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THE INVISIBLE ARMY

2 Kings 6:8-17

As I’m sure is true for every grandparent, all our grandchildren are a constant source of amazement, amusement, joy and exhaustion. We got to spend time with all of them this week. A couple of humorous moments were provided by 3 year old Wesley. One day we were racing, one of his favorite things to do, and I said to him, “I’m going to catch you.” He said, “Not today, old man.” It caught me totally off guard. Carissa started laughing, and said, “Don’t worry, Dad, that’s just his current favorite movie line. He’s quoting it a lot.” Right now his favorite movie is the Disney animated feature *Cars*. That’s a line used by the main character, Lightning McQueen, right near the end.

I thought that was pretty funny, but on Thursday he topped that one. We were in the back yard and doing, again, his favorite thing, running. He said, “Bapaw, fast.” That means run fast with me. The dude has enough energy to run a marathon. He just keeps going and going. Bapaw gets plenty of exercise. But at one point he decided he’d run out of gas. He went over to a patio chair, sat down and said, “I’ve got to sit down. I’m old.”

Old? At 3? If he’s old, what does that make me? Pre-historic I guess. I’m pretty sure that’s something he’s heard his parents say. But even if that’s true, if they think they’re old, that would make me absolutely ancient. There’s something that’s a surprise to me now that I’m old. Life hasn’t gotten easier. I figured that by now I’d kind of have a handle on life, but it feels like while the challenges may change, they just keep coming. In fact, it turns out that being old itself can be a rather daunting challenge. There’s the obvious challenge of your body wearing out. Laurie and I got flu shots this past week. It turns out that I get a special shot. I’m so honored. After a certain age you get a more powerful dose. I didn’t request it, they just automatically give it to you. Laurie wasn’t honored with this special shot because she hasn’t reached the magic age yet. They automatically give this shot to people over that age because their immune systems have semi-retired. It is not a happy thing to hear constantly in the age of the pandemic that you are “vulnerable” because your immune system is like the engine on a 40 year old Yugo, wheezing, coughing and barely functioning. But that’s not a surprise to me. My eyes don’t work nearly as well as they used to. When Laurie and I watch TV we frequently say to each other, “what did that person say?” Because our hearing is not as acute as it once was. Do I need to talk about how stuff hurts? I sat on the floor to trim my toenails. Even that’s a challenge now. And that’s just the physical stuff. There’s the challenge of being seen as increasingly irrelevant by the world around us and facing the trajectory of where life is going.

As I look back I can see that at every phase of life there were difficulties and obstacles. Life is always hard. What makes it hard varies, but it’s never easy. Why is that? Why isn’t life easier? There’s something going on that we need to be aware of throughout life or we will be always caught off guard. There is some bad news and some very good news. You will see what I mean as we look at a funny story from 2 Kings 6:8-17.

ELISHA FRUSTRATED THE ENEMY

We see in 2 Kings 6:8 “the king of Aram was at war with Israel.” We saw last week that Aram was a confederation of states in what is now Syria, for the most part. They had an on again off again conflict with Israel. In this chapter it was on again. The Arameans began experiencing some frustrating results in their war planning and execution. They repeatedly planned ambushes, and they kept failing. Every time they thought they had surprise on their side and were going to crush the Israelis, somehow the Israelis avoided the trap the Arameans had set for them.

I recently read a couple of stories that very tangentially reminded me of this. The stories were about two pitchers on the Padres. One of them is Yu Darvish, who has been an excellent pitcher with a blemish on his postseason record. He pitched for the Dodgers 5 years ago and had a very good season. But in the World Series that year he had two disastrous games that contributed to the Dodgers losing that World Series to Houston. He concluded that he must have been tipping his pitches somehow, because the opposing hitters seemed to know what was coming. That brings up the other pitcher for the Padres, Joe Musgrove. He was on the Astros, team that beat the Dodgers in that World Series. Musgrove said he wants to win another World Series, because he’s not proud of that one. He’s not proud of it because the Astros cheated. They knew what the Dodger pitchers were going to throw because they were cheating to find out. Darvish wasn’t tipping his pitches, they were using electronics to steal the signs. When the opponents know what is coming, you know something is wrong. The Aramean king could figure that out as well as Yu Darvish could. Mossad had a mole.

Verse 11 says the king was enraged and asked, “Which one of us is on the side of the king of Israel?” In other words, who is leaking our plans to them? Even back then the king of Aram knew the reputation of Mossad as an effective spy organization. Obviously Mossad had managed to plant a mole in the highest levels of Aramean government.

I have solved that puzzle. 2800 years later, I know who the mole was. Actually, it wasn’t that hard to figure out. All you have to do is remember the passage we looked at last week. It was the story of Naaman, who had leprosy. He was miraculously healed through Elisha, the Israeli prophet. He was so grateful he tried to give Elisha a gift, but Elisha said, “That’s very kind, but not necessary. No thank you.” Remember who Naaman was. He was the commander of the Aramean army. He was the top soldier, and as such he had access to all of their top secrets and plans. So Naaman thanked Elisha in another way. He passed critical intelligence to Elisha. Naaman was the mole! I’m sure of it. It makes perfect sense. Elisha wouldn’t accept money, but he surely would be willing to receive critical intelligence like that.

Actually there was no mole. The king wasn’t the first person to suspect that there was a Mossad operative at work. They had already done a mole hunt and cleared everyone who could have been suspect, Naaman included. But they had an even stronger piece of evidence. They apparently had a source inside Israeli leadership, and this source told them where all the intelligence was coming from. Verse 12 says one of the king’s officers told him, “Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom.” That was a way of saying he knows everything you say even in your most private moments. The king had no trouble believing this. He was already aware of Elisha. He knew of the miracle that the prophet worked with Naaman, so he had no trouble accepting that this prophet somehow knew everything he was doing.

You mean they had his palace bugged? They were listening to everything he said? Sounds like something out of the Cold War where the Soviets bugged the American embassy in Moscow. It does sound like that, but that’s now what happened. Obviously they didn’t have that technology back then. What Elisha had was God’s communication to him of precisely what the Arameans were up to.

ELISHA’S SERVANT HAD HIS EYES OPENED

The Aramean king decided that the only solution was to eliminate Elisha. He ordered his operatives to find out where the prophet was. Word quickly came back that he was in an Israeli town called Dothan. He put in motion an operation to finish off Elisha. Maybe he called it Operation Lights Out. He sent a unit to Dothan at night. This wasn’t just a small sniper team. It was a “strong force,” an army with horses and chariots. In today’s terms we’re talking about an armored division. He wanted to make sure there would be no escape for Elisha.

It’s kind of funny to think about that plan. It seemed to me that it was something of a doughnut because it had a huge hole in the middle that the king somehow didn’t see. If Elisha knew everything he even said in his bedroom, it is a sure bet that the prophet knew all about Operation Lights Out, the plan to take him out. There was no way they were going to catch Elisha by surprise. The operation was doomed from the start.

Apparently no one could see that flaw in the plan, so the Aramean forces surrounded the city of Dothan. This led to the humorous event that is at the heart of this story. The next morning Elisha’s servant goes out of the house to pick up the newspaper. Actually I don’t know what he was going to do. Maybe he was going to get eggs from the hen house or just use the outhouse, but I do know from verse 15 that he went out of the house. When he did, he got a big shock, because he saw a huge force of Arameans surrounding him.

Every time I read this story I remember a scene in an old movie that was once one of our family’s favorites. It was *Independence Day*. It was a movie about an invasion of earth by aliens. There is a scene in which the main character, played by Will Smith, goes out of his house early in the morning to get the newspaper. He is disgusted when he sees neighbors up and down the street packing their cars as they prepare to flee after what he thought was a fairly mild earthquake. He can’t believe they would be so freaked out by a minor earthquake. Then he looks up, and everything changes. He sees why people are freaking out, and it has nothing to do with an earthquake. Hovering over LA is a massive alien spacecraft. He is completely stunned. That’s sort of like what happened to Elisha’s servant. He went out of the house and the first thing he saw was a massive Aramean army surrounding the city, and obviously aiming their weapons at him.

The panicked servant ran back into the house and cried, “Oh, no, my lord! What shall we do?” Apparently his plan was to go to pieces in panic. Elisha had other plans. He was as cool as the other side of the pillow, because none of this was a surprise to him. In verse 16 Elisha told the servant, “Don’t be afraid. Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” No doubt the servant thought Elisha had lost his mind. Either that or he had a serious problem with arithmetic. Let’s see, looks like there’s 10,000 of them out there, armed to the teeth. There’s 2 of us, armed with exactly nothing. Just how is it, Elisha, we outnumber them? I’d say your math is way off.

This is where the story gets really interesting. Elisha prayed that the Lord would open his eyes, “so that he may see.” The Lord answered that prayer. And what the servant saw was another army. Verse 17 says “he saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.” Facing the Aramean army was another army, until that moment invisible to the servant. It was an army that had “chariots of fire.” In that dramatic moment that man saw an army of God’s messengers, arrayed to protect the prophet and his servant. It was an army far more powerful than the enemy that threatened them. They had nothing to fear. He only had to see it.

IMPLICATIONS

WE ARE SURROUNDED

Does it ever feel to you like the odds in life are stacked against you? Does it feel like there’s something in life working to trip you up, knock you down, make everything harder for you? Do you ever feel like you are swimming upstream against a strong current?

I’ve felt that much of my life. I’ve recently had what feels like examples of it in regard to even medical care. A few years ago I learned I had a torn tendon in my right arm. It looked like the only treatment left to me was surgery. But wait. The surgeon said there was one other option. He had a colleague who had a different treatment. I saw that doctor, and he told me about PRP, a platelet rich plasma injection. He said in cases like mine that worked for 93% of the patients. It seemed like a no brainer to choose that option. It turned out I am in the 7%, the small minority for whom that did not work. I had to have the surgery because the PRP treatment totally failed. A few years later I had another surgery for a different issue, one the surgeon told me was effective in 80% of the cases. I am in the 20% for whom it did not work. Do you detect a theme? It works for everyone else, but not for me. Lately it has been dealing with what my doctor thought could be melanoma. He took a biopsy and told me it would take a week to get the results. Well it has now been almost 3 months, and we finally got an answer. After all those weeks of saying they didn’t think it was melanoma, the doctor called this week to tell me it actually is, and it is a serious issue. I feel like the living, breathing incarnation of Murphy’s Law. If anything can go wrong, it will. Life is arrayed against me. I suspect that most of us at least at times feel the same way.

One implication of this story is that if it feels like forces are arrayed against you in life, it’s because it’s true. You are surrounded by powerful forces seeking to do you harm like Elisha was. Ephesians 6:12 says, “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” There are powers, forces of evil that are, in fact, arrayed against you. 1 Peter 5:8 says, “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” He is real, he is powerful, and he is seeking to destroy God’s people.

If you got in your car intending to drive some place at 5 PM on a week day, would you be surprised if you encountered heavy traffic? Of course not, because you know that’s rush hour and traffic will be terrible. You should expect it. If you were playing football and the quarterback handed the ball off to you, would you be surprised if people from the other team start trying to knock you off your feet? You’d be foolish to be surprised. You should expect it. We should not be surprised at the opposition we feel like we experience. It’s not our imaginations. It is what we should expect. There are spiritual forces arrayed against us like that Aramean army surrounded Elisha and his servant.

WE SEEM TO BE OUTGUNNED

I identify with Elisha’s servant, because I can see the same thing he saw when he walked out of that house. It was pretty hard to miss thousands of enemy troops surrounding him with evil intent. I can also see what is obvious in the world.

Let’s take those passages from the New Testament as true. They tell us there are spiritual powers, forces of evil deployed against us in the world. Those forces, according to Peter, aren’t poltergeists, annoying beings just trying to inconvenience us or scare us. They want to devour us. They want to do us serious harm.

It would be scary if, as was the case for Elisha’s servant, there were forces of human beings who outnumber us and who are intent on destroying us. Can you imagine what it would be like if there were people who wanted to destroy you, and there were a lot of them intent on that end? That would be terrifying. But our problem is worse than that. We are surrounded by forces that operate in ways and with abilities that we can neither see nor comprehend. What abilities do these beings have? I don’t actually know. I know they are not as powerful as God. But I do know that they do not have human limitations. They are somewhere in between apparently. That makes them even more concerning.

Life itself tells us that we have a problem because so much that happens is completely out of our control. I was thinking about how we try to do everything we can to control life. For instance, think about what it is like for young kids to ride in cars these days. They have to be in the back seat. Not only are they in the back, but they have to ride facing backwards. They don’t just have to face backward, they have to be strapped into a seat that looks like it was designed for a mission to Mars. It takes a degree in engineering to work the things. The poor kids end up facing backward in the back seat, strapped down so they can’t move an inch. This is all so that we can eliminate any risk of a child ever being hurt should there be an accident. We try to control life and its dangers.

That same thing impacts what kids can play with. We have some old toys that our kids loved when they were young. Our grandchildren love playing with them now. But they don’t make these toys today because somewhere one child somehow got hurt playing with it. They are no longer available because we need to get rid of all possible risk. I recently read an article about what this has led to in Canada. There government bureaucrats are trying to crack down on an activity deemed dangerous. That activity is pickup hockey games played on homemade ice rinks. In Canada in the winter people can just flood their yard and let it freeze. Instant ice rink that the kids can play hockey on. In Ontario one family was slapped with a $25,000 fine for putting a rink in their front yard. A woman in Edmonton was fined for shoveling snow off a frozen pond so kids could play hockey on it. She was told what she was doing “was likely to cause injury.” People are trying to control the uncontrollable, to make sure nothing bad can ever happen, to eliminate all risk. Yes, we all want to reduce risk, but there are just some things we can’t completely control.

When our son, Toby, was in college he spent a good part of one summer as part of a missions outreach in China. The last few days of the trip they got to do a little sight seeing. Among the sights they visited was the Great Wall. He showed us some of the pictures they took, and they revealed he and his friends climbing on some rather risky parts of the wall. I commented that I was surprised that the government there let them do that. He said, “They don’t care. You can’t sue them. If someone gets hurt doing something kind of dumb there, they’re on their own. It’s their problem.” They aren’t worried about eliminating all possible risk.

I’m talking about this because the problem for us is we want to control life, protect ourselves against all harm, get rid of all risk, but we don’t have the ability to do that. Yes, we can do some. It’s a good thing that we have to wear seat belts. That clearly has saved lives. But there is so much that happens that we have no control over. Think of poor Job in the Old Testament. Satan attacked him, and there was not a single thing he could do to protect himself from the onslaught and the tragedy that befell him. How are we supposed to fight against beings we can’t even see, don’t understand, don’t know their abilities, beings who are able to somehow manipulate events in this world, and who have truly malevolent intent toward us?

In our human ability, there is little to nothing we can do. We can eat right, exercise, be disciplined, try to do the right things, be wise in our choices, and we can still have life blow up on us. It seems like we are on an uneven playing field. We are overmatched and outgunned. That’s why this story is so important and helpful for us. It tells us there is good news.

WE ARE PROTECTED

Elisha’s servant could see that he and his master were massively outmanned and out gunned. That was all he could see. But when Elisha prayed that his eyes would be opened, he saw a totally different battlefield. The two of them were not overmatched victims about to be slaughtered. They had a far more powerful army protecting them, so they had nothing to fear. Could our eyes be opened, we would see the same thing. We also have God’s chariots of fire guarding us.

Psalm 34:7 says, “The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.” Psalm 91:11 says God “will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.” Hebrews 1:14 says, “Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?” We talk about guardian angels because the Bible says they are very real. They are with us right now. They do not abandon us.

Hebrews 11:1 says, “Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” There’s the rub. I would like to be like Elisha’s servant. I want to have my eyes opened so that I can actually see the forces protecting me. Wouldn’t that be awesome? I am sure that if I could just have one glimpse of that, of shining, powerful angels, guarding me, protecting me from all the threats of this world, I just know that I would never be afraid after that. But living by faith means living with “assurance about what we do not see.” It requires no faith to believe in the power of an aircraft carrier and its fighter jets. I can see them. What makes this hard is I can’t see God’s forces protecting me. This is part of why Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:7, “we live by faith, not by sight.” We must go through life trusting in God’s protection of us when we can’t see the forces guarding us.

That sounds like a fairy tale or a myth. You’re asking me to believe in something I can’t see, and, frankly, I experience many events that to me look like what you claim is not true at all. It feels like if there are forces guarding me, they’re not doing a very good job.

First, let’s think about that idea of believing in something you can’t see. We believe in things we can’t see all the time. When Laurie and I first got married we had a 19 inch TV that got about 3 channels. To change from one channel to another we had to get up, walk over to the television and manually turn a dial on the set. Today we have a 55 inch TV that has more channels than we will ever watch. We literally have tons of them we’ve never looked at and never will. One really cool thing about it is if we want to change a channel we just point a hand held remote device at it, push a button and it changes. We can be sitting all the way across the room from it and we don’t even have to stir from the couch. How is that possible? The remote sends a series of infrared light pulses to the TV. The TV receives and interprets the light pulses as a command addressed to it, and does as instructed. Oh, come on. How am I supposed to believe that? I’ve used TV remotes countless times and have never seen even a single pulse of light. Well, see, the light is invisible. Ah, invisible light. Sounds like a fairy tale to me. If the light is invisible, it’s not light is it? Obviously my point is we have no trouble at all believing in something we can’t see. We do it all the time. In fact, to not believe in that light is silly. So yes, we believe in what we can’t see.

Can we really believe that God’s forces are protecting us when we can’t see them and when too many bad things happen? I submit to you that we have little idea how much God is protecting us. Ira Sankey was a well known singer and hymn writer in the 19th century. At one point when he was on a river boat cruise some people recognized him and asked him to sing them a song. He agreed and sang the hymn, *Savior Like A Shepherd Lead Us*. After he was done one of the men who listened to him sing asked him if he was ever in the army. He said he was, that he had joined in 1860 to fight in the Civil War. The man then asked him, “Were you ever in battle in Maryland?” Sankey said he was, that he had fought at Sharpsburg. The man said, “I saw you there one night. I was on the other side in the battle. One night I saw you standing in the moonlight. I took aim to shoot you. But then you sang that song. I recognized your voice as you sang it just now. When you were done there’s no way I could shoot you. I put my rifle down and let you live.” Sankey had no idea that had happened. But that night God protected him without him knowing anything about it. By all rights, he should have died. We have no idea what God has protected us from or he is protecting us from right this minute.

APPLICATION

DO NOT FEAR

It is so easy to let fear dominate us, control us, destroy our peace, drain us of joy, control our choices. Many years ago Laurie and I were on an inter island flight going to Maui. The plane was an airliner, but not a big jet. It was a twin turboprop plane. That particular flight was eventful. Calling what we experienced turbulence is a bit like saying a hurricane is kind of windy. We were bouncing all over the sky, experiencing repeated stomach turning sudden drops in altitude that felt like this was it, we were going down. I told myself to relax, that it was just turbulence and we’d be fine. But I was gripping the armrest tightly enough to break it. My palms were sweaty. I looked around and what I saw on the faces of my fellow passengers I will never forget. No one was smiling, no one was laughing. Everyone was tense. There was fear on their faces and you could tell all they wanted was for that flight to be over. No one was relaxed, at peace and happy. When we are fearful we are not joyful, we are not at peace, we are generally not thinking of others.

God repeated tells us “Do not fear” in the Bible. Fear is the opposite of faith. It destroys it. When Abraham was afraid that people might kill him to get his hot wife, Sarah, he lied, saying she was his sister, and put her in a terrible situation. When the people of Israel were afraid of the people living in Canaan, they refused to obey God and enter the land, and ended up spending the rest of their lives wandering in an arid wilderness. When David was afraid Saul was going to find him and kill him, he lied to a priest in order to get him to help. That lie resulted in the death of that priest, his entire family and everyone in his town. Fear causes us to disobey God.

We need to ask God to open our eyes. We likely will not see the forces protecting us, but we can ask God to metaphorically open our eyes, to help us remember that those forces are there. God does not want us to be dominated by fear. He wants to free us. So let’s live in the reality that God is there taking care of us. Let’s live by faith, assured of what we cannot see and finding peace in it.

UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF THE BATTLE AND VICTORY

What are the spiritual forces attacking us trying to do? They are trying to get us to doubt God, to disobey God, to live totally apart from God. They want to separate us from God, thereby destroying us. Maybe you’ve heard of the Four Spiritual Laws. The first one is “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” There is also a law about the devil. The devil hates you and has a diabolical plan for your life.

All that the enemy does is aimed at that goal of separating you from God and of destroying you. So what is victory? Victory is not letting him get you to doubt God, disobey God, live apart from God. Victory is making God the center of your life. It is living with him, obeying him, and living for his glory. God may allow circumstances in your life in which you can glorify God by continuing to love and worship him in the middle of hardship, loss or pain. When we focus on the goal of loving God, glorifying him no matte what, we win. That is when we are victorious. It is also what will enable us to stand, to persevere, to rejoice in all things in life.

Think about the great heroes of the faith. There was the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Daniel 3. When ordered by Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar to disobey God by bowing down to an idol or face being burned to death, they said in verses17-18, “If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” When faced with a terrifying threat, they glorified God. In Daniel 6 when Daniel was ordered not to pray tohis God or he would be thrown into a den of lions, he went right on praying. He glorified God. He won by worshiping the Lord.

In both of those situations God acted to protect those heroes. But it doesn’t always go that way. In 1 Kings 22 the prophet Micaiah stood up to the idolatrous king Ahab and all of his false priests and prophets. He courageously stood for the Lord. The end of that story is he is thrown into prison with only bread and water for rations, and we never hear of him again. In Acts 7 Stephen boldly preached the good news of Jesus to the leaders of Israel despite their threats against him. In the end we see him saying in verse 36, “Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” Then they killed him.

All of those people won the victory. They didn’t necessarily win by being miraculously saved by God, they won by staying faithful, trusting God, obeying him, serving him, no matter what the outcome. In doing that, they defeated the enemy. That is how we win the victory as well. Pray that God might open our spiritual eyes, that we might have confidence, faith that God is there, and in that confidence seek to honor him however it goes.