

“OPEN HIS EYES THAT HE MAY SEE”

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on January 7, 1962 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P. M.

In the ninth century BC, Elisha was one of God's most influential spokesmen. He was one of the greatest of God's prophets and his influence was great both on those of his own generation and on men down through the centuries. His influence was in the direction of spiritual values. He shared a very close and personal relationship with God and this affected everything that he said and did.

In the second book of Kings there is a very revealing story. “Now the king of Syria was warring against Israel; and he took council with his servants, saying, In such and such a place shall be my camp. And the man of God sent unto the king of Israel, saying, Beware that thou pass not such a place; for hither the Syrians are coming down.” Another translation makes this even clearer, “In such and such a place shall we establish an ambush ... Beware that thou pass not such a place; for thither the Syrians lie in wait.” “And the king of Israel sent to the place which the man of God told him and warned him of; and he saved himself there, not once nor twice (meaning many times). And the heart of the king of Syria was sore troubled for this thing; and he called his servants, and said unto them, Will ye not show me which of us is for the king of Israel? And one of his servants said, Nay, my lord, O king; But Elisha, the prophet that is in Israel, telleth the king of Israel the words that thou speakest in thy bedchamber. And he said, Go and see where he is, that I may send and fetch him. And it was told him, saying, Behold, he is in Dothan.

“Therefore sent he thither horses and chariots, and a great host: and they came by night and compassed the city about. And when the servant of the man of God was risen early, and gone forth, behold, a host with horses and chariots was round about the city. And his servant said unto him, Alas, my Master! how shall we do? and he answered, Fear not; for they that are with us are more than they that are with them. And Elisha prayed, and said, Jehovah, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And Jehovah opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire around about Elisha. And when they came down to him, Elisha prayed unto Jehovah and said, Smite this people, I pray thee, with blindness. And he smote them with blindness according to the word of Elisha ... and the bands of Syria came no more into the land of Israel.” (II Kings 6:8-18, 23).

In this reading there are two sentences that stand out and become our text: “Fear not; for they that are with us are more than they that are with them ... Jehovah, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see.” These sentences were needed by the servant of Elisha in the long ago; they are needed by all of God's children today. Let us explore them and see just what meaning they may hold for us.

More Than the Eye Can See

In our day, too, we often feel that we face fearful odds in the world about us. Evil is very rich, very powerful, and deeply entrenched. First of all, irreligion is very strong in the world. Godless Communism has under its control more than one billion people. Every school in the Russian empire aggressively seeks to destroy every trace of religion. Recently, when Dr. Norvel Young returned from Russia, he described a bulletin-board display in one of the elementary schools which branded religion as the “opiate of the people,” warning the children against such outworn superstitions as faith in God and Christ. But, irreligion is also a strong factor in our country as well as in Russia. There are a great many people in high places whose words and examples destroy faith and downgrade religion. Particularly is this true in many institutions of higher learning throughout our land.

In the second place, another of the hurtful forces about us is wrong religion. Visualize for a moment the hundreds of millions of Hindus, Buddhists, Confucionists, Shintoists, and Moslems. These often are very sincere and very earnest, but they are also very wrong in their efforts to worship God. They do not know the only true and living God, and the name of Jesus Christ is utterly meaningless to most of them. Then, think of the millions who wear the name of Christ but who do not know him nor his church in the pure New Testament way. Surely wrong religion is a formidable foe .

Another of the great discouraging influences in our world is the moral weakness of mankind. Even good people, well-informed people, often sink in their behavior to the level of animals. Lust, hate, greed, envy and strife are common even in the enlightened twentieth century. We are faced by fearful odds and sometimes when we compare our visible strength--limited numbers, wealth and influence--with these vast forces that are against us, we become discouraged and feel that the battle is hopeless.

But--The Early Christians

It is at this point that we need to turn our eyes back to the first century and visualize the situation faced by those with whom Christianity began. Discouragement seems obvious and overwhelming, when we realize that even the divine Son of God was not accepted by his own people, but rather was ignominiously crucified. When the twelve apostles were left to establish the church and to launch the Christian era, even one of their own number had to be written off as a traitor. They were immediately met by Jewish antagonisms and persecutions. They also faced the strong negative influence of an absolute Roman dictatorship. The emperor claimed to be divine and demanded the allegiance of every subject throughout the empire. What a negative climate for the establishment of the Christian religion! Also, paganism was universal and triumphant. The mystery religions were known everywhere. Their temples were large, magnificent buildings in every major city. All across the Roman world these mystery religions had blinded the people's eyes to the true God and his worship. What chance did Christianity have?

On the surface, measured with the eye of human reason rather than with the eye of faith, the establishment and spread of Christianity was hopeless. However, there were forces at work that could not be seen with the natural eye and these forces entirely changed the picture. Imagine the apostle Paul coming into Athens. So far as the record goes, he was alone. As he walked through the streets he observed the hundreds of idols and altars to the various gods and goddesses. When he lifted his eyes to Athens' crowning-hill, the Acropolis, he observed the magnificent Parthenon, which, with the other temples that surrounded it, was built for the worship of a pagan deity. What chance had he to change all of this? Remember, too, that his gospel was a strange sounding story in itself. How convincing would it be to tell the people that the only living God had sent his only begotten Son into the world and that he had lived in lowly Palestine for a third of a century. How convincing would it be to tell them that this Messiah had been a carpenter in the small city of Nazareth, that he had no wealth, and no illustrious following? What would the pagans think when told that his own people, led by their religious leaders had called for his crucifixion and that the Roman soldier had nailed him to a cross? Yet, amazingly, some did believe. Dionysius, the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others.

A little later Paul entered the equally pagan city of Corinth. On its crowning hill was another great temple served by many priests and also using a thousand priestesses, or harlots, in the practice of its religion. What chance had Christianity in this setting? Yet, just a little later on, the apostle Paul write these inspiring words to the church that had been established in the shadow of this pagan temple, "All things are yours; whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, of things present, or things to come; all are yours; and ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's." (I Cor. 3:21-23). In some strange way the future belonged not to paganism, nor to the Roman dictatorship, nor to the strongly entrenched Jewish religion, but to the lowly Nazarene and his humble followers. Again, "They that are with us are more than they that are with them."

Our tendency today is to look at the world about us through the eye of human reason, and to forget the realm of the spirit. David made this mistake in the long ago by trusting in his own strength rather than in the strength of God. You will recall the occasion when, in his own human pride, he called for the numbering of Israel. When afterward he discovered that his strength lay not in numbers, but in the power of God, he said, "I have sinned greatly in that which I have done: but now, O Jehovah, put away, I beseech thee, the iniquity of thy servant, for I have done very foolishly." (II Samuel 24:10). In contrast to David, Gideon trusted in the strength of Jehovah. With an army of 32,000 he was ready to march to battle against the Midianites. God told him that the army was too large, so 22,000 were allowed to go home, but even the 10,000 that remained were too many. The army was further reduced to 300 men. These men then conquered the hosts of Midian; the power was obviously God's power. (Judges 7).

When we contemplate the forces about us, hurtful to the religion of our Lord, we need to look beyond our own strength and remember that there is an unseen power that makes all the difference. Like Elisha's servant, we need to remember, "They that are with us are more than they that are with them."

Spiritual Blindness

Some people go through life blind to the beauties of nature. The hills, the valleys the streams, the trees and the flowers that beautify our world are hardly seen by them. They are so preoccupied that the beauty of the world about them is wasted. There are others who see and appreciate the beauties of nature, but are blind to the God who created and sustains nature. They marvel at the intricate delicacy of a flower, but fail to appreciate the God who created that beauty.

Similarly, there are those who are blind to spiritual matters. These are many in our day for whom prayer, Bible reading, and worship have little meaning. The reality of Christ, of God, and of heaven has somehow passed them by. They would consider the "fruit of the spirit" listed by the apostle Paul in Gal. 5:22-23, "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control," as of little importance. To many, these are qualities of weakness rather than strength. Those who are blind to spiritual values consider themselves the strong men of our world. They build highways and bridges; they dig tunnels under our rivers. They walk the steel girders of our skyscrapers. They sail the great dreadnaughts of the sea and march men into battle. They are the strong men of the world in contrast to the weak

who believe and trust in spiritual forces. But it is they who are blind, and we need to pray that their eyes may be opened that they may see that the eternal values and the lasting strength is not of physical might, but the invisible strength of the spirit. As one contemplates the graveyards of the great battleships and destroyers of past years, he feels something of the impermanence of military power. Or, in passing a field where airplanes of a past war are stored row on row by the thousands, one gets something of the feeling of the transience of military power. Everything material becomes old and obsolete.

Even many Christians, like Elisha's servant, are blind to the reality of spiritual things. Even preachers and teachers and elders sometimes make decisions upon the basis of sight rather than the basis of faith. The material is so real because it can be seen and measured; the spiritual is so unreal because it lacks these visible qualities.

In the long ago God had led his people to the southern boundary of the promised land and they sent their spies to report on the condition of Canaan; they made this same mistake. The ten brought back the report that the people were giants and their cities well fortified. They then concluded that the unarmed host of Israel was no match for the inhabitants of the land. (Num. 13-14). God turned this faithless host of Israelites back to wander in the wilderness for forty years. Their mistake was simply that they trusted the eye of human reason rather than the eye of faith.

Occasionally we read or hear, "God has no hands, but our hands, no feet but our feet, no eyes but our eyes, no ears but our ears, no tongues but our tongues." Don't you believe it. God has infinite power beyond any power that we may possess. We can understand why these words might be written in trying to encourage people to do their best for the Lord, but in a deeper sense we need to realize that God's power is infinite and that it is not limited to our weak service. He has a power that we know not of. We need to pray the prayer of Elisha "O, Jehovah, open our eyes that we may see.

Conclusion

As we live our lives, we must come to realize that the things of the spirit are more important and more lasting than the things of the flesh. We come to realize this best when we stand face to face with death by the side of an open grave. When we have laid to rest a beloved companion, a father or mother, or a child, we realize with a clarity impossible at other times the meaninglessness of the material things about us. Houses and lands no longer seem very important at a time like this. Earthly ambitions and achievements seem equally meaningless. Only the things of the spirit matter.

For those who have had eyes to see it, there has always been hope for the triumph of right. God's infinite spiritual power has changed the blackness of night to the brilliance of day. Ask Moses, ask Daniel, ask Paul, and the host of God's servants who have triumphed through faith. Let us pray, O Jehovah, open our eyes that we may see "... that they that are with us are more than they that are with them."