



BEHIND THE CURTAIN – 2 King 6:8-23

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Who is really in control? This is a very big issue in politics at the moment. We're becoming aware that things are not always as they seem. I suppose this is not surprising in monarchies and dictatorships but it is not what we expect in democracies! While we don't need to know all the processes involved, we do want to know who is making the decisions and what safeguards are in place to keep them accountable for those decisions. In a democracy we elect representatives who we trust to work for the greater good and we want to see them working on our behalf.

The event that we are looking at today is about who is really in control. It comes in the middle of the period of Jewish history called the Divided Kingdom. After Saul united all the tribes together into the nation of Israel, David and Solomon consolidated this kingdom by protecting their borders, building the temple in Jerusalem and establishing good governance. However, this unity and peace didn't last long. Solomon's son was harsh in his taxation and the northern tribes broke away and formed their own nation. The northern kingdom kept the name of Israel, and the southern kingdom was called Judah after its predominant tribe. Both nations were constantly under attack from the surrounding nations. In our passage today, the problem was the nation of Aram. It is to the north east of Israel in what is known today as Syria.

David's line continued to rule Judah from Jerusalem. Some of these kings followed God and some did not, but the presence of the temple and the priests in Jerusalem ensured that the worship of God never completely disappeared. Things were not so positive in Israel. They set up their own capital in Samaria and their own centres of worship and these were soon corrupted with the worship of foreign gods. The kings were regularly overthrown and none of them followed God. Whereas in the south, kings were identified as good or bad, in the north it was matter of bad, worse and worst.

Just before our story, Israel had been ruled by one of their worst kings, King Ahab, who along with his foreign queen, Jezebel, accelerated the growth of idol worship and actively opposed and killed those who worshipped *YAHWEH* (the name of God translated as LORD in English). Meanwhile, Judah was being ruled by one of their good kings – King Jehoshaphat. Although the southern and northern kingdoms were often at war with each other, at this time, there was an alliance between them as they fought common enemies. However, this was not a good thing as Ahab and Jezebel were a bad influence on Jehoshaphat. When their daughter married his son, she pulled him away from the worship of God as well.

Both nations were in danger of being completely corrupted by this evil and idolatrous influence and God needed to step in and remind the kings and the people that they were still His people. He did

this primarily through the two prophets, Elijah and Elisha. Their exploits were “bigger than life” as God showed His power over the false gods and the might of the kings. You probably remember some of these stories from Sunday School – the showdown on Mt Carmel when fire came down from heaven, Elijah being carried up into heaven in a whirlwind, the healing of Naaman, and even bringing people back to life again. These were some of my favourite stories as a child!

By the time we come to our story today, Ahab and Jezebel had been killed, but their immediate descendants were ruling Israel and following in their footsteps, rejecting God and worshipping idols. But God will once again show His power through Elisha. It is interesting to notice that the kings involved are not named – they are just called the king of Aram and the king of Israel. In surrounding accounts, the kings are named. I wonder if the author, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, did this deliberately to cast them as minor characters and to put the spotlight on the one person who is named–Elisha. He is the central character around whom the story unfolds. It is a drama in three acts – moving from Aram, to Elisha’s home, to Samaria. As we work our way through the story, we’ll be looking particularly at what each character does, noticing the verbs, or action words, which are related to them.

Act One: Two Kings and Elisha

The first act introduces us to the two kings who are warring with each other – the king of Israel and the king of Aram. We see the king of Aram conferring with his officers and deciding where to set up camp. (v. 8) Later, when his plans are thwarted, he is enraged and demands to know who is revealing his secret plans (v.11) and sends soldiers to capture Elisha. (v.14) In response, we see the king of Israel checking Elisha’s reports and guarding against the plans of the king of Aram. (v.10) They are acting in very decisive and authoritative ways. They are doing exactly what you would expect kings to do!

But who is really in control here? Who knows everything which is happening and is therefore able to influence the events? Elisha is the one who knows what is going on behind closed doors. Or to use the idiom of the time, “the very words spoken in the king’s bedroom”. (v. 12) Even though the king of Israel is not following God, he is willing to listen to the warnings of God’s prophet and Elisha becomes his secret advantage. The king of Aram also recognises the importance of Elisha and determines he must be captured (maybe with the goal of turning him to work for Aram?) and sends out “horses and chariots and a strong force”. Such a strong force to catch just one man? It seems like the king of Aram is beginning to feel a bit uncertain about his power and control and is over-compensating.

Act Two: A Servant, Two Armies and Elisha

The action now moves to Elisha’s place. Elisha’s servant gets up early to prepare for the day. Notice again that the servant is not given a name even though he is named in other stories. As the servant rubs the sleep from his eyes, what he sees are the horses and chariots of the king of Aram. “Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?” he exclaims. (v.15) He is justifiably fearful. Elisha doesn’t berate him, but he does know that his servant isn’t seeing the whole picture. He knows that “those who are with us are more than those who are with them” and he prays to God, asking God to open his servant’s eyes so that he can see that they are surrounded by horses and chariots of fire. They are being protected by the supernatural army of God. (v.16,17)

There are a couple of things I notice as I read this. Firstly, Elisha doesn’t ask God to change anything in the situation. Instead, he asks that his servant’s eyes would be open to see what God is already doing. How often our first response is to cry out to God to change things; to fix things the way we think they need fixing! But God is already on the job and He knows the very best way for things to be solved. The problem isn’t with His actions it is with our vision.

Secondly, God isn't just equal to whatever we are facing, He is bigger and stronger and more capable than anything which comes against us. If you had to choose between a visible army of earthly soldiers or an invisible army of fiery, heavenly soldiers, which would you choose to protect you?

Act Three: An Army, a King and Elisha

But what is going to happen to the army sent by the king of Aram? Does the heavenly army trample them underfoot and burn them up? No, that isn't necessary. It was helpful for Elisha's servant to see them and know that they were there, but they were a protective force, not an attacking one. No, Elisha has a better plan. He didn't just want to protect himself, he wants to teach BOTH kings a lesson they wouldn't forget in a hurry.

Elisha prays again and asks God to strike the army of Aram with blindness. The word used seems to refer to being bedazzled by a bright light. Maybe God revealed his flaming army to them for just a moment and the sight was so overwhelming that they were left dazed and blinded. Whatever happened, they become totally docile and are willing to be led with no resistance. In fact, the army doesn't actually do anything. First, they are blinded and led. Then they are captured, fed and released. All the verbs are things which are done to them, not that they do. So much for the king of Aram's "strong force"!

And then there is the king of Israel. He has done nothing to win this contest, but he jumps in eager to claim the trophy. "Shall I kill them, my father? Shall I kill them?" (v. 21) As I read this all I can think of is young children on Christmas morning bouncing up and down on their parent's bed at 5 am saying "Can we open the presents now? Can we? Please, please, can we?" (Not that I ever did such a thing when I was young!) Elisha responds with a question: "Would you kill those you have captured with your own sword or bow?". The probable answer is no, they would usually become slaves. But that question is a not-so-subtle reminder to the king that he had actually done nothing to capture these soldiers. They were not his trophies of war to dispose of as he chose.

Elisha chooses to preserve the lives of the soldiers by directing that they be fed and set free. I think this was a very clever action of Elisha. If the soldiers had just been killed, it would have only escalated the conflict. By treating them well and setting them free, he is ensuring that news of all that had happened was taken back to the king of Aram as a warning to leave Israel alone. We read that it did keep them away—at least for a while.

Behind the Curtain: YAHWEH

Elisha stands out in as the hero of this account. An unarmed old man defeated the power of a mighty king and his army – and stopped a weak king from escalating the conflict. He helps both sides and stands against both sides. But that is not the end of the story. How is Elisha described? A prophet – yes. Father – yes. But most importantly, Elisha is the "man of God". He was not acting on his own, he was an agent of another—YAHWEH.

We've shone the spotlight on all the different characters in this drama, but they are all just the ones acting in front of the curtain. Behind the curtain is the real hero of the story, the one who really won in this conflict—YAHWEH, the God of Israel. YAHWEH was the one who knew the secret plans of the king of Aram and made sure that Israel was protected. YAHWEH was the one who opened eyes—and closed them. YAHWEH was the one who guided Elisha's actions to the best possible conclusions. The author of this account wants to pull back the curtain from what is merely visible to the human eye and give us heavenly vision so that we will understand that YAHWEH was the one in control all along. This story isn't really about the kings or the servant or the armies, or even Elisha. This story is about YAHWEH, the God of Heaven's Armies, and His protection of His own and control over all that happens.

“Open my eyes, YAHWEH, so that I may see.”

I wonder, with which character in this account do you identify at the moment? Are you like the kings, proud and determined to be in control and take credit for the victory? Are you afraid like the servant as you look at the circumstances which you face and see no positive way forward? Are you just plain confused like the blinded soldiers who didn't know where they were or what they were doing? I'll admit I've felt all those things at different times. I don't like not being in control. I don't like not knowing what will happen next. I like to take credit for when I do something well. But when I have turned to God in my pride or fear or confusion, I've found one prayer that brings a solution in all those situations. It is the prayer which Elisha prayed twice for others and which I can personalise for myself: “Open my eyes, YAHWEH, so that I may see”. (v.17,20)

Only YAHWEH can open our eyes to see the reality of what He is doing in a situation. As He opens our eyes, we see that any victories we have won are because He has won them for us – we have no basis for pride in our accomplishments. We see that He is already at work protecting us and providing a safe way forward – we don't need to be afraid. We see that He is walking with us every step of the way – we are not alone and He will bring us through a time of confusion and uncertainty.

And God does delight to pull back the curtain and give us glimpses of what He is doing on our behalf. I'd have to say that I've never seen horses and chariots of fire! But then I'm not sure how helpful that would be in the situations I find myself. Often the glimpses are very small indeed, but they are glimpses and they make all the difference in the world.

For instance, the timing of my bout of COVID. I have been very aware of the disruption that it would cause for me to get COVID. I've tried to have a Plan B in the back of my mind as I've planned services and other activities. But if I had to come down with COVID, this was the best timing ever. I had already arranged to have Graeme and Bob preach the past two Sundays so that I could spend a little extra time finishing up a paper for my class. When I tested positive, we didn't need a Plan B! You might say it was just coincidence, but for me, it was God saying “I've got this! And I've got everything else to do with the church well in hand as well! You don't need to worry.” The timing of this assurance as I begin to step into this job on a permanent basis was a deep encouragement to me.

And sometimes these glimpses have to do with seemingly inconsequential things and yet they can have a big impact. In 2005, I was offered a role with a ministry based just outside of Chicago. It was a new area for us, and we knew no one. I had to raise my own support for the role, and I had only been successful in raising enough to cover about 2 days a week. Nevertheless, we believed God wanted us there and so we made the move. It took us about 9 months for me to find another part-time job, Scott to find a job, and us to find permanent accommodation. Most of that time we lived in someone's basement. It was a wonderful provision, but hard at times to live somewhere without any windows! And money was very, very tight. We hadn't brought much with us from Australia and so we needed to get a lot of things to set up a house again. One thing we didn't have were some everyday dishes. I was thinking that we'd just go to Kmart and get some cheap ones when we finally settled, however, on a visit to an op shop one day, I came across a complete set of beautiful stoneware from a very high-end company. It had everything needed for 10 people and it only cost \$20! I was totally overwhelmed by God provision and generosity at giving me something far better than I could have ever imagined – and I wasn't even asking for it! In the coming months, when things got tough and it was hard to see how we were going to survive, let alone settle in, I would look at those dishes and hear God saying to me, “I've got this! And I've got you. Don't be afraid.” After 10 years of hard use, I went online to look for replacements for some of the dishes that had broken and discovered that one dinner plate cost \$20! We ended up getting rid of the set because we couldn't afford the replacements. But I will never forget that glimpse of God's work on our behalf.

The problem isn't that God is not at work in our lives. The problem is that we just can't see what He is doing. However, I believe that if we humbly ask Him to open our eyes, He will do so. He may not answer all our questions, but He will often give us glimpses if we are on the look-out. This week, I want to encourage you to ask Him to open your eyes to see what He is doing in you and in the circumstances of your life. He IS there and He IS at work. You probably won't see horses and chariots of fire. But I do believe He delights in pulling back the curtain just a bit to let us see what is really happening. He knows you and He knows what you need to see right now.

But don't stop there! If you see Him at work, share it with someone else. It might be just what they need to hear to help them begin to see their own situation in a different light, and to ask God to open their eyes to what He is doing. I am always excited as I hear about what God is doing in other people's lives. I find it so strengthening in my own walk with God. If nothing else, let me know what you see! I'd love to share that experience with you.