

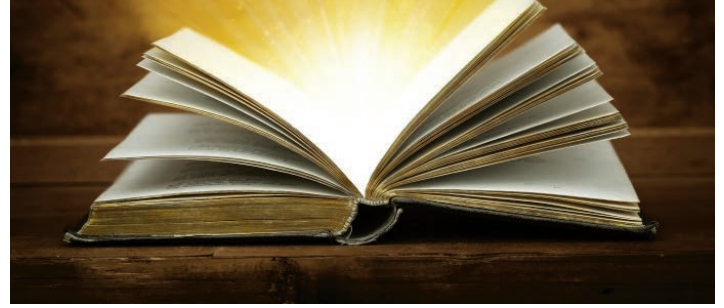
2 Kings 6-7

Lesson 109

Wednesday, November 9, 2022

Overview of the Bible

1 and 2 KINGS



The Floating Axe Head, the Defeat of the Syrians, the Siege of Samaria

THE FLOATING AXE HEAD (6:1–7)

6:1–4a. Another incident involving **the company of the prophets** follows. At one of their schools their accommodations had become inadequate because of the growing number of young men, a tribute to the effectiveness of Elisha's ministry. This may have been the school at Jericho since the young men went to the nearby **Jordan** River for their wood. They intended to **build** new facilities at a new site **there**. **Elisha** gave his permission for this project and agreed to accompany the workmen.

6:4b–7. In the process of cutting **down trees** an **iron axe head** flew off its handle and **fell into the** river. The man wielding the axe **cried out** to his **lord** (i.e., to Elisha) in dismay because his tool had been **borrowed**. Ascertaining **where** the axe head had fallen into the water **Elisha** threw **a stick** into the river. Miraculously **the iron** implement floated to the surface. The workman was able to retrieve it easily.

Certainly, this miracle encouraged the group of faithful followers of the Lord that their God really is alive and that He would supernaturally provide for their needs even though many Israelites in that day had turned from the true God to Baal.

THE BLINDING OF THE ARAMEAN ARMY (6:8–23)

6:8–10. As mentioned previously the Arameans were sometimes **at war** and sometimes at peace **with Israel** during the years of Elisha's ministry. At the time of this particular incident **the Arameans** were making profitable surprise raids into Israel. **The king of Aram** (cf. 5:1) was probably Ben-Hadad II. (Of the major persons in this narrative only Elisha is mentioned by name. This may suggest that readers should focus on the Lord and His prophet.) In preparation for another raid Ben-Hadad planned to pitch his **camp** on the border of Israel from which he could strike unexpectedly. However, **God** informed **Elisha** of the place and the prophet passed his information on **to the king of Israel** (Joram) with a warning to **beware**. Joram **checked** Elisha's information, found it to be correct, prepared for the encounter, and frustrated Ben-Hadad's secret attack. This happened several times.

6:11–14. **Enraged** by his continual failure to surprise the Israelites Ben-Hadad concluded that one of his men was tipping off the enemy. An officer assured **the king** that there were no traitors in his camp but that it was **Elisha** who had supernatural knowledge of all his plans. **The very words you speak in your bedroom** mean even his most private conversations were known to the prophet. Obviously, this officer had somehow learned of Elisha and his powers.

As long as Elisha remained free the army of Aram would be unsuccessful, so Ben-Hadad ordered that he be located and captured. He stealthily sent a strong contingent of soldiers with **horses and chariots.... by night** and completely surrounded **Dothan** (12 miles north of Samaria), where Elisha was staying. The fact that Ben-Hadad would try to take Elisha by surprise even after the prophet had repeatedly anticipated the Arameans' moves indicates the king's lack of faith in the supernatural origin of Elisha's ability. Therefore, he needed to be convinced that Yahweh is the living and true God.

6:15–17. Since Gehazi had been dismissed as a disobedient servant and “leper” (5:27), the Naaman story must follow this one if Elisha's **servant** here is Gehazi. Or this servant may be someone who replaced Gehazi. **Early the next morning** the servant was terrified to see that **the whole city** was under the Arameans' control, or so he thought. He returned in a frenzy to Elisha and nervously asked, **What shall we do?** The servant's anxiety reflected his lack of understanding and trust in the Lord which, one would think, Elisha's previous revelations would have changed.

Elisha was not at all disturbed by the present situation. He encouraged his aide to stop fearing and assured him that they had behind them a force superior to that of the enemy. **Elisha** then asked the **LORD** to enable his servant to see this host and the Lord did so. He gave the servant the ability to **see** the normally unseen world of invisible spirits (angels) that are constantly ready to do God's bidding (cf. Gen. 28:12). The **hills** around Dothan were filled with superior **horses and chariots**. These appeared as fiery agents of God suggesting to the servant their superterrestrial origin (cf. 2 Kings 2:11). **The LORD** had surrounded the armies of Aram and was in control.

6:18–20. Proceeding with a divinely revealed strategy **Elisha** called on God to blind the Arameans as they began to converge on Dothan, and God did so.

Elisha said, **This is not the road and this is not the city** for that road and **city** were not where God intended them to go. They unknowingly followed Elisha **inside** the walls of **Samaria**, the capital of Israel. What the Israelite army might not have been able to do except with much fighting and loss of life, God did peacefully through one man. In response to Elisha's prayer God opened **the eyes of** the Arameans and they discovered that they were surrounded and helpless captives at the mercy of the king of Israel.

6:21–23. Joram, realizing that **Elisha** was in control, and almost hysterical because of his good fortune, **asked** the prophet, whom he respectfully addressed as his **father** (cf. 5:13), if he should **kill** his prisoners. Elisha said no. Joram probably would not have killed soldiers captured in battle and furthermore God's purpose was not to destroy the Arameans' lives but to save the Israelites' lives. The king then assured them of this in an unusual way. By setting a **great feast** before the soldiers he was expressing confidence in God's ability to control the enemy; Israel had absolutely nothing to fear and could even treat these soldiers as friends because God had them in His sovereign power. In the ancient Near East eating together under one's roof constituted making a covenant of peace (J. Herbert Livingston, *The Pentateuch in Its Cultural Environment*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974, p. 157). The Arameans were now bound by social custom not to attack the friend who had extended his gift of hospitality and protection. For these reasons the Arameans **stopped raiding Israel's territory** for a time.

The reference to the soldiers returning **to their master** suggests that King Ben-Hadad II was not part of the force that had been sent to capture Elisha (cf. 6:13). Evidently this was just part of the total Aramean army.

This incident demonstrates Yahweh is His people's defense. So, to depart from Him was the height of folly. Israel's victory by means of God's prophet rather than by warriors undoubtedly encouraged many in Israel and Aram to fear the Almighty God.

THE FAMINE IN SAMARIA (6:24–7:20)

Joram and the nation of Israel failed to turn back to the Lord as a result of the previous incident. Consequently, God sent a more severe situation to draw them back to Himself.

(1) The desperate condition (6:24–31).

6:24–25. **Sometime** after the events narrated in verses 1–23 **Ben-Hadad II** tried again to defeat Israel. This time instead of sending raiding parties (cf. “bands” in v. 23), he **mobilized his entire army** and besieged **Samaria**. Since no one could leave or enter the capital, **a great famine** resulted. It was so severe that one **donkey’s head**, one of the least nourishing and most repulsive parts of this animal, unclean to the Israelites, became a highly valued commodity selling **for 80 shekels** (ca. two pounds) **of silver**. Approximately a half pint **of seed pods**, normally considered animal fodder, cost **5 shekels** (ca. two ounces) of silver.

6:26–27. Joram’s reply (**Where can I get help for you?**) to **a woman** who called **to him** revealed his frustration. He was angry with **the LORD** for permitting this situation (cf. v. 33). God had promised that such conditions would discipline His people if they turned from Him (Lev. 26:29; Deut. 28:53, 57). Joram sarcastically told the woman that he could not provide bread **from the grain** on the **threshing floor** or wine **from the grapes** in the **winepress**; he was not greater than God was supposed to be.

6:28–31. Having vented his frustration with these words, the king then invited the woman to explain her problem. She said that a friend had persuaded her to cook her **son** but **the next day**, when the friend was to cook **her ... son ... she had hidden him**. Learning the desperate extent to which the siege had driven his people, **the king** angrily **tore his robes**, an expression of deep distress and sorrow (cf. 2:12; 5:7; 11:14). **Sackcloth**, coarse material made from black goat’s hair, was worn as a symbol of repentance and self-affliction. But Joram’s repentance seems to have been rather shallow in view of his attitude toward God’s servant **Elisha**. Rather than dealing with the real cause of God’s discipline, his own apostasy, Joram blamed Elisha who had perhaps only explained the reason for Israel’s condition. In oath (**May God deal with me, be it ever so severely**; cf. 1 Kings 2:23; 20:10) the king swore to put the prophet to death that very day (cf. Elijah’s experience, 1 Kings 19:2).

(2) THE PROPHECIES OF DELIVERANCE (6:32–7:2).

6:32. **The elders** who **were sitting with Elisha in his house** (cf. 5:9) were the officials of the land. Perhaps they were meeting with the prophet to discuss what should be done. Warned by God, **Elisha** announced that the king was **sending someone** to have him beheaded. Joram did not realize that **Elisha** was the solution to his problems rather than their source. The prophet’s instruction to **the elders** to bar **the door** against the executioner was evidently intended to postpone any violence until Joram himself would arrive. (**Is not the sound of his master’s footsteps behind him?**) The instruction would also give Elisha opportunity to announce God’s message of imminent deliverance.

6:33. When Joram did arrive he asked Elisha why he should **wait ... any longer** for God to act. Apparently, Elisha had told Joram that God had said he should not surrender to Ben-Hadad but should wait for divine deliverance. Since that help was not forthcoming Joram had decided to take matters into his own hands. As he had done many times before he was disobeying the orders of his Lord through Elisha, acting as an unfaithful administrator (cf. 1 Sam. 15:11). Since, as Joram stated, the **disaster** (the siege and the famine) was **from the LORD**, the king should have obeyed Him.

7:1–2. **Elisha** then announced a prophecy. Within 24 hours the siege would be over and there would be plenty to eat. **A seah** (ca. seven quarts) **of flour** would **sell for a shekel** (about two-fifths of an ounce) **and two seahs** (ca. 13–14 quarts) **of barley** (for cattle to eat) would sell for the same price (cf. v. 16) **at the gate of** the city where business of this sort was normally transacted. These prices were not unusually low but compared with what the people had been paying during the famine (cf. 6:25) they were great bargains.

The officer assisting Joram (cf. 7:17 and the comments on 5:8) found this prophecy incredible. His retort expressed his utter disbelief that **God** would or could do this. **Elisha** replied that the officer would **see** the miracle **with his own eyes**; it would indeed take place. But because of his unbelief he would not experience the blessing (cf. 7:17).

(3) THE LEPERS' DISCOVERY (7:3–9).

7:3–4. The **four** lepers may have been housed in huts just outside **the city gate**; they were isolated from contact with non-lepers in Israel. Of their three options, they correctly concluded that their best choice lay in giving themselves up to **the Arameans**. They might be killed but, they reasoned, that would be better than dying gradually of starvation.

7:5–7. Entering **the camp of the Arameans** (apparently at night; cf. **dusk**, v. 7, “daylight,” v. 9, and “night,” v. 12) the lepers found that the enemy soldiers had **fled**. The writer explained the reason for the soldiers' departure. **The Lord had caused them to hear** noises from the north and the south that made them think the armies of the Hittites (who earlier had lived in the area now called Turkey but were now living in enclaves in Aram) and the Egyptians were descending on them. They supposed these were reinforcements **hired** by the Israelites. So, at **dusk** they retreated eastward toward their homeland. So great was their haste that **they left** many of their animals and supplies behind.

7:8–9. At first the lepers filled their own stomachs and pockets and even **hid** some of their treasure so that they could retrieve it later. But gradually their sense of duty to their fellow Samaritans convicted them. Also, they reasoned that if they failed to **report** the situation, others would discover in the morning that the enemy had fled, and they would be punished for not announcing the situation to the starving population. Rather than suffer as criminals they preferred to be treated as heroes. So, they decided to return to Samaria and proclaim their **good news**.

(4) THE CAUTIOUS INVESTIGATION (7:10–15).

7:10–12. The lepers returned to Samaria and told **the city gatekeepers** their story. The news spread like wildfire through the city during **the night** (cf. vv. 9, 11). But **the king** suspected a trap. He calculated that since **the Arameans** had not been able to break into Samaria, they had planned this apparent retreat to draw the Samaritans **out**, leaving **the city** open to invasion.

7:13–15. **One of** Joram's **officers** proposed sending only **five** horsemen out to scout **the Aramean** camp. If these soldiers were caught their deaths would **only be** hastened; he thought death was inescapable for all the people in Samaria. Joram liked this plan. So, he ordered **two chariots with their horses**, risking four horses (not five as had been suggested) to follow the supposedly fleeing Aramean **army**. The chariot **drivers** followed a trail of discarded **clothing and equipment** all the way to **the Jordan** River, about 25 miles from Samaria. Israel's enemy then had crossed the Jordan and was far away. The drivers **returned** to Samaria and announced the good news **to the king**.

(5) THE FULFILLMENT OF ELISHA'S PREDICTIONS.

7:16–20. **The king** apparently through the gates open before the excited multitudes who streamed out to find food and booty. Those who found the food first were able to sell it to their neighbors for the same prices **the Lord had** predicted through Elisha (cf. v. 1). So heavy was the traffic through the **gate** that **the officer** who assisted the king (cf. v. 2 and the comment on 5:18) and who had been stationed there to ensure an orderly departure was **trampled** to death. This man had ridiculed God's ability to do what He said He would do (cf. v. 2). The fate that Elisha had predicted overtook him.

Yahweh, not Baal, provides food; in fact, God even foretold exactly when He would provide it. The remarkable way in which God kept the Samaritans safe and sustained them should have turned them and **the king** back to Him. God's future discipline of the Israelites can be understood better in the light of their rejection of His many gracious and miraculous provisions for them.¹

¹ Thomas L. Constable, “2 Kings,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 549–552.