

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

In the presence of God

Presented by Harry Goodhew

INTRODUCTION

Good morning. There's a fascinating story in the sixth chapter of the second book of Kings about the King of Aram sending troops to capture Elisha. During the night, the armed company surrounded the city where the prophet was staying. Early the next morning Elisha's young servant came out, and seeing the enemy forces surrounding them, dissolved in fear at the prospect of what might lie in store for them. The prophet's response to his servant's anxiety was one of reassurance: "Fear not", he said, "for those who are with us are more than those who are with them": which, understandably, might not have been the easiest thing in the world for the young man to take on board, seeing the fearsome array that circled the town. But as it happened, Elisha was, as they say, "On the money". So let's recall what happened and what we might learn from it.

SEGMENT 1

Here's how the sacred record tells it.

¹⁷ Then Elisha prayed, and said, "O LORD, I pray thee, open his eyes (that is, the eyes of his young servant) 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 round about Elisha." God was there.

That was very dramatic: a story that that young man would no doubt recount to his grandchildren on many future occasions. But I think it raises an important issue for us as we endeavour to live for God day by day.

Are we alone in our daily struggle to be loyal and faithful to God? Are we alone when difficulties, problems, sickness, tragedy, despair or depression surround us? I think we can confidently say, No, we are never alone. That affirmation is not simply based on this rather exceptional story of deliverance but on a long list of such deliverances or possible deliverances, and upon God's firm and dependable promises.

Recall how perplexing it must have been for someone like Isaiah to know that good King Uzziah was no more and that Assyria would in some twenty years' time obliterate the Northern Kingdom of Israel and seriously threaten the future of Judah.

Remember how Isaiah 6 reads:

¹ In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

Whatever catastrophe the Nation would experience under the correcting hand of God, God was neither absent nor powerless. He was still the Lord sitting upon his eternal throne in majesty and power.

Many years later when Habakkuk surveyed the storm cloud of mighty Babylon descending on the disobedient Judean nation, he lamented bitterly and questioned what God was doing, but he was not without hope. Babylon may honour gods of wood and stone and attribute their victories and Judah's ignominious exile and servitude to them, but the prophet would still boldly assert: "... the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him. (Hab., 2:20 RSV).

In so doing he was not simply whistling in the wind, he was counting on another Reality, unseen, yet sovereign, in whom he would rejoice. His fundamental assertion was: "GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like hinds' feet, he makes me tread upon my high places. Habakkuk 3:19 (RSV)

SEGMENT 2

It was not just in evening darkness but in the deeper darkness of evil that Judas came with those who accompanied him to arrest the Lord Jesus in the garden.

Matthew's account in Chapter 26 reads: "And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Hail, Master!" And he kissed him.⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, "Friend, why are you here?" Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him.⁵¹ And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest, and cut off his ear.⁵² Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.⁵³ Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?⁵⁴ But how then should the scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?"

Legions of angels that would, in an instant, have swallowed up all the Roman forces in Judea were not absent; they were poised ready to plunge into the fray, but they were restrained. God was there, there was an overwhelming potential for deliverance but God had another purpose in the events of those days and we are grateful that the unseen armies of heaven were withheld.

In the story of the growth of the church as it is recorded in Acts, Chapter 18 recounts the serious opposition that was encountered by Paul and those who joined the company of believers. Again you may remember how it played out in that city. The Lord appeared to Paul one night in a vision saying to him, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent;¹⁰ for I am with you, and no man shall attack you to harm you; for I have many people in this city."

The result was that "he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them." That was longer than he stayed anywhere else in his itinerant ministry. And why, because he knew that he was not alone; Someone else was present whom no one else could see and that Someone had a purpose for him to fulfill in Corinth.

The providence of God is not open to our detailed investigation. He acts as he determines and for purposes we do not always understand. Stephen is stoned to death, King Herod Agrippa I lays violent hands upon some of the church in Jerusalem killing James the brother of John and then imprisoning Peter. However in answer to prayer, Peter is delivered from prison by an angel and escapes the clutches of Herod. Was God not there when Stephen and James died? Yes he was, as the story of Stephen makes clear. So the fact that bad things happen to God's servants does not indicate that God is absent: his purposes for individuals differ. Jesus promised he would be with his people to the end of the age and he is.

SEGMENT 3

Now a final example. John, the author of the Revelation, who calls himself the brother of all those to whom he writes, and says he shares with them in Jesus "the tribulation ... the kingdom, and the patient endurance",

says he was on the island of Patmos as an exile for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus. He was well acquainted with the difficulties and life threatening circumstances that confronted many of God's people in Asia Minor and elsewhere.

During his exile he was granted a vision of the heavenly realities that were operating behind the all-too-obvious events that were playing out in the here and now of his times. Behind the threats and the martyrdoms he was permitted to see into the heavenly realms where he saw the throne of God and of the Lamb ruling over all things. There, while God's people were being mistreated on earth, was the church and all created things worshipping the One to whom all things belong and who rules over all.

This stark contrast between what was happening on earth and what John saw in his vision, was the substance of the message that he was to carry to the churches of his day, and beyond them, to all God's people down through the ages until the present time. Those sufferers were to keep their eyes on a reality that said that their sufferings were not unnoticed, and that they themselves were precious in the eyes of their heavenly Father. They were to remain loyal and faithful because they were suffering, not in some isolated and unnoticed location, but wherever they were located geographically they were, in that situation, there in the presence of God.

Their lot was much like that of their Master, of whom the writer to the Hebrews says in Chapter 12, who, "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." He suffered and died in the presence of his heavenly Father to bring about the redemption of the world. The pathway was lonely and dark but he was not alone even though he cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" In the same way, the men and women who walked the difficult path of true discipleship in the troubled times of the late first century were similarly under the eye of the One who led his Son through death to resurrection and new life and does the same for all those who belong to the Son.

Our life in God is lived out in the presence of God, always under his eye, always the subject of his loving attention. He knows every circumstance, every worry, and every issue that goes to make up our lives. In all these things he is with us.

CONCLUSION

In Hebrews chapter 11 Moses is commended in these words: "By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king; for he endured as seeing him who is invisible."

Two possibilities were open to Moses. He could look at the might, power and determined opposition of the most powerful man in his part of the world, the Pharaoh of Egypt. Who would not understand if he had been deterred by such an opponent? On the other hand he had encountered the One who said "I am who I am" and who had commanded him to lead the people out to the Promised Land. To his eternal credit he chose to fix his attention on the One he could not see and to follow where He would lead.

So it is to be with us. Our wisdom is to endure, to suffer, to serve, and to rejoice, and finally to surrender to death, with our eyes fixed steadfastly on the One whom we cannot see, the One who is our loving and beloved Father.