

OLD TESTAMENT FIGURES

Elisha

An army you can count, an army you cannot, and a victory spent on dinner

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, March 6, 2022
PASSAGES	2 Kings 6:8-23; 2 Kings 2:9-12; 2 Kings 2:23-25; 2 Kings 4:32-37; Romans 5:8; Romans 6:23; Revelation 3:20
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:09:58 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

A foreign army came for one prophet and went home fed. The victory was not Israel's to spend, because Israel had not won it — God had, single-handedly, in a dimension nobody could see until their eyes were opened. That is the shape of the gospel: Christ subdues his enemies with mercy, at his own expense, and the enemies are us.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ♦ Matt reads the Old Testament in order on purpose, by what he calls the law of proportionality: if God thinks something matters, it comes up a lot. Choosing your own favourite passages builds a God of your own design.
- ♦ The Old Testament story so far is dark on its own terms, and the refrain under all of it is that the wages of sin is death. What keeps happening anyway is that God rescues, in Matt's words, "pagans and weirdos."
- ♦ The strange stories clustered around Elisha — the soup, the loaves, the bears, the oil, the raised son — are God credentialing a successor. Not everyone who claims to speak for the Lord actually does.
- ♦ Elisha's servant panicked over the army he could count and missed the one he could not. The horses and chariots of fire were on the hills before anyone's eyes were opened.

- ◆ A foreign king feared Yahweh more than Israel did. When God's people will not display his name, he is able to make a reputation for himself anyway.
- ◆ "Shall I strike them down?" was a reasonable question with an easy answer. Elisha refused on one ground: it was not Israel's sword and not Israel's bow.
- ◆ Mercy was expensive — a great feast for a great army — and at the cross it cost everything. We were not God's friends when we were seated at his table.

► 1:09:58

Matt took the microphone on a communion Sunday and started by naming the theme that had already been running all morning: blessing instead of cursing, victory instead of mourning, gardens instead of graves. Bob and Marisa had just walked the room through an ancient wine press and an empty tomb. If God has given you a victory where there was loss, Matt said, tell somebody — confess it out loud, because that is a huge faith builder and the body needs to hear it. Then he explained, again, why the church is working through the Old Testament the slow way.

1. Why we are doing this the slow way

► 1:13:52

He laid out the sermons he could preach instead, and he was candid that each one has real verses behind it. He could find all the law and the hard passages, camp there and go to town — he noted that this plays well in some parts of Christendom, because "some people feel good when they feel bad, because feeling bad to them means conviction." Or he could do the exact opposite and preach only the verses you would put on a pillow, leaning into what he called the cult of kindness — "the church of Jehovah Sweet Pea," where the only aggressive material is Jesus being hard on religious people. He could preach the supernatural and the miraculous, which the Bible supplies in quantity. Or he could follow the great apologists of the age and show how rational and reasonable Christianity is.

All of those have passages. All of them, he said, would still be "a distortion of my own design." His reason for the discipline was personal: "I personally don't feel like I trust myself to just navigate what God is like on my own instincts." So: read all of it. If God thinks something is important it will come up a lot, and if it is a side issue to him you will not see it often. The second reason is simpler. The Old Testament is Scripture, and when we are intimidated by it we do not read it, and then it becomes "that whole section in the middle" where we cannot even name the books. "But there's gold in there."

2. Pagans and weirdos

► 1:16:35

The recap moved fast. Everyone comes from Adam — and Eve came from his side, which is part of why Adam is such a clean type of Christ: they all fit inside him. When he was removed from the garden, Matt pressed on what he actually lost. People assume it was the presence of God, as though God were stuck in the garden like a terrarium. What was fenced off was the tree of life. Truly the wages of sin is death.

Then the first children anyone raised — the first people we can recognise as ordinary humans rather than miraculous ones — and one of them murders the other. “Classic human.” The picture of humanity starts dark, Matt said, and he is not importing that: “it’s really there, and it’s really dark, and honestly if you looked around you could see it too.” The flood. Sodom and Gomorrah.

And then God makes a nation out of a dead end. He picks a man and a wife far too old to have children and builds an entire people where there was none, in order to bless and to reveal himself. Blessing whom? The same screwy people we have already been reading about. Joseph is used to save Egypt, Jacob’s family and Canaan — “in other words, who is he saving? Pagans and weirdos.” Moses: a lost and helpless people, barely crying out, and God raises a deliverer. Judges and Kings run the same loop, with God rescuing and revealing himself again and again. “Truly humanity deserves to be kicked out of the garden, and yet God exalts himself. We see that the wages of sin is death — but all this time we’re also seeing that God prefers mercy.”

3. Why it matters that Elisha is the successor

► 1:19:37

The immediate context is Elijah, who brought the nation to its knees by declaring there would be no rain except by his word. Elisha travelled with him as a companion inside a company of prophets ministering to the Lord. That company mattered more, not less, once the kingdom split: two often-wayward nation states needed a check, a voice calling out. Elisha asked for a double portion, which Elijah could not grant — it could only come from heaven — and he was told to keep his eyes on Elijah as he was taken. Matt was precise here: the chariot is the distraction, and the whirlwind is what takes him up.

Succession is the point. Who can authoritatively speak for God is important, and later kings will shop among prophets until they find one who says what they want. So God stamps this man publicly, which is why the oddest stories sit right here — fixing the poisoned soup, multiplying the barley loaves — and why Matt took a tangent into the one nobody enjoys.

► 1:21:08

“It’s in the Bible, and if it’s weird it’s probably important.” In [2 Kings 2:23–25](#), forty-two young men jeer at Elisha — “go up, baldy” — and bears come out of the woods. We hear “boys” and picture six-year-olds. That Hebrew word is used of Ishmael as a teenager, of Shechem when he assaulted Jacob’s daughter and stirred up a whole city, of Joseph a couple of years before he became vizier, of Solomon several years into his reign, and of Jeremiah speaking about himself. “I don’t know if you’ve seen a group of forty-two teens all antagonising a person, but if there was not a threat, Elisha could have kept walking.” Why bears? Because [peace from wild animals was a covenant blessing](#), and Israel had already [chosen her path](#) — the protection was lifted. Why forty-two he does not know, though he noted the [forty-two of Ahaziah’s house killed later in the same book](#), and left it as a possible echo rather than a claim. And the taunt itself is the tell: [Elijah was a hairy man](#). The mocking question is whether this is even the right guy.

The miracles answer it by rhyme. Elijah had [a widow, miraculous oil, and a son raised from death](#). Elisha has [a widow and miraculous oil, and a wealthy woman’s son raised from death](#). Different women, different sons, same signature. “This is my guy, listen to him. This is my guy, listen to him.” The whole nation hears it, over and over — which is exactly what the next story depends on.

4. The prophet in the war room

► 1:23:57

“Once when the king of Syria was warring against Israel, he took counsel with his servants, saying, ‘At such and such a place shall be my camp.’ But the man of God sent word to the king of Israel, ‘Beware that you do not pass this place, for the Syrians are going down there.’ And the king of Israel sent to the place about which the man of God told him. Thus he used to warn him, so that he saved himself there more than once or twice.”

2 KINGS 6:8–10 ↗

Elisha knows the Syrian plans before the Syrians execute them, because God tells him. And because he is heeded, he has saved Israel’s bacon at least three times — the text says more than once or twice.

► 1:25:30

The king of Syria draws the obvious conclusion: there is a leak.

“Will you not show me who of us is for the king of Israel?” One of his servants corrects him — it is Elisha the prophet, who tells the king of Israel the words you speak in your own bedroom. Matt lingered on how good that is: a foreign nation has learned to fear the power of Yahweh through his spokesman. “If the nation of Israel is not going to be faithful and shine light to the world, then God can

still find a way to make a reputation for himself.” The king’s plan is to seize the prophet, which has one flaw — if he always knows where you are going, he knows this too. Elisha is at Dothan, and Syria sends horses and chariots and a great army by night to surround a small city for the sake of one man. That is how frightening it is to deal with a prophet. We do not see Israel fearing the Lord in this story. We see Syria doing it.

5. More with us than with them

► 1:28:11

“When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. And the servant said, ‘Alas, my master, what shall we do?’ He said, ‘Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.’ Then Elisha prayed and said, ‘O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see.’ So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.”

2 KINGS 6:15-17 ↗

Elisha is cool as a cucumber; the servant is not, and Matt guessed his question came out more frantic than the text makes it look. He also had fun with the servant’s first attempt to make sense of the answer: more with us than with them — who, the men of Dothan? The guys at the market? “I’ve seen those guys.” Israel’s army is not here; later details put it in Samaria.

► 1:29:22

Then his eyes open, and the words repeat with one addition. Horses and chariots, on the hills, on fire. Picture it as concentric circles: Elisha and his servant, the city around them, a foreign army around the city, and a heavenly army around that. Who, Matt asked, is besieging whom. And the question he left hanging is the better one: how long has that army of fire been there? It is not brand new. “What else is going on out there that I can’t see?”

6. “This is not the city”

► 1:30:45

“And when the Syrians came down against him, Elisha prayed to the Lord and said, ‘Please strike this people with blindness.’ So he struck them with blindness in accordance with the prayer of Elisha. And Elisha said to them, ‘This is not the way, and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom you seek.’ And he led them to Samaria.”

2 KINGS 6:18–19 ↗

The Hebrew is simply “when they came down,” and since the chariots of fire are up on the hills, it is not actually clear who is descending — the Syrians, or the heavenly host. What is clear is that something has started moving.

► 1:32:13

Matt checked the word for blindness. It appears only twice in the Bible: here, and when the angels strike the men at Lot’s door so that they wear themselves out groping for it. Blindness or confusion, he could not say — you cannot hold the hands of an entire army and lead it. What is certain is that they are being thoroughly misled, and that where they are being led is where they probably ought to go: Samaria, the capital of the northern tribes, where there is at least a garrison. He also noted the nerve of it, and said plainly what the scene looks like: if you were standing there watching, you would have no words, because here is the prophet of God kind of fibbing — this is not the city, and you do not have the right guy. “To have the guts to just say that is impressive — and then to watch them just go, okay.” Chariots keep sounding through this stretch of Elisha’s life; they were there when he received the double portion, and in the very next chapter a Syrian army abandons its camp because it hears a cacophony of horses and chariots that are not there.

7. “Shall I strike them down?”

► 1:34:35

Inside the walls Elisha prays again and their eyes are opened. Matt stopped to name it: eyes opening is a motif running right through this story — the servant’s on the hillside, the Syrians’ shut on the road, and now the Syrians’ opened inside the walls. No swords drawn, no formation, just a foreign army standing in the middle of the enemy capital, dawdling, surrounded now by drawn bows. “That would have been a weird sight.”

“As soon as the king of Israel saw them, he said to Elisha, ‘My father, shall I strike them down? Shall I strike them down?’ He answered, ‘You shall not strike them down. Would you strike down those whom 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 for them a great feast, and when they had eaten and drunk, he sent them away, and they went to their master. And the Syrians did not come again on raids into the land of Israel.”

2 KINGS 6:21–23 ↗

The king asks twice, and Matt read that as eagerness. “What a victory on a silver platter. That would be my kind of warfare. I would like that if I was a general, your honour.” He was honest that it was not an unreasonable request: there are real battles before and after this one, Syria was the aggressor, these are soldiers, and ending the raids permanently was on the table. “My father” is a term of genuine respect for a man God has firmly established. And the refusal turns on one fact only. Was it your sword? Was it your bow? “You didn’t do anything to get these guys.” Matt left the general question open — prisoners of war may be struck down, maybe not, he was not arguing that — because that is not where the emphasis sits. The emphasis is whose sword and whose bow it was, and he answered his own question out loud: “It was the Lord.”

8. An expensive meal

► 1:37:02

Matt would not let the feast stay abstract. The text does not say rations, it says provisions, and it says great — and this is the same great army that encircled Dothan. “Have you ever fed a small battalion? You’re like, well, come to my house at dinner.” Somebody had to serve it, which means Israelites moving among Syrian soldiers, and he wondered aloud whether they were feasting alongside them; the text records no aggression at all. He tried it from the soldier’s side: “I came to attack a prophet. I don’t know what happened. The next thing I know it’s the end of the day and I’m in a totally different city and now they’re feeding me. Am I dreaming? Am I captured? I don’t feel captured. I feel full.” Then they walked home to their master — who, Matt said, undoubtedly got a revelation about the God of Israel out of that meal. The news travelled up.

Men who marched all day, camped overnight, walked from Dothan to Samaria, nervous and rationing their own food. It cost something real. And the raids stopped — not by treaty but by reputation. “Let’s go down to Israel and raid.” “No, that’s freaky down there. Let’s invade someone else.” Why? Because the God of Israel made a name for himself. Four things are true at once: God subdued his people’s enemies with mercy, he did it with a spiritual dimension in play that was likely there all along, he did it single-handedly and not by Israel’s weapons, and the mercy was expensive.

9. A type of the Last Supper

► 1:39:44

“This is all a type of the Last Supper.” When we were invited to sit at the table with the Lord, Matt said, we were not his besties yet.

“But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

ROMANS 5:8 ↗

He is making a way and a path and a meal for his enemies — “not that he was enemying us, but that we were enemying him.” The four parallels land in order. Christ subdues his enemies with mercy. He subdues them in a battle fought where we cannot watch it. He does it single-handedly. And the meal is expensive, because this time the cost is his own life. It could have been a slaughter, and on the evidence of everything the series has read so far, nobody would have been surprised — the wages of sin is death “and boy do we deserve it.” Instead there was a feast. “We are that enemy soldier, just following orders, or antagonising, or loving it.” And because of the mercy of God, he fought against us and subdued us with his very own kindness. “That is Christ our Lord.”

10. Remember how far away you were

► 1:41:05

The application was pastoral and specific. When you feel wayward — a bad week, or something you did that you know was wrong — go back to the terms of the original invitation. “Remember you were invited in when you were frothing at the mouth, when you were a total enemy, poison filling our veins. That’s when he invited us in.” If you have gone off the beaten path, remember how far away you were when he first called you. He is committed, there is still a place for you at his table, and that is how he subdues us — unconventionally, but really. He is still pursuing us, still offering to let us join into his very own death and his very own life, still setting a feast before us, and still knocking and still bidding us come in and dine with him — his enemies.

► 1:42:24

And then he turned it outward, which is where the story was always going. “These are odd, weird, clownish times we live in. We feel like we’re just surrounded by antagonism, and we often get into that crush-them mentality.” But what is the heart of the Lord? He does intend to subdue his enemies — with his own victory, and his own death, in his own body. Matt closed by praying it over the room rather than preaching it: thanks for the victory, for Christ’s body and blood, for God feasting with us, and a

request that he would woo us back into his presence all over again. “I want you to subdue us with your mercies, subdue our city with your kindness, subdue our nation with your love.” Then the ordinary dismissal, which on this Sunday was not ordinary at all: come forward if you are prepared to pray with folks, and otherwise go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- [Genesis 3:22–24](#)
- [Romans 6:23](#)
- [Genesis 4:8](#)
- [Genesis 18:11](#)
- [1 Kings 17:1](#)
- [2 Kings 2:9–12](#)
- [2 Kings 4:38–41](#)
- [2 Kings 4:42–44](#)
- [2 Kings 2:23–25](#)
- [Leviticus 26:6](#)
- [Deuteronomy 30:19](#)
- [2 Kings 10:14](#)
- [2 Kings 1:8](#)
- [1 Kings 17:8–24](#)
- [2 Kings 4:1–7](#)
- [2 Kings 4:32–37](#)
- [2 Kings 6:8–10](#)
- [2 Kings 6:11–14](#)
- [2 Kings 6:15–17](#)
- [2 Kings 6:18–19](#)
- [Genesis 19:11](#)
- [2 Kings 7:6](#)
- [2 Kings 6:20](#)
- [2 Kings 6:21–23](#)
- [Romans 5:8](#)
- [Revelation 3:20](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Matt said he does not trust his own instincts to tell him what God is like, so he reads the whole Bible in order. Which part of Scripture do you quietly skip, and what might it be keeping from you?
2. Elisha's servant reckoned carefully with the army he could count and missed the one he could not. Where are you doing your arithmetic on visible forces only?
3. The king's question was reasonable, and Elisha's answer turned on whose sword won the victory. What win in your life are you tempted to spend as though you had earned it?
4. Matt described the crush-them mentality we fall into when we feel surrounded by antagonism. Who comes to mind, and what would it mean to pray for them as someone God intends to subdue with kindness?
5. Remember how far away you were when he first called you. What does that memory change this week — one table you could set, or one person you could feed?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJ_9lWYa_GU&t=4198s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.