

The Bible's Most Amazing Stories: Invisible Chariots Frustrate Army
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2 Kings 6:8-23

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."

"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 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.

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.

Historical Setting

This incident between Elisha and Aram is not dated. The exact identity of the kings involved is

not important to the author. It is probably placed at this point in 2 Kings for thematic rather than chronological reasons. The author wants us to see the necessity of faith during times of trial. There are some clues, however, that can help us figure out the date of the events. Many scholars identify the kings of Israel and Aram as Joram and Ben Hadad, respectively. This would put the timing of this event between 852-841. The reign of Joram was generally a time of Israelite strength, though conditions were not uniformly stable. This may be why the Arameans raid the Israelite cities at night (T.R. Hobbs, *Word Biblical Commentary: 2 Kings*, Word Publishers, 76-77).

Geography

Dothan, where Elisha resided, was twelve miles to the north of Samaria. Dothan stands on an isolated hill in the midst of the plain; but on the eastern side it is enclosed by a range of hills, which project into the plain. The Arameans who came to kill Elisha had posted themselves on this range of hills, and they came down towards the town of Dothan, which stood on the hill, while Elisha went out of the town to meet them (as is implied by verse 19). Dothan is modern Tell Dothan situated at the southeastern edge of the Valley of Dothan, about eighteen kilometers north of Samaria (Keil & Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Hendrickson Publishers, 231; Hobbs, 77).

The Arameans

Aram (also called Syria) posed a great threat to the Northern Kingdom's security during the ninth century B.C. Two powerful kings, Ben-Hadad I (880-840 B.C.) and Hazael (840-805), led Aram to become perhaps the chief power in northeast Palestine at this time. Ben-Hadad first enters the biblical story when he breaks an alliance with Israel's King Baasha to ally himself with Judah's King Asa (1 Kings 15:9-22). Ben-Hadad's friendship was costly, since Asa was forced to strip the palace and temple of its gold and silver to purchase the Aramean's "loyalty" (15:18-19). With Judah's money in hand, Ben-Hadad gladly annexed several of Israel's cities (15:20). The Israelite King Omri took steps to ward off the Aramean threat, including marrying his son Ahab to Tyre's princess Jezebel, thus linking Israel with another anti-Aramean country (16:31). Indeed, the Aramean problem remained so serious that Israel and Judah joined together to fight Aram during the days of Ahab and Jehoshaphat (22:1-4), and Ahab died fighting this longterm foe (22:29-40).

Aram continued its dominance under Hazael. Though annoyed for a time by Assyria, Aram ravaged Israel during Jehu's reign (2 Kings 10:32-33), captured Gath of Philistia (12:17), and only spared Jerusalem because Joash paid him a large sum of money (12:18). Aram's power was finally broken after Hazael's death, when Assyria laid siege to Damascus and forced the king to pay tribute money. Assyria did not threaten Israel and Judah at this time, so those nations enjoyed a half-century of peace and prosperity (Paul House, *New American Commentary: 1 and 2 Kings*, Holman, 45).

Observations

In a war which the Arameans carried on against the Israelite king Joram, by sending raiding parties into the land of Israel, Elisha repeatedly informed King Joram of the place where the Arameans had determined to encamp, and thereby frustrated the plans of the enemy. When

the king of Israel, according to verse 10, was told where the Arameans were planning to encamp, he sent troops there; so that when the Arameans arrived they found Israelite troops there, and were unable to attack the place (Keil & Delitzsch, 229).

The spectacular sight that the servant was enabled to see was like the double army of angels encamped around Jacob (Gen 32:1-2). The Lord's promise to "encamp around those who fear him" (Psalm 34:7; see Psa. 55:18; Psa. 121) had become a visible reality to Elisha's servant. The whole episode underscores the power of prayer. It was only through the power of prayer that the servant's eyes were opened to the realities of God. In the same way, prayer can enable us to recognize what God is doing and draws us closer to him (R. D. Patterson and Hermann J. Austel, *Expositors Bible Commentary: 1 and 2 Kings*, Zondervan, 194).

When the enemy came down to Elisha, he prayed to the Lord that He would smite them with blindness; and when this took place according to his word, he said to them, "This is not the way and this is not the city; follow me, and I will lead you to the man whom ye are seeking." He led them to Samaria, the Israelite capital which was about four hours' distance from Dothan, where their eyes were opened at Elisha's prayer, so that they saw where they had been led. Most likely the blindness that the army is struck with was a mental blindness. That is to say, a state of blindness in which, though a man has eyes that can see, he does not see correctly. The Arameans did not comprehend where they were going or what they were doing until Elisha prayed for their eyes to be opened (Keil & Delitzsch, 230-231).

Under normal circumstances of war, prisoners would be spared as the spoils of war. They would be used as slaves. In several campaign records of ancient kings from the third millennium on thousands of prisoners are so dealt with. In the OT, only rarely were prisoners killed out of hand (2 Sam. 8:2). In extreme situations, however, prisoners were subject to the "ban" which meant their complete annihilation. Elisha, however, seems more intent upon embarrassing his foes with kindness than killing them. The result is that this led to a temporary end to the Aramean sieges (Hobbs, 78).

Elisha forbade King Joram to slay the enemy that he brought to him, because he had not taken them as prisoners in war, and recommended him to treat them hospitably and then let them return to their lord. The object of the miracle would have been frustrated if the Arameans had been slain. For the intention was to show the Arameans that they had to do with a prophet of the true God, against whom no human power could be of any avail, that they might learn to fear the almighty God. Even when regarded from a political point of view, the prophet's advice was more likely to ensure peace than the king's proposal, as the result of verse 23 clearly shows. The Arameans did not venture any more to invade the land of Israel with raiding parties, from fear of the obvious protection of Israel by its God (Keil & Delitzsch, 231).

Home Group Questions

1. Why do you think Elisha's servant was initially unable to see the angelic army?

2. Who do you identify most with in the story? Are you like Elisha who realized God was behind him no matter what happened? Or are you like Elisha's servant afraid of the reality you see before you? Why do think you tend to be that way?

3. Read Hebrews 11:1. What role does faith play in times of trial?

4. What can we do to ensure that we will have faith in difficult times?

5. Read Psalm 121. What do we see God do for those in need in this passage?

6. How does understanding God's character help us to respond in faith during difficult times?

Questions for the Family

7. What miraculous things does God do through Elisha in this story?

8. What do you think God was trying to teach the Israelites about himself in this story?

Questions for Personal Application

9. How would you characterize your faith when it comes to difficult times? Are you ready to trust God with whatever happens or do you not expect God to come through? What steps can you take to see your faith be like Elisha's?