

## **Chariots of Fire**

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Rev. Peter Jonker

2 Kings 6:8-23

Years ago there used to be something called the Young Calvinist Convention, I would go to those conventions and I would be what they called, a 'Living Group Leader'. A living group leader is an adult who's assigned a small group of young people from all over the country. You meet twice each day—once in the morning and once at night—and you do a Bible study or a devotion together. It's not an easy job because you have got to get 8 high school boys to talk about faith and feelings.

When I was a living group leader, I always wanted to get my guys to see God at work in their lives every day. I wanted to teach them to keep their eyes open for God moving and working and acting and speaking. At the beginning of every day I would say to them, "I want you to find at least one incident or place today where you see God. Then tonight when we get back together we can report on our God sightings." I wish I could say to you that my little spiritual exercise was a huge success. I wish I could say to you that these young men came back with excited testimonies of places where they saw God. I wish I could say to you that the eyes of these young people were opened and they were forever changed. Unfortunately, the truth is a little different. At the end of the day the guys would come back and I would ask them where they'd seen God today, and they would squirm and mumble. There would be maybe one real answer and there would always be a couple of guys whose great vision of God was a girl they met down at the swimming pool. Not exactly a ringing success.

Spiritual sight is not easily acquired. It wasn't easy for these 16 year olds to see God at work in an ordinary day and let's be honest, it's not always easy for us either! Take today for instance, we are at the end of another day—a Sunday no less. If I were to sit you down individually and ask you 'where did you see God at work today, where did you see Him in action?' Would you be able to answer? I think most of us would have to think long and hard to come up with a real honest answer to that question. Spiritual sight is hard. Mostly we roll through our days with our eyes to the ground, our eyes and our hearts filled to the brim with our worries and the things we need to do. And in the course of that day we don't find ourselves stopping in our tracks saying 'O my goodness—there's God!' 2 Kings 6 is a story about spiritual sight. Let's read 2 Kings 6:8-23.

2 Kings 6 is a story about what happens when you get spiritual sight. When you read it carefully you see that the Bible is showing us that when we are given the ability to see God, our life is completely changed. When we become able to see God with us in our daily work and play, we become very different people. In fact, I see two big changes that come into your life and it is these that I want to share with you tonight.

The first change is confidence. Learning to see that God is walking beside you gives confidence. Of course this story doesn't start out with confidence, it starts out with the opposite. It starts out with terror. Elisha has been reading the mind of the King of Aram. The King is at war with Israel but every time he makes a decision about where he's going to put his troops, Elisha anticipates and tips off the Israelite army. Who needs spies when you have a prophet of the Lord. The king is annoyed enough that he sends a massive force to capture Elisha in Dothan. Men and horses and chariots—a whole division just to bring in one middle-aged man. They come in at night and completely surround the city. They want to make sure there is no way the prophet is getting out. In the morning Elisha's servant gets out of bed, puts on his robe, makes himself a coffee, walks out to open the front door, and he's about to lean over to pick up the morning paper when he sees that the town is surrounded by rather nasty looking soldiers and horses and chariots. And every spear on every chariot is tipped towards Elisha's house. Like the barrel of a hundred tanks pointed right at him and his master.

The servant does what anyone of us would do in this situation, he panics. He runs to his master and says, "Oh No! My Lord! What shall we do?!" The servant is sure that this is his last day on earth. There was no way he and his master could stop this mighty army. But Elisha is strangely calm, and says, "Don't worry we've got them outnumbered!" And then he prays that his servant might have spiritual sight, and the servant's eyes are opened and he sees that the hills are full of horses and chariots of fire. The army of God is there on their behalf. He is given spiritual sight and he suddenly realizes he doesn't need to be afraid. Spiritual sight gives him confidence in the face of his troubles.

I am willing to bet that none of you have ever woken up in the morning to find your house surrounded by angry armies in chariots. But I am also willing to bet that all of us have woken up many days to find ourselves

surrounded by a different sort of army. All of us wake up in the morning surrounded by an army of cares, surrounded by our duties, our troubles, surrounded by our problems. As we open our eyes and shake off our sleep, these armies surround us, they tilt their spears toward us and we can feel them closing in. And just like Elijah's servant our hearts cry out some version of, "Oh No! My Lord! What shall I do?!" In those moments, spiritual sight is just what we need.

Let me ask you a question. Do you think those chariots of fire and that army of angels were a one-time thing? Do you think that flaming army was only there on that day for Elisha, OR do you think that those chariots were there around Elisha every day? Of course they were there every day and I believe Elisha knew that. In fact, there's a good scriptural reason to think that Elisha knew that. Do you remember the day that the prophetic mantle got passed from Elijah to Elisha? How did that go? Elijah was taken up into heaven, right? What was it that took Elijah up into heaven? A chariot of fire! Do you by any chance remember what Elisha cried out as his master was taken up into heaven? "My Father My Father! The Chariots and the Horseman of Israel!" Elisha had already seen the chariots. He saw the chariots of fire and the host of the Lord. And I have to believe that from that day forward he walked in the confidence that the chariots of fire surrounded him every morning of his life.

They surround us too if only we have eyes to see. Richard John Neuhaus, the great Catholic thinker, died of cancer in 2009, but it was not his first brush with the disease. 16 years earlier he'd been very sick with colon cancer. He'd had major surgery to remove part of his colon and as he lay in his hospital room halfway between life and death, he saw something in his room. He had an episode of spiritual sight. Here's how he described it. "What I was staring at was a color like blue and purple, and vaguely in the form of hanging drapery. By the drapery were two 'presences.' And then the presences—one or both of them, I do not know—spoke. This I heard clearly. Not in an ordinary way, for I cannot remember anything about the voice. But the message was beyond mistaking: "Everything is ready now." That was it. They waited for a while, maybe for a minute. Whether they were waiting for a response or just waiting to see whether I had received the message, I don't know. "Everything is ready now." It was not in the form of a command, nor was it an invitation to do anything. They were just letting me know."

Neuhaus was a smart man and he knew that the further you get removed from experiences like this, the more you tend to doubt what you saw so he made a deal with himself: he was not going to let that happen. He made a mental note to himself to remind himself that this was not a figment of his imagination, this was not something he ate; this was real. He lived the next 16 years under the shelter of that vision and the words of those messengers. It changed him. It gave him confidence. "Be assured that I neither fear to die nor refuse to live. If it is to die, all that has been is but a slight intimation of what is to be. If it is to live, there is much I hope to do in the interim". Chariots of fire. Every morning.

In this story spiritual sight brings not only confidence, it also brings compassion. The Aramean army has shown up to take Elisha into custody and so that he can be imprisoned or executed. They have the worst intentions for him. They have the worst intentions for the whole nation of Israel. They'd like nothing better than to slaughter them all. God delivers the nasty people into Elisha's hands. They are struck blind and Elisha leads them right into Samaria where the Army of Aram is completely surrounded by the forces of Israel and completely at their mercy. The Israelite king is ecstatic. "Can we kill them Elisha, Can we? Huh? Can we?" He's ready to give them what they deserve. He's got his sword drawn and he's ready to go.

But Elisha says no. And instead of preparing a slaughter, he has the people prepare a banquet for the captured men, he gives them good food and good drink and they send them safely back home. Who does this?! Does this make any sense at all? People who hate you, people who want to kill you. People who want to spit on you and run you through. And you give them a feast?! Who does this? Well Jesus for one. Jesus was surrounded by an angry mob who wanted to kill him, and that mob was us. We beat him. We spit on him. We called out 'crucify him!' Then we took him and nailed him to a cross and mocked him while he hung there. And what does God do in response? He gives us a feast. 'Father forgive them; they don't know what they're doing.' 'Here is my body, here is my blood. I give this feast for the complete forgiveness of your sins.' Amazing compassion. So come to this table tonight and as you come look closely. Look deeply. This is not bread, it is the food of forgiveness and eternal life. This is not grape juice, it is the cup of salvation, poured up by Jesus himself. This is not a few crumbs, it is a holy feast, and there are chariots of fire all around you.

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