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2 Kings 6:8-23

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WHERE DO YOU GO FOR MUSCLE WHEN YOU FACE ENEMIES?

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

My claim to fame in life is that I am from Nebraska. I attended the University of Nebraska, and over the past few years have maintained somewhat of a passing interest in the school football team. A few years ago, Nebraska played UCLA in the Rose Bowl, and my wife and I attended that game. We parked our car, and as we were walking to the stadium the traffic was moving at about walking pace. Driving alongside us was a busload of UCLA students. They had been diligently preparing for this game, and they were a bit drunk and obnoxious. My Nebraska hat became the focus of some rather derogatory comments. The students were leaning out of the bus, yelling obscenities at my wife and me. I was embarrassed for my wife, and troubled as to how to respond. The street was so narrow that the bus kept moving at the same pace as we were walking, so Liz and I decided that the best thing we could do was to ignore them.

Suddenly, the traffic speeded up and the bus was almost past us when one of the students leaned out and grabbed my Nebraska hat. Some of you who know me might think I am fairly mild-mannered and quiet, but you have never seen me get mad. I didn't even think about what I was going to do. I suddenly found myself going through the window, into the bus. My upper body was in the bus and my legs were dangling out the side as it moved down the street. The students saw fire in my eyes, and one of them was smart enough to give my hat back. As I tried to get off the bus I forgot that it was moving and I fell right on my rear end in the middle of the street. My wife watched this entire incident in total amazement. She always says there are only two things that I would fight for, God and Nebraska—and not necessarily in that order. (By the way, Nebraska trounced UCLA that day.)

This is a lighthearted story, but it raises a very real issue, and that is that we all face enemies; we all have battles and conflicts. The question we want to examine today is this: Where do we go for muscle when we face enemies? Where do we go for strength when battles and conflicts rise up around us?

Last week, we looked at an event from the book of 2 Kings that occurred during the life of Elijah. Today, we will look at an incident that happened during the ministry of his successor, Elisha. Here we will discover four spiritual principles to help us deal with enemies.

Second Kings 6:8:

Now the king of Aram was warring against Israel; and he counseled with his servants saying, "In such and such a place shall be my camp." And the man of God sent word to the king of Israel saying, "Beware that you do not pass this place, for the Arameans are coming down there." And the king of Israel sent to the place about which the man of God had told him; thus he warned him, so that he guarded himself there, more than once or twice. Now the heart of the king of Aram was enraged over this thing; and he called his servants and said to them, "Will you tell me which of us is for the king of Israel?" And one of his servants said, "No, my lord, O king; but Elisha, the prophet

who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedroom." So he said, "Go and see where he is, that I may send and take him." And it was told him, saying, "Behold, he is in Dothan." And he sent horses and chariots and a great army there and they came by night and surrounded the city. (2 Kgs 6:8-14 NASB)

Aram, or Syria, was warring against Israel, the northern kingdom, which was centered in Samaria. Syria was a collection of nomadic tribes just to the north who constantly made marauding raids into the land of Israel. Saul, David, and Solomon all had conflict with these people in the past.

Ben-Hadad, the king of Syria, was seeking to ambush the army of Israel and the king of Israel, who at this time was Jehoram. Ben-Hadad must have had an informant inside the Israelite camp because he knew in advance where the army of Israel was going to be. Evidently, Elisha was able to discern supernaturally what the king was planning, so he sent to Jehoram, telling him to avoid such and such a place, thereby saving his troops.

This happened so many times that the king of Syria became enraged. He gathered his counsel and asked them, "Which one of you is committing treason? Obviously someone is telling the Israelites what we are planning to do." They replied, "No one is committing treason. None of us are for the king of Israel. The problem is Elisha. He is able to understand what you are going to do, and he is warning the king of Israel." Again, the informant must have passed along the fact that Elisha was the problem, and he told the Syrians where the prophet was currently located. The king of Syria decided that he had to rid himself of this nemesis, so he sent to Dothan an entire army to take out Elisha. Perhaps he thought the people would rise up in defense of the prophet, so he did not want to be outnumbered.

We could ask, what did Elisha do to deserve this? He was simply going about his business, trying to help his king. He didn't fight against the Syrians, he didn't taunt them, he didn't plan a military campaign against Ben-Hadad. He probably felt like I did when I was walking to the Nebraska-UCLA game that day. He did nothing to bring about this conflict.

Here we find our first spiritual principle: Enemies are unavoidable. All of us at some time in life will face battles and conflicts. Even if we mind our own business, even if we obey God, speak the truth and help other people as much as we can, we will still have enemies, we will still have conflict. It is impossible to escape.

At times, people—bosses, co-workers, roommates, neighbors, family members, even friends—become a source of conflict for us. At times, circumstances—the loss of a job, loss of a family member, financial reversal, an automobile accident, failure to achieve a promotion—become a source of conflict. Children face many conflicts as they grow up: pressure and competition in school, peer pressure, the search for identity and self-esteem, the fear of not being accept-

ed. Some of the enemies we meet do not have faces, but we certainly know their names. They are self-doubt, illness, death, depression, loneliness, rejection, lust, fear of failure. The major enemy we face in our lives, of course, is Satan. He uses people and circumstances to overwhelm us, out-man us, and rob us of our life. The apostle Paul says “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). Scripture tells us that Satan “is a liar and the father of lies,” and that he “prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”

How do we respond when enemies rise up against us? Elisha’s servant illustrates our usual response, in verse 15:

Now when the attendant of the man of God had risen early and gone out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was circling the city. And his servant said to him, “Alas, my master! What shall we do?” (6:15)

The servant rose up early, got the coffee going, and went outside to get the morning paper. He looked up and, lo and behold, saw an army surrounding the city. He immediately woke up Elisha, crying, “Alas, master, what shall we do?” His first emotion was fear.

Fear is always our first reaction when we encounter an enemy. Like the servant, we feel overwhelmed, outmanned, with no possible way of escape. Why do we fear? The servant of Elisha feared for his life. Every enemy we face threatens our life in some way or another. It may not be our physical life, but perhaps we fear losing our freedom, our security, our identity, our comfort, our sense of well-being. We fear our enemies will rob us of some aspect of life. Chuck Swindoll wrote,

Fear? Ever met this beast? Sure you have. Fear of failure, fear of heights, fear of crowds, fear of disease, fear of rejection, fear of unemployment, fear of what others are saying about you, fear of moving away, fear of height, or depth or distance or death; fear of being yourself, fear of buying, fear of selling, fear of financial reversal, fear of war, fear of the dark, fear of being alone. Bully that it is, the creature relies on scare tactics and surprise attacks. It watches for your vulnerable moment and picks the lock that safeguards your security. Once inside, it strikes quickly to transform spiritual muscle into mental mush. The prognosis for recovery is neither bright nor cheery.

This was how the army of Israel responded to the giant, Goliath. Every day, Goliath stood across the valley of Elah from the Israelites, as recorded in 1 Samuel, and he taunted and challenge them, saying, “Send out someone to fight with me.” Here was the response of Saul and the army of Israel: “When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.” Later on, it says, “when all of Israel saw the man, they fled from him and were greatly afraid.” Our first reaction is to fear our enemy.

Panic was the servant’s second reaction. “What shall we do?” is his question to Elisha. This is usually the path we take. We do not talk to God about it. We want to figure out quickly some course of action to alleviate our fears. We feel uncomfortable and threatened. We want desperately to get out of the jam. We want life to return to normal. When we face enemies, we respond the same way my wife responds to intense heat. Several years ago, we were driving through Oregon on a blistering hot day. It was midday, and there was no relief in sight. Suddenly, my wife screamed, “Stop the car!” I pulled over to the side of the road and she opened the door, ran across the

road and jumped into a stream. There she sat, with all of her clothes on, finding relief.

This is how we respond to enemies—with fear and panic. Like Chicken Little, we say, “The sky is falling! The sky is falling! What shall we do?” If our first spiritual principle is that enemies are unavoidable, our second principle is that our normal, natural reaction to enemies is fear and panic.

How can we respond differently? How can we keep from fear and panic? This answer is presented wonderfully in verses 16-19 by the man of God, Elisha:

So he [Elisha] answered, “Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” Then Elisha prayed and said, “O LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.” And the LORD opened the servant’s eyes, and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. And when they came down to him, Elisha prayed to the LORD and said, “Strike this people with blindness, I pray.” So He struck them with blindness according to the word of Elisha. Then Elisha said to them, “This is not the way, nor is this the city; follow me and I will bring you to the man whom you seek.” And he brought them to Samaria. (6:16-19)

What a wonderful encouragement and comfort this text can be when we face enemies! Three things in Elisha’s response in contrast to that of his servant form our third spiritual principle. First, Elisha does not look at physical circumstances; he knows a spiritual reality. He does not fear. He knows that despite the overwhelming odds, all is not as it seems. He is so confident he says to his servant, “Do not fear. Those who are with us are more than who are with them.” Elisha knows that God is present, even if he is not visible. God has a great army. He is in control. Nothing will happen that God does not permit. Even if we feel outnumbered, even if there seems no way of escape, we need not fear. We can trust God. We can trust that those who are with us are more than those who are against us. Trusting in the presence of God is the antidote to fear.

Deuteronomy tells us how we are to go out into battle. It says,

“When [not if] you go out to battle against your enemies and see horses and chariots and people more numerous than you, do not be afraid of them; for the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt is with you. Now it shall come about that when you are approaching the battle, the priest shall come near and speak to the people. And he shall say to them, ‘Hear O Israel, you are approaching the battle against your enemies today. Do not be fainthearted, do not be afraid, or panic, or tremble before them, for the LORD your God is the one who goes with you to fight with you against your enemies to save you’” (Deut 20:1-4)

Eugene Peterson wrote,

...first impressions and surface appearances are deceiving. We underestimate God and we overestimate evil. We do not see what God is doing, and we conclude that he is doing nothing. We see everything that evil is doing and think it is in control of everyone.

Remember David’s response to Goliath in contrast to that of the army of Israel. The Israelites were dismayed and greatly afraid, but when David heard the giant taunting Israel, he responded, “Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should taunt the armies of the living God?” David trusted in God. He knew that God was present.

He knew that there were more with him than there were with Goliath. Hear his words in Psalm 27,

**The LORD is my light and my salvation;
Whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the defense of my life;
Whom shall I dread?
When evildoers came upon me to devour my flesh,
My adversaries and my enemies, they stumbled and fell.
Though a host encamp against me,
My heart will not fear;
Though war arise against me,
In spite of this I shall be confident. (Ps 27:1-3)**

The second thing we see about Elisha is that before he becomes a man of action he becomes a man of prayer. Rather than trying to figure out what to do next, Elisha prays. He prays specifically, first, for the eyes of the servant to be opened to the spiritual reality of which he had just spoken. Suddenly, the servant's eyes are opened, and he sees the horses and the chariots of fire that surround Elisha. Fire is used in scripture to portray the presence of God, and this is what became visible to the servant.

There is something interesting to note about verse 17. I have always thought that the presence of God was surrounding the enemies of Elisha. But verse 17 says that the chariots of fire were surrounding Elisha. This is much more powerful in terms of our understanding God. God is in between us and our enemies. He is a buffer, a fortress, a bulwark who surrounds us and protects us. We are like a quarterback who is surrounded by an impenetrable offensive line. No one can possibly get through. Psalm 34 says, "The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them" (Ps 34:7). Surely the servant of Elisha was reminded of Psalm 121:

**I lift up my eyes to the mountains,
From whence shall my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
Who made heaven and earth.
He will not allow your foot to slip. (Ps 121:1-3a)**

How often do we respond with prayer when we come face to face with an ominous foe? How often do we lift our eyes to the Lord and look for his strength and protection? Just as trust is the antidote to fear, prayer is the antidote to panic. When we are panicking, we usually are not praying.

And what should we pray for? The scripture here is specific. Elisha prays that the eyes of his servant will be opened—and we can pray for the same thing. We can pray that God would allow us to see his presence, and that he would allow us to see him in control. We can pray that God will replace our fears with confidence. If fear and panic are the result of looking at the enemy, confidence and comfort are the result of looking at God.

A couple of years ago, my father was at the end of a two-year battle with cancer. My mother telephoned me to say that he was going into the hospital for what looked like the last time. My family was facing an enemy called death. She wanted me to come home right away, and I didn't know exactly how to respond, being uncertain about how long my dad had to live. I sat down, put my head into my hands, and began to pray. I was fearful and panicky, and I needed to talk to God. As I began to pray, a great confidence and peace overwhelmed my soul. I sensed that God was present with me. Then I heard a voice, as clearly as if someone was sitting next to me, saying, "Go, tomorrow morning." I went the next morning, and

that evening I saw my father. Next day, before we could get to the hospital, he passed away. I learned very dramatically how the power of prayer helped me face that battle. It gave me confidence in the presence of God in a way that I normally would not have.

The third thing Elisha does is ask God for deliverance. Now that his attitude is right, now that his focus is right, now that he has confidence in the presence of God, Elisha prays for deliverance. He prays that God would blind the Syrian army. I do not think they are blinded physically, but they become confused and are unaware of what is taking place. They are able to see and to follow Elisha to Samaria, but they do not know who he is. They are confused; they do not recognize him. So Elisha is able to lead this marauding band to Samaria, to the capital, and to the king of Israel.

In her book, *The Hiding Place*, Corrie Ten Boom tells of a time when she wanted to take her Bible into a concentration camp in Nazi Germany. The guards were searching the prisoners and taking away all of their possessions as they entered the camp at Ravensbruck. Corrie and her sister found a sweater, which they used to hide the Bible temporarily while they changed their clothes. When they had their new clothes on, Corrie took the sweater with the Bible in it and tried to conceal it inside her dress, hoping that she could make it through the checkpoint. She wrote,

It made a bulge that you could see across the Grote Markt. I flattened it out the best I could, pushing it down, tugging the sweater around my waist. But there was no real concealing it beneath the thin cotton dress. And all the while I had the incredible feeling that it didn't matter, that this was not my business, but God's. That all I had to do was walk straight ahead. As we tramped back out through the shower room door the SS men ran their hands over every prisoner, front back and sides. The woman ahead of me was searched three times. Behind me, Betsy was searched. No hand touched me. At the exit door to the building was a second ordeal—a line of women guards examining the prisoners again. I slowed down as I reached them, but the Aufseherin in charge shoved me roughly by the shoulder. "Move along, you are holding up the line!" And so Betsy and I arrived at Barracks 8 in the small hours of that morning, bringing not only the Bible, but a new knowledge of the power of Him whose story it was.

Again, our text gives us a helpful insight as to what we can pray for when we ask God for deliverance from our enemies. God gives Elisha a wonderful physical victory, but each time we pray we cannot always expect a physical victory. The Old Testament gives us physical pictures of spiritual realities. God's solutions might be a bit different from ours. At times, he wants to change us internally before he changes our circumstances. But Elisha prays something very specific—and this can become the content of our prayers as well. When he prays, the army of Syria is disarmed and made powerless to carry out what it threatened to do. That is what we can pray for as well. We can pray with confidence that the fears, the anxiety and the doubt can be made powerless to strangle our lives. In the midst of the battle we can maintain peace, security and trust in the Lord. The fears of self-doubt, the threats of lust, the dread of facing unemployment, the anxiety of confronting another person—these sorts of things can be disarmed and be made powerless. That is what God promises to do.

So we see our third principle in Elisha's response. When we face enemies, rather than looking at the physical circumstances, rather than being controlled by our feelings of fear, we can trust in the pres-

ence of God; and we can pray that he would open our eyes so that we can have a sense of confidence and strength as we face the battle. We can pray that the enemy be made impotent to take away our peace, our security and our identity in Christ Jesus.

David Roper wrote,

We must not focus on our foes and our fear. We should rather turn from them to seek God's face and the tranquil place where he dwells. There is no panic there. And from that quiet place we can sally forth to face what we fear, singing to ourselves about His love, thanking Him for a contest already won, believing that the battle is not ours, but the Lord's.

The concluding verses give us Elisha's response to the victory God given to him:

And it came about when they had come into Samaria that Elisha said, "O LORD, open the eyes of these men, that they may see." So the LORD opened their eyes, and they saw, and behold, they were in the midst of Samaria. Then the king of Israel when he saw them, said to Elisha, "My father, should I kill them? Shall I kill them?" And he answered, "You shall not kill them. Would you kill those you have taken captive with your sword and with your bow? Set bread and water before them, that they may eat and drink and go to their master." So he prepared a great feast for them; and when they had eaten and drunk he sent them away, and they went to their master. And the marauding bands of Arameans did not come again into the land of Israel. (6:20-23)

When our enemy is another person and God gives us a victory, how do we usually respond? Sometimes, our response is to rub it in their face. We want to gloat; we want to kick them while they are down; we want total victory. They have been a pain to us, and we want to get even. We are conditioned by the revenge motive we see portrayed in the movies. But not Elisha. The king of Israel wants to kill the attackers, but Elisha says, "You would not kill someone whom you captured in actual battle by the sword or the bow, then why would you kill someone whom God has delivered to your doorstep?" Elisha's response is like Jean Valjean's when he has the opportunity to kill his nemesis, Javert, in *Les Miserables*. His response is like David's in the cave when he has the opportunity to kill Saul, and is encouraged to do so by his men, but does not. Elisha does not want revenge. He does not want to get even. Rather, he tells the king to feed them a great feast. He sees an opportunity to love and serve his enemy, an opportunity to minister in the love and grace of God.

And what is the result? The text says that the marauding bands of Arameans did not come again to attack the land of Israel. If the Israelites had killed the Syrians, their foe would have wanted revenge, and things would have continued to escalate. But Elisha's response short-circuits any future warfare and brings peace to the land.

Our fourth spiritual principle is this: Rather than seeking an opportunity to destroy the enemies that God gives into your hand, seek an opportunity to love and serve them. When you are in conflict with your neighbors, bake them a cake. When you have conflict with a co-worker, take him some cookies. When you are having conflict with a family member, invite him or her to dinner. When we respond in this manner, people with whom we are in conflict are humbled and challenged. They do not expect it. They do not understand it. An avenue is opened for us to love them, care about them and minister to them. It causes the past to be done away with and brings peace to the relationship.

Enemies are unavoidable, so we will face conflict. Our natural reaction will be fear and panic. The question is, where do we go for muscle, for strength, when we face these enemies? Hopefully, like Elisha, we can learn to seek God. He is present. He surrounds us. He can open up our eyes—and he can cause the fears that would choke us of our life to be disarmed and made powerless.

As I thought about this text last night, one more question came to mind. Why do we have to face enemies, anyway? Why conflicts and battles? The answer from this text is that we too must learn the lessons that the servant learned from his master. We must learn to personally trust in the strength of God ourselves. God wants each one of us to come to depend on him. He does not want us to only read about it in the life of Elisha. He wants each one of us to experience how powerful he is, how much he loves us, and how much he can help us in the midst of the conflicts and battles that threaten our lives. The servant had to learn it; David had to learn it; Corrie Ten Boom had to learn it; and God wants each one of us to learn it as well. He wants us to see how big he is, what a ready resource he is, and how we can lean upon him in the midst of the battle. When we do that, we come to know God more deeply and appreciate him more fully. We come to trust him for our entire life because he is there. He surrounds us and protects us. Our fears and anxieties can be turned to trust and confidence. The battle is not ours; it is the Lord's.

**This I know, that God is for me.
In God, whose word I praise,
In the LORD whose word I praise,
In God I have put my trust, I shall not be afraid.
What can man do to me? (Ps 56:9b-11)**

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