

## Seeing True Safety

2Kings 6:1-23

BPC – 5pm – 17/10/2021

“We are never as safe as we think we are” – that was the reflection of one reporter last month on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the September 11 attacks on New York. As those famous images of the trade centre towers on fire filled our screens we were repeatedly told that these events changed the world.

And I think they probably did. I can remember watching the events unfold at school while not really grasping how big and horrific it was. “We are never as safe as we think we are.” But is that right?

In way I think our world is really obsessed with safety. During this pandemic we’ve constantly asked or been told what is safe. It was the slogan of our government last year, “stay safe, stay open.” Is it safe to open up, safe to gather in groups or travel, or even safe to take the vaccine?

But our love of safety goes well beyond the pandemic or health. We have safety ratings for cars, cyber safety to protect our privacy, insurance for our financial safety, cameras to keep our houses safe, and the list goes on. We want to be safe – it is instinctive to us like locking our house or car.

And while these things are good and right and we as believers should use them and be thankful for them, the consistent message of Scripture is that no one is as safe as God’s people, even when we live in frightening or uncertain times. As Psalm 125 says, <sup>1</sup> *Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever.* <sup>2</sup> *As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore.*

But I imagine for those that 1-2Kings was first written to, for God’s people living as exiles in Babylon, taken from their homes and their city destroyed, they were feeling far from safe. So these books are designed to lift up their eyes to see the greatness of their God and all that comes from trusting him.

To see their security in him whatever the situation. Which is exactly what our passage does tonight but in ways we might not expect as it shows us God’s care, presence, and mercy. Fresh of the the healing of Namaan, the enemy’s general, in chapter 5, and before the blinding of the whole Aramean army 6:8ff, we have this small, unexpected, even trivial provision in vv.1-7.

In v.1 we meet a company of prophets, like a group of bible college students that met back in chapter 2, one of the many that it seems Elijah had put together in his final years. And there’s encouraging growth, so much so that they come to Elisha because they’ve outgrown their classroom.

They want to expand and like all church groups rather than pay the professionals, they hold a working bee and it’s all hands on deck. v.2, *Let us go to the Jordan, where each of us can get a pole; and let us build a place there for us to meet.*”

And so they head to the Jordan, persuading Elisha to come along with them in vv.3-4 and you can picture the scene right: they put down their theology books, their soft keyboard fingers wrap around the axe handle and in v.4, they *began to cut down trees.*

And what happens in v.5 is, I think, actually familiar to us, it is the kind of thing that would go viral on YouTube... The prophet swings his axe, the head flies off, smashes the windscreen of his car, and plops into the river... which is then met with an eruption of laughter by all involved...

Except it isn't... The man cries out, *"oh no my lord, it was borrowed."* This is no laughing matter...

Yet I imagine for most of us we think, what's the big deal... Just buy another one. But with what?

Israel was a poor country, and these prophets are so poor they have to borrow equipment. And iron was expensive, very expensive, that the loss of this axe head was more like writing off a borrowed car without insurance... It's no wonder then that he cries out 'oh no my lord.'

As he watches the axe head fly across the air and land in the river, he despairs for he has no ability to pay it back and could be facing indentured servitude to fix his debt. So though it may seem trivial to us at first, this is a desperate situation of real need.

And as we've seen time and time again in Kings, God shows up to provide for his people. He has delivered his people from death, drought, disease, and now debt and difficulty.

Without prompting, Elisha asks <sup>6</sup> *"Where did it fall?"* When he showed him the place, Elisha cut a stick and threw it there, and made the iron float. <sup>7</sup> *"Lift it out,"* he said. Then the man reached out his hand and took it.

The iron floats. And so while this miracle may lack to the wow of raising the Shunamite's son or the oomph of blinding a whole army, this miracle is no less profound. Because in it we see the God who cares deeply and is present to provide for his people in the mundane and ordinary aspects of life.

Even the accidents of life. See this story is funny or trivial only until it is you or I facing the debt, loss or crushing consequences of our accidents or mistakes or just poor decisions. But God knows, God cares, and God provides for his needy people through the ins and outs of everyday life.

But did you notice that as the axe head sunk in the river, it wasn't the whole company of prophets that was affected. Not everyone would be in debt. The building project wasn't compromised. The loss and need was of the individual believer.

And I think this is the kind of thing I struggle to believe and accept. The creator God who is outside of time, who sustains the whole world, cares and is involved in the intricacies of my everyday life? Yet it was Jesus who taught us to pray, "give us our daily bread" even before asking for forgiveness of our sins. And so we have these great events written down for us to remind and persuade us that this is our God – the God who provides even in the small and seemingly simple.

As Ralph Davis says, "Do you see the God you have? Heaven is his home and the earth his footstool (Isa 66:1) – and your axe-head matters to him." Part of God's greatness is that he does indeed care about and attend to even our small problems or the ordinary affairs of life.

So do you know this? Do you enjoy this? Do you take it seriously by daily, regular, prayer and thankfulness? Whether it's the consequences of a mistake, our fear, loneliness, God is not distant or removed, and we can, we should, enjoy the privilege to taking all of our lives to him.

It's easy, even natural for us to think God doesn't know, doesn't care, like the CEO too preoccupied with the big plans for the future to notice the needs of one little employee. Yet it is God himself who calls us to not be anxious about anything but to take everything to Him in prayer. To cast all our anxiety upon him because he cares (1Pet 5:7), and to rest in him.

In 1767 the great hymnist John Newton wrote this in a letter to his friend: "Are you not amazed sometimes that you should have such a hope, that, poor and needy as you are, the Lord thinks of you? But let not all you feel discourage you."

So don't let either pride or laziness or a small view of God rob you of the joy and comfort and amazement of throwing yourself upon the God who cares and provides.

But the scene and mood quickly changes as we go from a prophet with an axe to invasion and armies covering the hills. From God's provision in the small things to his protection in the big things.

In v.8 we are plunged into the middle of the King of Aram at war with Israel, which will be the context for the next 3 chapters. And did you notice during the reading that no one other than Elisha is named in the event. We have the King of Aram, probably Ben-Hadad 2 and the King of Israel, Jehoram.

But this story isn't about them – the focus is squarely on God and what he is doing as even the location names are left out. <sup>8</sup> *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."*

But as the king talks tactics, he has a big problem, Elisha knows every move he makes. <sup>9</sup> *The man of God sent word to the king of Israel: "Beware of passing that place, because the Arameans are going down there."* <sup>10</sup> *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.*

God protects and spares Israel multiple times and we can imagine how frustrating this would be for the King of Aram right? So he's reaction in v.11 isn't surprising as he is enraged, calls his leadership team together and essentially says to them, whose the mole? Who is working for the other team?

Now as is often the case in the books of 1-2 Kings, as the enemies of Israel, or sometimes Israel itself, reject or resist God's sovereignty and control, the events are quite comical and ridiculous.

So as the furious king interrogates his officials about who is leaking information to the enemy time and time again, one of them pops up and says, I know why... v.12, *Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom."*

Seems like the kind of thing he should have brought up earlier right? The King overlooks this however and sends out a search party to find him in v.13 so he can capture him. He finds out

Elisha is in Dothan and in v.14 he sends his biggest and best army who go by night and surround the city.

But do you see the irony and comedy in that? The king thinks he can take Elisha by surprise even though Elisha knows everything the King says, even in private!

But all of this is to make the clear point of how easy it is for God to provide for and protect his people. Nothing and no one is outside of his control and God has a habit of frustrating his enemies plans.

We see this hilariously in Acts 5 as the Jewish leaders arrest the apostles for preaching the Gospel, only to have an angel open their jail and tell them to go out and tell everyone about it.

And yet can you imagine how confronting, how devastating it would have been for God's people to be reading this story from captivity in Babylon? That time and time again they had refused to see and respond to God for who he truly is and what he deserved. People who had failed to see reality.

Which is exactly the focus as the sun rises the next morning. The very best of the Aramean army has moved in during the night to capture Elisha – the overkill is deliberate and a picture of how desperate the King has become as the whole army is there for little old Elisha.

And in v.15 we meet an unnamed servant of Elisha, perhaps Gehazi's replacement after the events of chp. 5 and you can picture him walking into the kitchen, yawning and stretching as he puts on the kettle to make the coffee, and as he gazes out the window there's a squeal and maybe a little wee...

Like the Riders of Rohan arriving at Minas Tirath they are everywhere. V.15 *an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. "Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?" the servant asked.*

What is your immediate reaction to being under threat, under the pump, or just overwhelmed? Whether being mocked or attacked for your Christian faith, or just the pressure of an assignment or work deadline, so often we, like this man, default to both fear and pragmatism.

The army is both powerful and numerous and the two of them don't stand a chance. There is no escape. So he says, what shall we do? What resources or abilities do WE have to overcome this situation? His fear, like ours, is the result of self-confidence and self-sufficiency being shattered.

As Proverbs 29 says, <sup>25</sup> *The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe.* Because we need to remember that Elisha knows everything the King says and plans right? So the only reason Elisha is 'trapped' is for God's own purposes. We see this plainly in Elisha's calm and collected reply.

<sup>16</sup> *"Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them."* <sup>17</sup> *And Elisha prayed, "Open his eyes, LORD, 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.*

Rather than shamed, disciplined, or scolded, he is prayed for. Elisha prays his servant would see reality, to see that because theirs is the true and living God, those with them far outnumber those against them. As Proverbs says, *whoever trusts in the LORD is safe.*

He sees chariots and horses of fire, suggesting they come from the very presence of God himself, this is an army of angels surrounding them. The same ones we met back in chp 2 who appeared to escort Elijah into heaven. As we heard in Psalm 125, the LORD always surrounds his people.

In his panic and fear, the servant had failed to remember or comprehend their reality. Because notice that Elisha doesn't pray they would come or appear but be seen and their reality embraced. Psalm 34:7, *The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.*

Elisha knew this is always the case so he prays his servant might see and be both captured and comforted by this reality and not be afraid. So true safety can only be found by clinging to, resting in, and relying on not ourselves but on God. To live in his care and presence.

The real danger for this servant is spiritual: the threat is not the horses and chariots but to forget the greatness of God who cares and is present. God's people are safe with him even when under attack.

And it's the same for believers in Jesus who always live in spiritual battle. Paul writes in Ephesians 6:<sup>12</sup> *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.*

Christians always live in a spiritual battle, a struggle. But notice what Paul says next. <sup>13</sup> *Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground.*

Put on the armour. Not find the armour, not search for it, not earn or achieve it, put it on. God doesn't withhold protection but generously gives it. Because what is the armour? Well in vv.14-17 they are all things God has already given us in the Gospel when we trust in Jesus.

Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation. Not things God could give us but has given us.

Putting on the armour of God is about knowing, enjoying, and living in light of having every spiritual blessing, the indwelling of the Spirit, our new identity in Christ, being set free from the fear of death.

But the problem is that we, so often, like God's people always have, struggle to either remember, comprehend, or enjoy all we have by trusting in our God. Put simply we have a constant battle to see God clearly and all we enjoy through our relationship with him to we respond rightly.

Over the past month I've been meticulously reading this book called Gentle and Lowly, The heart of Christ for sinners and sufferers, and this quote stood out to me: "The bible is one long attempt to deconstruct our natural vision of who God actually is. The Christian life is the long journey of letting our natural assumption about who God is, over many decades, fall away, being slowly replaced with God's own insistence on who he is."

We have the natural ability to have a poor, unsatisfying, impoverished view of God. We see this time and time again in the life of Israel. When things are hard it's God's fault and he's evil. When things are good and prosperous, God is irrelevant and forgotten as pride takes over.

So just as Elisha prayed for his servant, we too must pray time and time again that we would know our God – to see more clearly that all we have in Christ that we would treasure him more deeply.

Paul models this in his letters, praying that believers would know God better, that God would open the eyes of our hearts that we might know the hope we have in Jesus.

And we must do this through the heights of joy and pleasure just as much as the depths of despair. Whether it is lockdown or conflict, a relationship breakdown or a health crisis, pray you'd grasp more and more who our God is and our safety not in our circumstances but in him.

Which is exactly what God gives us in the surprising conclusion to the King of Aram's attempt to capture Elisha. Though the hills covered in fiery horses, they don't actually stop the army advancing. <sup>18</sup> *As the enemy came down toward him, Elisha prayed to the LORD, "Strike this army with blindness." So he struck them with blindness, as Elisha had asked.*

Just as Elisha prayed his servant would see reality, God's enemies who can't see reality are blinded.

And what they experience is literally a blinding light – which doesn't remove their sight but hinders or confuses it. And again there is a sense of comedy in scene that follows.

The big scary Aramean army, now visually dazed come down the hill only to have Elisha greet them and essentially say, who are you looking for? Elisha? Sure I know the guy...

<sup>19</sup> *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.*

He takes them on the 20km hike to the capital of Israel only to pray again. <sup>20</sup> *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.*

Can you imagine their confusion and horror as they blinked, rubbed their eyes, only to see themselves inside the enemy capital now surrounded by their army. What would they think?

Well we don't have to guess what the King of Israel was thinking as the enemy's army is gifted into his hands. <sup>21</sup> *When the king of Israel saw them, he asked Elisha, "Shall I kill them, my father? Shall I kill them?"*

He's delightfully surprised and smells victory, seeking permission to slaughter them all. But I'm sure he was very surprised by Elisha's answer: he wanted a bloodbath only to throw them a banquet.

<sup>22</sup> *"Do not kill them," he answered. "Would you kill those 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." <sup>23</sup> 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.*

It's a great scene isn't it? You can only imagine their fear and dread as their sight returned and they found themselves in the enemy's capital... But as they comprehended their imminent doom, the doors fly open and out comes the buffet as their enemy serves them the wine.

In v.13 the Aramean King sent his servants to literally "Go and see" in their search for Elisha. Can you imagine his confusion as his army returns not only without Elisha, but jolly, crumbs in their beards, full bellies, and in in complete awe of the God who blinded them so they could truly see his mercy.

You can't help but wonder what did they say to the king upon their return? Did you find Elisha? Oh we found him alright... It's no wonder the bands from Aram no longer raided Israel... (for a time...)

It's unheard of isn't it? Unthinkable? Kindness to your enemy? But that's exactly the point. As God's enemies walk away sparrred judgement and satisfied, Israel are being told he'll do the same for them.

Because we need to remember that as Israel first read and looked back on these events, they did so in Babylon, living in exile as those who had rejected and ignored God, and were experiencing God's judgement. They, like us, are people that don't give God the love, loyalty, and praise he deserves.

And so the safety they and we need above all else is the welcome and acceptance of God himself – the God who is in complete control, powerful and sovereign. We are not truly safe unless he is merciful to accept us! But that’s exactly the God we meet in the bible.

The God who is revealed to us in the coming of Jesus. That is why true safety is found in God alone. Not simply because of the greatness of his power but the greatness of his love and mercy. As Dane Ortlund says, “When God deigns to lavish goodness on his people, he does it with a certain naturalness reflective of the depths of who he is. For God to be merciful is for God to be God.”

And so this glimpse, this taste of God’s care and presence, sovereignty and mercy in 2Kings 6 is just a taste of the mercy of God on display through the Lord Jesus Christ. In him we find true safety through his death and resurrection not to spare us from anything hard or scary, but better and deeper.

*1Peter 1: <sup>3</sup>Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*

And so as God’s sovereignty and mercy are clearly on display as Jesus goes to the cross in our place, as he rises from death with all authority and offers life to all who trust him, we are assured that we are truly safe, whatever our circumstances, because God cares, is with us, and is merciful.

Listen to how Paul puts it in Romans 8: *If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? <sup>35</sup> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? <sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, <sup>39</sup> neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Isn’t that true safety? To know that not even death itself will separate you from the love of God, because in the Gospel we share in Jesus’ victory over death.

To know he is with you and cares for you even down to the mundane and ordinary parts of life – and that nothing can happen to you in life and death that is outside of his control, his power, and his goodness.

That’s the kind of safety and comfort our friends and neighbours, our city, country, and world need, what they are searching and longing for. But do you see it? Just as with Elisha’s servant or the Aramean army, we need God to open our eyes, removing our blindness to see and savour reality.

And so if you are not yet a believer in Jesus watching tonight, someone that knows and enjoys this safety, then pray that God would give it you, eyes to see. Call out to Jesus who is not far from anybody. And if you have questions still, get in touch, sign up for Christianity explored.

Come to see Jesus clearly and know his love and care and mercy, to have living hope. But if you have already done that, if you’re a believer in Jesus listening tonight, the wonderful events of



2Kings 6 show us that the clearer the sight we have of who our God is revealed to us in Jesus, his care and presence meeting his power and mercy, the less we will fear the troubles and challenges in life.

And I imagine for lots of us we live in scary times. There is so much uncertainty, health challenges, loss of work, isolation from friends and family. Many things that may cause us fear and anxiety.

We too must pray we'd not just see but live in light of our God's rich mercy poured out to us in Jesus. His intimate care and provision every day, his presence protection that makes us more than conquerors, for not even death can rob us of our safety in Christ who rose from the dead.

As one author put it, "Christianity is not an umbrella that keeps us from getting wet, but an anchor for our souls through any storm."

All we have in Christ is always bigger and better than we can see or even imagine, so day by day we must pray and long for God to show us again, and show us more.

So look to and cling to Jesus in whom we are truly safe. As Dane Ortlund says to finish his book, "The Christian life boils down to two steps:

Step 1) Go to Jesus; 2) See step #1"

Let's pray.