

COMPASSION FOR THE HUNGRY

ELISHA: PROPHET OF COMPASSION AND CONFRONTATION

by Ron Ritchie

I'll never forget a prison ministry trip I had the privilege of taking with Ed Woodhall, Carl Gallivan, and several of our disciples to Bogotá, Colombia a few years ago. In one of our meetings we met a twenty-year-old Colombian Christian woman who had a great love for and ministry to the poor in the slum area of the city. She invited us to visit her people, where many lived together in cardboard boxes on a deserted dirt lot that served as a local dump. We looked into one of the "rooms" and saw a young mother with a half-dead baby clinging to her dried-up breast. Our hearts went out to her, and after meeting a few more people, we were motivated by the Lord to go to a local open market and buy milk, bread, a big bag of flour, vegetables, fruits, and some pots and pans.

We drove back to the slum area, and as we began to unload the food, we quickly realized we might be in some serious trouble. The word that some food had arrived brought a host of very hungry men, women, and children out of nowhere. In no time at all we almost had a small riot on our hands as these starving people all tried to get their hands on the food. Fortunately, a man who seemed to be the head of this part of the slum took charge of the food, and the machete in his right hand helped him restore some order as he began handing it out. Then the cops came with loaded guns and told us they thought we were crazy, and not to do that again. The thing I remember most about that afternoon is the way serious hunger made people behave almost like animals. And the spiritual truth I carried away with me was that their physical hunger was just an outward manifestation of their spiritual hunger, which could be satisfied only when they came into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

That is exactly what Jesus said when he came to this earth: "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty...I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. I am the bread of life...I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" (John 6:35, 47-48, 51).

In 2 Kings 6:24-7:20, under the leadership of King Joram, son of Ahab and Jezebel, the Jewish people in the capital city of Samaria, most of whom had given themselves over to the worship of Baal, were experiencing a severe famine. King Ben-Hadad of Aram and his army had put the city under siege. In time the Lord God used his prophet Elisha as an instrument of compassion to prophesy that he would provide food for them in the midst of their physical famine. Elisha foreshadowed the life and ministry of Jesus, who would offer physical as well as spiritual food to the hungry of his day. Jesus offers the same spiritual food today to all who are experiencing spiritual famine in their lives because they have been held under siege by surrounding armies of the world, the flesh, and the devil himself.

The famine

2 Kings 6:24-31

Some time later, Ben-Hadad king of Aram mobilized his entire army and marched up and laid siege to Samaria. There was a great famine in the city; the siege lasted so long that a donkey's head sold for eighty shekels of silver, and a fourth of a cab of seed pods for five shekels.

As the king of Israel was passing by on the wall, a woman cried to him, "Help me, my lord the king!"

The king replied, "If the LORD does not help you, where can I get help for you? From the threshing floor? From the winepress?" Then he asked her, "What's the matter?"

She answered, "This woman said to me, 'Give up your son so we may eat him today, and tomorrow we'll eat my son.' So we cooked my son and ate him. The next day I said to her, 'Give up your son so we may eat him,' but she had hidden him."

When the king heard the woman's words, he tore his robes. As he went along the wall, the people looked, and there, underneath, he had sackcloth on his body. He said, "May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if the head of Elisha son of Shaphat remains on his shoulders today!"

In 2 Kings 6:8-23 we found that somewhere around 845 BC Ben-Hadad II, the king of Aram, sent some bands of soldiers out to engage in guerrilla warfare with Israel, but he was totally unsuccessful because God kept telling his prophet Elisha their plans. Once Ben-Hadad found out that Elisha was his problem, he sent a strong force to capture him in the city of Dothan. When Elisha's servant saw the army on the hills surrounding the city, he turned in fear and cried to Elisha, "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" The man of God said, "Don't be afraid. Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." The Lord opened the servant's spiritual eyes, and he saw the same hills covered with the army and chariots of the Lord. The Lord then blinded the Aramean army, and Elisha led them into Samaria where their sight was returned, and they were fed and sent back home as a witness of the compassion and power of Jehovah, the one and only living God of the whole world. God kept the enemy away from Israel in order to show them his eternal love and care for them. But as we will see, in time they drifted away from him again.

It appears that several years passed between 2 Kings 6:23 and 24. In verse 24 Jehovah God had removed his hand of protection and allowed judgment to begin against his people for the basic and horrible sin of idolatry, the worship of Baal. Samaria was located in the hill country of northern Israel, and it was a beautiful place to live in times of peace. But it was land-locked and totally dependent on the yearly crops and full wells and streams from Mount Hermon's snow cap to maintain a healthy population, which was dangerous in times of war. And in the final days of his rule over Israel (about 840 BC), King Joram awoke to the horrible realization that his city was under siege by the powerful army of Ben-Hadad, and that meant that all his fields of grain, streams, wells, and cattle were cut off, leaving the city to live off of their small food surplus.

Once a foreign army surrounded your city and cut off your daily supply lines of food and water, you knew that unless peace came soon, you and your family would experience famine and disease leading to a slow and miserable death by starvation. Food was becoming so scarce that men and women were paying the most ridiculous prices for meat and grain. Donkey heads and dove dung were both symbols of the severity of the famine. And today we have only to turn on CNN and receive our daily report on the horrible situation in Rwanda to begin to understand the feelings of panic, dread, hunger, and death of such a defeated people.

In the middle of the siege and famine, King Joram was walking the walls trying to figure out a way to get out of this terrible situation, when a mother yelled up to him as king and judge for some help. In his frustration he yelled back, "If the LORD does not help you, where can I get help for you? This situation is so bad that the only one who can help you and me is the LORD Jehovah, because Baal hasn't helped. The wheat from the threshing floor and the wine from the winepress are all gone." Then he asked her what her problem was. Apparently she was standing next to another mother with whom she had made a most horrible and unnatural deal: "This woman said to me, 'Give up your son so we may eat him today, and tomorrow we'll eat my son.' So we cooked my son and ate him. The next day I said to her, 'Give up your son so we may eat him,' but she had hidden him."

"Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap" (Galatians 6:7). Now, keep in mind that the ten northern tribes under the leadership of Ahab and Jezebel, except for a small godly remnant of some seven thousand, had forsaken the one and only living God Jehovah and given themselves over to Baal worship. Among the many perverted activities in the religious cult was the sacrifice of children, indicating the devaluation of human life (see Jeremiah 19:4-5).

God had spoken to this people through Moses some six hundred years earlier (1445 BC; see Leviticus 26) and warned them that should they forsake him at any time in the future and turn to idolatry, they would experience certain consequences seven times over for breaking their covenant with him. He would bring upon his spiritual children sudden terror and wasting diseases and fever; their enemies would eat of their fields; they would be taken captive; they would flee in terror when no one was chasing them; they would receive no rain; the land would become like bronze; their fruit trees would become barren; their strength would be wasted; and wild animals would eat them, their children, and their cattle. And then God promised he would have their enemies lay siege against their cities, and they would experience the plague and famine and become captives of their enemies.

"If...you still do not listen to me but continue to be hostile toward me, then in my anger I will be hostile toward you, and I myself will punish you for your sins seven times over. You will eat the flesh of your sons and the flesh of your daughters" (Leviticus 26:27-29).

Deuteronomy 28:53-58 is even more graphic:

"Because of the suffering that your enemy will inflict on you during the siege, you will eat the fruit of the womb, the flesh of the sons and daughters the LORD your God has given you. Even the most gentle and sensitive man among you will have no compassion....and he will not give to [his wife or family] any of the flesh of his children that he is eating...The most gentle and sensitive woman among you---so sensitive and gentle that she would not venture to touch the ground with the sole of her foot---will begrudge the husband she loves and her own son or daughter the afterbirth from her womb and the children she bears. For she intends to eat them secretly during the siege and in the distress that your enemy will inflict on you in your cities.

If you do not carefully follow all the words of the Law, which are written in this book, and do not revere this glorious and awesome name---the LORD your God...." (See also Jeremiah 19:9; Lamentations 4:10.)

Jesus prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem after they rejected him as their Messiah on Palm Sunday, a week before he went to the cross: "...He saw the city and wept over it, saying, 'If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you when your enemies will throw up a bank before you, and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation" (Luke 20:41-44). This prophecy included cannibalism, and it was fulfilled to the letter according to Josephus the Jewish Roman historian (see Volume 6, 201-213). And Jesus told his disciples that at the end of the great tribulation this prophecy would be fulfilled for the final time, and then all of Israel would turn to the Lord again forever (see Matthew 24:15-22; Isaiah 44).

But keep in mind that God also told his people, "...If they will confess their sins and the sins of their fathers---their treachery against me and their hostility toward me...I will remember my covenant with Jacob and my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham...I am the LORD" (Leviticus 26:40-45).

Cannibalism of one sort or another has always been a problem among various ancient and modern religions as well as within ancient Israel and even within the church of Jesus Christ. That is why the apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians in southern Asia during his ministry (50 AD; Galatians 5:13-15), "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: Love your neighbor as yourself. If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other." Paul was speaking of "eating" others' reputations and destroying their lives with gossip. When we cut people down and bite them this way, I can't see how we are any different from those who ate their children.

"When the king heard the woman's words, he tore his robes. As he went along the wall, the people looked, and there, underneath, he had sackcloth on his body." Here the son of Ahab and Jezebel had put on sackcloth (a hairy robe) as a symbol of repentance and humility before the one and only living God. But he may have felt he had received bad advice from the prophet Elisha to humble himself and pray to the one and only living God. Where did it get him? Nowhere! So like his mother before him (in her frustration at the prophet Elijah for killing her eight hundred fifty prophets of Baal [see 1 Kings 19:1-2]), he cried out to anyone who could hear: "This siege is all Elisha's fault, and he has not lifted one finger to heaven to help us. Look where we are---eating our children! May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if the head of Elisha son of Shaphat remains on his shoulders today!" The king had led the people of God into sin, and then he blamed the prophet. Classic!

Today in our Christian communities, many believers have opened the door of their hearts to have a personal relationship with Jesus---and with the many other gods of this modern world. Many are toying with the psychics, hoping to get a glimpse into the future. Other Christians are investing time and money in the many new age groups, hoping for insight into living through the men and women called channelers. Some Christians are drawn to seminars that challenge us like this one: "Awaken the Spiritual Master within and transform your life! Come and join the celebration and listen....'Carol is a profound spiritual teacher...Firewalking with Carol has been an inspiration and tremendous source of spiritual growth,' said one satisfied customer" (*Common Ground* , Winter 93/94, page 177).

But the apostle Paul told the Corinthians, "What harmony is there between Christ and Belial [Satan]? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.'" Then quoting Old Testament passages Paul continued,

"Therefore come out from them
and be separate,
says the Lord.

Touch no unclean thing,
and I will receive you.'
'I will be a Father to you,
and you will be my sons and daughters,
says the Lord Almighty.'"
(2 Corinthians 6:15-18.)

God does have compassion for the hungry, but not according to our demands and personal schedules. In this case King Joram had to face and confess the sin of idolatry and repent. It appears that he did all that, but then he lost his temper, and his mind became confused again.

The prophecy of Elisha

2 Kings 6:32-7:2

Now Elisha was sitting in his house, and the elders were sitting with him. The king sent a messenger ahead, but before he arrived, Elisha said to the elders, "Don't you see how this murderer is sending someone to cut off my head? Look, when the messenger comes, shut the door and hold it shut against him. Is not the sound of his master's footsteps behind him?"

While he was still talking to them, the messenger came down to him. And the king said, "This disaster is from the LORD. Why should I wait for the LORD any longer?"

Elisha said, "Hear the word of the LORD. This is what the LORD says: About this time tomorrow, a seah of flour will sell for a shekel and two seahs of barley for a shekel at the gate

of Samaria."

The officer on whose arm the king was leaning said to the man of God, "Look, even if the LORD should open the floodgates of the heavens, could this happen?"

"You will see it with your own eyes," answered Elisha, "but you will not eat any of it!"

The prophet was sitting with the elders in his home in Samaria when he told them in advance that the murderous King Joram, the son of the murderous King Ahab, had sent his servant to kill him. But it looks like the king had calmed down and was even pursuing the servant to stop him from actually killing the prophet of God. At the same time he still wanted to let Elisha know of his frustration: "This disaster is from the LORD. Why should I wait for the LORD any longer?" Apparently Elisha had told the king to turn back to Jehovah and confess his sins of idolatry, and then God would deliver his people. But instead of some ray of hope that God would step in and rescue his people, the famine was getting so bad that the women of the city were eating their children. So he said in effect, "Jehovah isn't on our side, Elisha. I'm going to go and speak to Baal!" The problem with his faith was that it died a day early. Can you identify with that? I often trust God up to a certain day. And if on that day I walk out to the mailbox and find that the letter I need is still not there, I find some other member of the Pity Party Association and we have a Pity Party....

Then Elisha prophesied, "About this time tomorrow, a seah [seven quarts] of flour will sell for a shekel and two seahs of barley for a shekel at the gate of Samaria" (signifying the end of inflation). Jesus in his ministry saw a large crowd that was following him, felt compassion for them, and healed their sick. Then with five loaves of bread and two fish he fed five thousand men plus women and children, and there were twelve baskets left over. Jesus would also say later in his Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 14:13-21, 5:6).

But the natural response of the king's servant who had been living through this horrible famine was great doubt: "Look, even if the LORD should open the floodgates of the heavens, could this happen?" In that moment he blasphemed the living God, for his heart was filled with unbelief. He was saying, "Never...!" Then Elijah rebuked the servant in front of the king and the elders by saying, "Because of your spirit of unbelief in the one and only living God of Israel, you will see it with your own eyes, but you will not eat any of it!"

But God showed his compassion toward those who were physically hungry and would continue to show that same compassion toward those who were spiritually hungry.

God's ways are not our ways

2 Kings 7:3-20

Now there were four men with leprosy at the entrance of the city gate. They said to each other, "Why stay here until we die? If we say, 'We'll go into the city'---the famine is there, and we will die. And if we stay here, we will die. So let's go over to the camp of the Arameans and surrender. If they spare us, we live; if they kill us, then we die."

At dusk they got up and went to the camp of the Arameans. When they reached the edge of the camp, not a man was there, for the Lord had caused the Arameans to hear the sound of chariots and horses and a great army, so that they said to one another, "Look, the king of Israel has hired the Hittite and Egyptian kings to attack us!" So they got up and fled in the dusk and abandoned their tents and their horses and donkeys. They left the camp as it was and ran for their lives.

The men who had leprosy reached the edge of the camp and entered one of the tents. They ate and drank, and carried away silver, gold and clothes, and went off and hid them. They returned and entered another tent and took some things from it and hid them also.

Then they said to each other, "We're not doing right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves. If we wait until daylight, punishment will overtake us. Let's go at once and report this to the royal palace."

So they went and called out to the city gatekeepers and told them, "We went into the Aramean camp and not a man was there---not a sound of anyone---only tethered horses and donkeys, and the tents left just as they were." The gatekeepers shouted the news, and it was reported within the palace.

The king got up in the night and said to his officers, "I will tell you what the Arameans have done to us. They know we are starving; so they have left the camp to hide in the countryside, thinking, 'They will surely come out, and then we will take them alive and get into the city.'"

One of his officers answered, "Have some men take five of the horses that are left in the city. Their plight will be like that of all the Israelites left here---yes, they will only be like all these Israelites who are doomed. So let us send them to find out what happened."

So they selected two chariots with their horses, and the king sent them after the Aramean army. He commanded the drivers, "Go and find out what has happened." They followed them as far as the Jordan, and they found the whole road strewn with the clothing and equipment the Arameans had thrown away in their headlong flight. So the messengers returned and reported to the king. Then the people went out and plundered the camp of the Arameans. So a seah of flour sold for a shekel, and two seahs of barley sold for a shekel, as the LORD had said.

Now the king had put the officer on whose arm he leaned in charge of the gate, and the people trampled him in the gateway, and he died, just as the man of God had foretold when the king came down to his house. It happened as the man of God had said to the king: "About this time tomorrow, a seah of flour will sell for a shekel and two seahs of barley for a shekel at the gate of Samaria."

The officer had said to the man of God, "Look, even if the LORD should open the floodgates of the heavens, could this happen?" The man of God had replied, "You will see it with your own eyes, but you will not eat any of it!" And that is exactly what happened to him, for the people trampled him in the gateway, and he died.

Now, these four men with leprosy at the city gate were dependent on the love offerings of the people of Israel to live out their miserable lives (see Leviticus 13). But there was no traffic and thus no handouts. The situation was deadly, so one of them said, "Why stay here until we die? Let's go to the enemy's camp, and if we're lucky they won't kill us and may have mercy on us and feed us. We're between a rock and a hard place."

God in heaven is so wonderful, for he can do things that no man or army on earth would ever think of, or could do even if they did think of it. For instance, God used Joshua and his men with trumpets to bring down the walls of Jericho (see Joshua 6). He used Gideon and his three hundred men with pots, candles, trumpets, and a dream in the camp of the enemy to defeat some 120,000 Midianites and Amalekites (see Judges 7). God used the faith of Jonathan and his armor-bearer to kill many of the Philistines, causing a great fear to fall over the camp of the enemy (see 1 Samuel 14:1-15). And now we find in the midst of this siege by King Ben-Hadad, "...The Lord had caused the Arameans to hear the sound of chariots and horses and a great army, so that they said to one another, 'Look, the king of Israel has hired the Hittite [from northern Canaan, which today is Lebanon] and Egyptian kings to attack us!' So they got up and fled in the dusk and abandoned their tents and their horses and donkeys. They left the camp as it was and ran for their lives." It was much like the way the Iraqi army fled during the Desert Storm war. (The Greeks called this kind of situation a panic because they believed it was directly caused by the god Pan.)

The four hungry lepers entered the camp, found it empty, entered one of the tents and ate their fill. They took

some silver, gold, and clothing and hid them. Then, filled and strengthened, they came to their moral senses and realized that what they were doing was wrong and that in time they would be found out and punished. So they said, "This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves." (It is uncertain whether they turned in their loot.) The king received the good news with some suspicion, in spite of Elisha's prophecy. He tested this good news by sending out a point patrol of several men in two chariots with the attitude, "There's nothing to lose, and everything to gain." The men went out as far as the Jordan River, some twenty miles, and found the news of the lepers to be true. This good news was reported to the king, and then he sent his starving people out from the city. And they were able to plunder the camp of the Arameans.

So seven quarts of flour sold for a shekel, and fourteen quarts of barley sold for a shekel as the LORD had said. The unbelieving officer who had supported the king was put in charge of the gate of Samaria, and when the king told the people the good news of the abandoned camp of the Arameans with all its food, water, and gold and clothing, they ran out of the city gate in a frenzy of starvation and trampled him to death at the gate exactly as the man of God had said.

For those among us who have been surrounded by the forces of evil and are experiencing a spiritual famine because of the sin of idolatry (worshipping others gods, including ourselves), I have a question, a word of hope, and a promise filled with compassion. The *question* : "What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God." The *word of hope* :

"Therefore come out from them
and be separate...
Touch no unclean thing,
and I will receive you.'
'I will be a Father to you,
and you will be my sons and daughters,
says the LORD Almighty.'"

And the promise filled with compassion for all those who are spiritually hungry: Jesus says to all who have ears to hear, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty...I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. I am the bread of life...I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

Elisha ("My God is Jehovah") was an instrument of God's compassion and confrontation who served Jehovah faithfully and boldly for fifty-one years (848-797 BC). He ministered under the rule of four kings of Israel (Joram, Jehu, Jehoahaz, and Jehoash), as well as to the rulers of Judah, Aram, and Moab. He also foreshadowed the life and ministry of Messiah Jesus as he served with the prophets among the spiritual remnant: The indebted widow was given oil by the Lord to pay her debt. The childless wife was given a son who died and was raised again by the power of the Lord. The Gentile leper was healed. Blinded eyes were opened. The hungry were fed and the captives set free in his generation. Elisha walked among the common people and challenged kings and military leaders. He offered salvation to the Gentile general, Naaman, and rebuked his own king Joram for his idolatry.

After this famine God directed Elisha to anoint Hazael king of Aram after Ben-Hadad died, fulfilling a prophecy given to Elijah before he was taken to heaven (see 1 Kings 19:15). He then anointed Jehu, the former general of King Ahab, king of Israel before Joram died, with orders to destroy the house of Ahab and Jezebel. Jehu killed Joram king of Israel and then saw the death of his mother Jezebel (see 2 Kings 9).

Forty-three years passed between 2 Kings 9 and 2 Kings 13:14-20, in which Elisha was on his death bed. King Jehoash came to visit him and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" In a final act of compassion Elisha prophesied three military victories for Jehoash over the Arameans. Then he died and was buried.

Is the story over? No! Moabite raiders used to enter the country every spring. Once while some Israelites were burying a man, suddenly they saw a band of raiders; so they threw the dead man's body into Elisha's tomb.

When the body touched Elisha's bones, the man came to life and stood up on his feet (see 2 Kings 13:21). God continued to demonstrate to Israel his power and to show that only he could bring life out of death. His Son Jesus did the same thing: When Jesus died on the cross, as Matthew recorded (27:51-53), "...Behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, and the earth shook; and the rocks were split, and the tombs were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised...."

Our God is the God of the living, and he was and continues to be willing to bring life out of death. Israel was and remains dead in their sins, and yet Jehovah is waiting and willing to hear their confession and raise them from the dead. And Jesus, the Son of God said to all of us Jews and Gentiles today, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die" (John 11:25-26).

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