened across the center line of US 264 and slammed head-on into their Ford Explorer. The entire family was rushed to the hospital with various injuries, but it was little Derek, their blond and blue-eyed five-year-old, who didn't survive the crash. The anguish was so great that there were times when Jerry and Jennifer didn't think they would emotionally survive.

And then, Jennifer became pregnant again. Everything went well until the holiday period, almost exactly one year after the accident. Jennifer, whose due date was still three weeks away, woke up with full-blown labor pains, and her contractions were two minutes apart.

Another freak snowstorm had hit Greenville, and the snow was coming down hard. The Sneeds piled into their Ford Expedition at 1:15 with visibility at nearly zero. When they got to US 264, the snow was coming down so hard and the road was so slick that Jerry stopped the car in the middle of the road and called 911. The operator urged him to keep driving, but there was no time. The baby was coming.

Dropping the phone, Jerry raced around to the passenger side and within seconds the baby began coming into the world. Then another complication arose. The umbilical cord was wrapped around her neck. Somehow Jerry managed to untangle it and there, on the same road near the same spot where the accident had occurred on year before, little Madison was born, during a snowstorm on US 264. And suddenly they heard the sound of an ambulance siren. Ordinarily it would have taken a good half-hour to get an ambulance there, but they emergency crew had been out on a call that had been cancelled and were only three minutes away.

"There were a lot of miracles that night," Jennifer said later, "And I felt that DJ, looking down, had a hand in them all." ["Looking Down" by Gail Cameron Wescott, in Reader's Digest, December 2005].

The old Bible commentator, Matthew Henry, wrote: "There is a God who governs the world, so that things do not come to pass by chance, no, not the smallest event, but all by Divine direction." { Henry, M., & Scott, T. (1997). Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary (Ac 28:1). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems.]

Oswald Chambers said: "The things that happen do not happen by chance, they happen entirely in the decree of God. God is working out His purposes. [Chambers, O. (1993, c1935). My Utmost for His Highest : Selections for the Year (August 5).Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers.]

I'd like to show you some other examples and verses in the Bible that spotlight this same truth regarding the personal providence of God.

In the book of Genesis, the patriarch Abraham sent his servant to Mesopotamia to find a bride for his son, Isaac. The servant arrived in a Mesopotamian town with his caravan of camels, and at the village well he prayed a very specific prayer, asking God to lead him to just the women appointed to be Isaac's wife. At that very moment—the Bible says "before he had finished praying"—Rebekah arrived at the well with her water jar to draw the water for her household. She had no idea when she went to the water jar in her house and found it empty and when she hoisted it up and started off for the well that she was moments away from a Divine Appointment. But the unseen hand of God was there, manipulating the circumstances, working behind the scenes, bringing about His perfect will.

Or do you remember in the book of Ruth when Ruth returned to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law, Naomi? One morning when they were short on food she decided to go outside of town to the harvest fields and glean among the sheaves. It was the custom of the day that when the harvesters gathered in the grain, they would leave some along the edges for the poor people and the destitute. Ruth and Naomi were nearly destitute, and Ruth went out to do that; and the Bible says she happened to choose the field of a man named Boaz, and that Boaz happened to show up at about the same time, and that he noticed her, and the rest is history—one of the sweetest love stories in the Bible. From their union came the Messianic line.

Or do you remember when a man named Kish went out to the corral and discovered that four of his donkeys had gotten out. He called his son, a tall young man named Kish, and sent him after the donkeys. That set up an unlikely chain of circumstances that led to Saul's becoming the first king of Israel.

Or we could go to the book of Esther. On the very night when the evil Haman was plotting the murder of Mordecai, the might emperor of the Persian Empire suffered a bad case of insomnia. He called for an attendant who went into the royal achieves and selected a scroll to read. He randomly read to the king an account of the exploits of Mordecai, who had previously happened to overhear an assassination plot against the emperor. Learning afresh of the story, King Xerxes said, "What have we done to thank Mordecai?" The next morning, when Haman walked into the palace to arrange for Mordecai's death, the king said, "Haman, what should be done for the man the king wants to honor?" Haman thought to himself, "He's talking about me!" And he said, "Well, hold a grand parade in his honor and do this and that." The king said, "Yes, that's a good idea—let's honor Mordecai like that!" And what happened was that Haman was hanged on the very gallows he had built for Mordecai. Mordecai became the Prime Minister of Persia. And the Jewish people were saved from annihilation, all because the king of Persia had a sleepless night.

The Bible is full of these stories, and so are our lives. John Calvin, in his famous Institutes, wrote:

For we know certainly: 1) That God takes care of the whole human race, but especially of His Church. 2) That God governs all things by His will, and regulates them by His wisdom. 3) That He has most abundant power of doing good; for in His hand are heaven and earth, all creatures are subject to His sway, the godly rest on His protection, and the power of hell is restrained by His authority. That nothing happens by chance, though the causes may be concealed, but by the will of God; by his secret will which we are unable to explore, but adore with reverence. [Calvin, J., & Beveridge, H. (1997). Institutes of the Christian religion. Translation of: Institutio Christianae Religionis.; Reprint, with new introduction. Originally published: Edinburgh : Calvin Translation Society, 1845-1846. (i). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.]

We have a lot of men and women in our congregation who are connected with the Gideons International, a ministry that distributes one million copies of the Scriptures somewhere in the world every six days. Do you know how the Gideon's began? It was a

coincidence.

On a fall evening of 1898, a man named John Nicholson arrived in a hotel in Wisconsin about nine o'clock, needing a room. Every room was taken, but in those days sometimes people shared rooms; and the clerk asked Mr. Nicholson if he would mind sharing Room 19 with a stranger named Samuel Hill.

Nicholson agreed, he was taken to the room, and he crawled into his bed. Then he opened his Bible. The man in the other bed, Samuel Hill, awoke and looked over at the stranger. Nicholson apologized and asked if he could keep the light on just a little longer because that at age 19, he had promised his dying mother he would read the Bible every night.

Hill replied, "Read it aloud. I'm a Christian, too." Nicholson read John 15 and the two knelt for prayer. Then they stayed up till 2 a.m. discussing the needs of traveling Christians. And out of that "chance" meeting was eventually born this worldwide ministry. Who can doubt the Unseen Hand in those circumstances? The hotel full. Only one bed remaining.

There are some words that just are not found in God's dictionary, words like accident, chance, oops, and coincidence. He orders and ordains the events of our lives. I like the little poem by Anna Waring that says:

I love to think that God appoints

My portion day by day.

Events of life are in His hand,

And I can only say,

"Appoint them in Thine own good time,

and in Thine own best way."

The Psalmist said, "Our times are in His hands." The Bible teaches that the steps of God's people are ordered of the Lord. Jesus said that the hairs of our heads are all numbered. Think of that! God is more concerned about us than we are concerned about ourselves, more concerned about us than a mother or father is about his or her child. Experts tell us that the average person has over 100,000 hairs growing on their head. But who among us has ever cared enough to try to count every hair? What mother in all history has ever loved her child enough to count the hairs on his or her head? But God is so concerned about the details of our lives that He counts the hairs on our head. He sees every sparrow that falls, and nothing is hidden from His sight. He orders and arranges and leads and guides and works all things for good.

And our lives become a daily series of small miracles, and His care is seen in the so-called coincidences that occur every day. God in His grace orchestrates apparently random incidents and events in our lives into a series of everyday miracles which, taken together, fulfill for us His preplanned and precious will.

If thou but suffer God to guide thee

And hope in Him through all thy ways,

He'll give thee strength, whate'er betide thee,

And bear thee through the evil days.

Who trust in God's unchanging love

Builds on the rock that naught can move.

Be patient and await His leisure

In cheerful hope, with heart content

To take whatever thy Father's pleasure

And His discerning love hath sent,

Nor doubt our inmost want are known

To Him who chose us for His own