

NOTES AND QUESTIONS ON THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS - PART THREE - CHAPTERS 6-8

In the section of the book which begins in chapter 4, a series of miracles God performed through Elisha are described. They have a common theme, God's gift of life through Jesus Christ - limitless oil, a son miraculously born and restored to life, food instead of poison, bread for all, and cleansing from leprosy. There is also a powerful warning - God's gift is without price. If we dare to charge for what God has given freely, we make ourselves rather than Jesus the bearers of sin.

In the chapters that follow, Elisha's life continues to illustrate the work of the Lord Jesus.

CHAPTER SIX reveals first a little more of Elisha's ministry to the small group called the sons of the prophets, prophets in training like the disciples of Jesus in the New Testament. They wanted their 'Bible school' to grow as we want our part of the church of Jesus Christ to grow. They started work with energy and enthusiasm but soon disaster struck; one man's axe-head flew off and landed in the river Jordan. If the sharp cutting edge is a picture of the word of God which cuts into men's hearts to reveal their need of Jesus, (Eph.6:17; Heb.4:12) there is a warning here of why our message is so often ineffective. It is borrowed from what we have heard or read from others rather than being given to us first hand by God Himself. Elisha's solution was very simple, a branch cut off and thrown down into seeming death in the Jordan, the river the Israelites crossed to enter the Promised Land and the place where John baptised. Repeatedly a branch is a picture of Jesus (Isa.11:1; Jer.23:5; Zech.3:8) cut off in death but raised up in resurrection to become the one who lives in us and teaches us first hand so that the word of God becomes our own. Only then does our witness of Him become really fruitful and growth occur.

The story returns to the long running conflict between Aram and Israel. Aram was larger and stronger yet God intervened again and again on Israel's behalf despite the very half-hearted faith of Israel and her leaders. His instrument was Elisha who repeatedly warned the king of Israel of the movements of the king of Aram with a God-given wisdom. The king of Aram thought he could solve his problem by killing Elisha and so he surrounded his home at Dothan, the same place at which Joseph's brothers had planned to kill him. (Gen.37:17) To Elisha's servant, Gehazi, the situation looked hopeless. God then did two miracles, the first of sight and the second of blindness. Gehazi's eyes were opened to see the vastly superior army of God. The Aramean army's eyes were closed in blindness so that they could be meekly led into a trap in the city of Samaria. This picture of God given sight or blindness is a common one in the New Testament. (Jn.9:39; II Cor.4:4) When the king of Israel wanted to take the opportunity of killing his enemies, Elisha refused to let him take advantage of what God had done. Like David with Saul he was to love his enemies. (I Sam.24 and 26) Instead of killing he was told to feed them when their sight had been restored, to bless them instead of punishing them. They went away deeply convicted.

The king of Aram raised a new army and returned to besiege the city which resulted in terrible famine and suffering. Prices soared, people began to cheat each other in cruel ways. The king decided to blame Elisha who had previously been his saviour, and planned to kill him. Elisha as usual knew exactly what was going on.

CHAPTER SEVEN continues the story. Elisha made an outrageous prediction that by the following day food would be plentiful, prices would be down and his would-be murderer would be dead. Unknown to anyone the Lord had sent panic among the Arameans who had run away leaving food, clothing, money and weapons in abundance. First to discover God's victory were 4 lepers who went out to the enemy camp having nothing to lose because they were already starving

outcasts. In the New Testament it was often the rejects of society who were the first to discover the goodness of God through Jesus.(Lk.2:8-20; Jn.4:7; 8:3) Like Christians overwhelmed with the blessings of God, they realised they had to share what they had found even if they were rejected. They returned to those who had avoided them with impressive evidence of what God had done. In the stampede of Israelites rushing to share in God's goodness, the official sent to kill Elisha was trampled under foot, exactly as predicted.

CHAPTER EIGHT describes more of the kings of Judah, Israel and Aram all of whom had been deeply affected by Elisha's ministry to a point where to a greater or lesser extent they listened to what he said, particularly at times of crisis. The chapter begins with Gehazi telling the king of Israel of the miracles Elisha had done. To confirm the truth of what he said, the woman from Shunem and her resurrected son returned from Philistia where they had escaped the famine as living proof, just at that moment. The king had no hesitation in restoring her land which might otherwise have been forfeited.

Next it was the turn of the king of Aram to ask Elisha whether he would recover from his sickness. Elisha was faced with an extraordinary dilemma. God gave him two opposite pieces of information - yes, the king would recover from his illness, but no he would die, murdered by Hazael the very messenger who was asking the question! Elisha was very moved by his own message - and confronted Hazael with his intended crime - but he did it anyway!

A new king, Jehoram, came to the throne of Judah. Despite his godly father he turned away from God. Marrying Ahab's daughter would not have helped. Fancy having Jezebel as your mother-in-law! Edom rebelled against a weak king in Judah who did not last long. He was replaced by his son, Ahaziah, whose reign was also short. He too was under the influence of his grandmother, Jezebel. The two kings of Judah and Israel again united against a common enemy but because neither had a faith in God, their battle did not go well. The shadow of Jezebel still hung heavily over both families!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND FURTHER STUDY

Q.1 Why is it that a 'second-hand' Bible message is ineffective? Look for other examples in the Bible of the same problem. Just how does our message become our own instead of being borrowed? How does our teaching of young Christians cause or avoid this problem? What insight does the story in the second part of chapter 6 give us into why the world is so against those who are willing to be the mouthpiece of God? How does this story illustrate the very opposite ways in which believers and unbelievers see the same situation?

Q.2 How does chapter 7 again illustrate the very different way in which believers and unbelievers see the world in which we live? Why is it that so often the gospel, 'the surpassing riches of His grace'(Eph.2:7) remains a secret for most people? How can we personally make a difference in a needy world?

Q.3 Discuss how God uses the testimony of those who have been blessed by God to influence leaders even if they do not have a personal faith. How did God use His servant Elisha to gain the attention of unbelieving politicians? How does the story in chapter 8 demonstrate the danger of marrying into a family who do not share our faith?