

# Know Your Spiritual Enemies: The Syrians

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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## Readings

*2 Kings 6:8-23 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)*

<sup>8</sup> And the king of Syria was fighting against Israel; and he counseled his servants, saying, "My camp will be at a place set apart and isolated." <sup>9</sup> And the man of God sent to the king of Israel, saying, "Keep watch that you do not pass this place; for the Syrians have set down there." <sup>10</sup> And the king of Israel sent to the place of which the man of God had said to him and warned him of; and he kept watch there, not just once or twice.

<sup>11</sup> And the heart of the king of Syria was like a whirlwind over this thing; and he called his servants and said to them, "Will you not tell me which of us is for the king of Israel?"

<sup>12</sup> And one of his servants said, "No, my lord, O king; for Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the words which you speak in your bedroom."

<sup>13</sup> And he said, "Go and see where he is, and I will send and take him."

And it was told him, saying, "Behold, he is in Dothan."

<sup>14</sup> And he sent there horses and chariots and a heavy army; and they came by night and encircled the city. <sup>15</sup> And the servant of the man of God got up early to rise, and he went out, and behold, an army was surrounding the city, both horse and chariot, and Elisha's lad said to him, "Alas, my master, what shall we do?"

<sup>16</sup> And he said, "Do not fear; for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." <sup>17</sup> And Elisha prayed and said, "Jehovah, open his eyes, I pray, that he may see." And Jehovah opened the eyes of the lad and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. <sup>18</sup> And [the Syrians] came down to him, and Elisha prayed to Jehovah and said, "Strike, I pray, this nation, with blindness." And He struck them with blindness according to the word of Elisha.

<sup>19</sup> And Elisha said to them, "This is not the way, and this is not the city; go after me and I will bring you to the man whom you seek." And he went with them to Samaria.

<sup>20</sup> And it was, when they had come into Samaria, that Elisha said, "Jehovah, open their eyes that they may see." And Jehovah opened their eyes and they saw; and behold, they were in the midst of Samaria.

<sup>21</sup> And the king of Israel said to Elisha, when he saw them, "Shall I strike? Shall I strike them, my father?"

<sup>22</sup> And he said, "You shall not strike them. Would you strike those whom you have taken captive with your sword and with your bow? Set bread and water before them, and let them eat and drink, and go to their master." <sup>23</sup> And he provided for them great provisions; and they ate and they drank and he sent them away, and they went to their master. And the troops of Syria did not come again anymore into the land of Israel.

**Luke 4:23-30 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)**

<sup>23</sup> And [Jesus] said to them, "You will surely say this parable to Me: 'Physician, cure yourself! However many things as we have heard were done in Capernaum, do also here in Your country.'" <sup>24</sup> And He said, "Amen I say to you that no prophet is accepted in his own country. <sup>25</sup> And in truth I say to you, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, when a great famine was on all the land; <sup>26</sup> and to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath of Sidon, to a woman, a widow. <sup>27</sup> And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."

<sup>28</sup> And all those in the synagogue, hearing these things, were filled with wrath. <sup>29</sup> And standing up, they cast Him outside the city, and led Him to the brow of the mountain on which their city was built, to throw Him down a cliff. <sup>30</sup> But He, passing through the midst of them, went away.

**Secrets of Heaven 4720:2**

*The king of Syria* represents people who have concepts of truth, though here, in a negative sense, he represents people who have concepts that are not true. *Elisha* represents the Word of the Lord. *Dothan* represents doctrines from the Word. *The chariots, riders, and large army that Syria's king sent* symbolizes falsities of doctrine. *The horses and fiery chariots filling the mountain all around Elisha, which were seen by his lad,* symbolize the good and true things of doctrine from the Word. *The blindness* with which the troops sent there by the king of Syria were struck symbolizes the falsities themselves. The fact that *Elisha led them to Samaria*, where their eyes were opened, symbolizes instruction by means of the Word.

## Introduction

- Imagine being Elisha's servant.
  - He goes to bed one night and then, the next morning, when he wakes up early to get ready for the day, he looks outside and suddenly sees that the city where he and Elisha have been staying has been surrounded by an enemy army!
    - It's sort of like when you go to bed and wake up in the morning and look outside and it's snowed, except instead of finding snow outside you find countless enemies surrounding you, cutting off any chance of escape.
- This is how we can sometimes feel in our spiritual lives – in our efforts to try to be a good person and do the right thing we can feel overwhelmed, under-attack, outnumbered, and alone.
  - As the lad said, "Alas, my master, what shall we do?"
  - Elisha knew what to do and the Lord can help us know what to do when we are surrounded by a spiritual enemy.
- In this case, the enemy that had surrounded them was the Syrians and they are the focus of this, the next talk in our series on knowing our spiritual enemies.

## Outline

- We will mostly be working our way through the story that we read in our lessons but we'll also be mentioning a few of the other many stories that involve Syria.
  - We'll start with covering some of the history of Ancient Syria that can help us to understand what exactly this enemy might look like in our lives.
  - Then we'll go through our main story.
  - Finally, we'll look at how some of the same principles that we've talked about show up in the story of Naaman.

## The History of Syria in the Word

- Syria was an area to the east of the land of Israel but it also extended way up north to the river Euphrates.
- Where exactly the border was with Syria seems to change over the course of the stories in the Word and sometimes Syria seems to be treated almost as if it were part of the Holy Land and other times not.
- In Hebrew, Syria is called *Aram* and it comes in a couple of different variations – Aram, Padan Aram (the field of Syria), and Aram-naharaim (Syria of the rivers).
  - Syria is also called "the land of the East."
- It was a place of wealth and trading, particularly in its main city of Damascus.
- It was a place of religious knowledge from the Ancient Church.
  - Balaam, the soothsayer who was hired to curse the Israelites, he had a lot of religious knowledge and was from Syria.
  - At least some of the wise men "from the east" probably came from Syria because it was a place where there was still some old religious knowledge like some of the prophecies about the coming Messiah.

- It was also the place where Abram came from and where he sent his servant to get a wife for his son, Isaac.
  - And it was where Isaac's son, Jacob, went to get a wife and where all but one of his twelve sons were born.
- That all sounds pretty good.
  - What went wrong?
  - People in that area gradually fell into idolatry, no longer worshipping the Lord but instead serving whatever gods they made.
  - And the Syrians gradually became a bigger and bigger enemy of the Israelites.
    - King David managed to keep them under control but they were a problem for King Solomon (who started inter-marrying with people from lots of different religions) and then a big problem for evil King Ahab and a number of other kings after that.

## What Do the Syrians Represent?

- What do the Syrians represent in us?
  - Our lesson said that the king of Syria represents "people who have concepts of truth" or, in the opposite sense, "people who have concepts that are not true."
  - Other passages from the teachings of the New Church talk about Syria meaning knowledge of good and knowledge of truth (depending on which variation of the name is being used) – Syria of the rivers means knowledges of truth.
    - But then that knowledge of goodness or truth got messed up and falsified (*Secrets of Heaven* 1232; *True Christianity* 279).
  - Putting that together it seems that, in us, when the Syrians are attacking it's when the hells are attacking us, using ideas that maybe were once good and useful but have now been messed up.
    - The Syrians seem to particularly represent when the hells are attacking us with *religious* ideas that have been messed up.
- Where do we encounter religious ideas that have been messed up?
  - As a starting point, I think it's important to acknowledge that plenty of the religious ideas that occur to us in our brains are messed up – inaccurate, off-base, motivated by our selfishness, etc.
    - We don't actually need anyone's help to come up with messed up religious ideas.
  - And we also do encounter them from a variety of other sources.
    - Religious ideas from other religions like Hinduism or Buddhism.
    - Religious ideas from other Christian denominations.
    - Religious ideas from people who grew up in a religious tradition but then rejected certain parts of it.
    - Religious ideas from psychology about how human beings work.
  - You might be saying, "But there are a lot of good ideas from those sources!"

- Yes, there definitely are but the point is to realize that the hells will use whatever ideas they can to attack us and try to get us off of the path of following the Lord and obeying His commandments.
- When the Lord was tempted in the wilderness, Satan quoted from the Old Testament to try to get Him to do the wrong thing.
  - If the hells use direct quotes from the Word, you can bet that they're also going to try to use religious ideas from other sources too.

### *The Example of Karma*

- Let's take one example to maybe help this make a bit more sense.
  - In Hinduism and in Buddhism there's a concept called karma.
  - The simplified version of the idea is that, if we do good things, good things will happen to us and if we do bad things, bad things will happen to us.
    - There is some truth to this idea.
    - And for a devout Hindu or Buddhist it could be an idea that helps them work on being people who do good things.
- But this idea is also out there in the general culture and can also be messed up and used by hell.
  - Let's say you've had some difficult interactions with another person.
    - You feel like they've done some mean things to you.
    - And then you hear that they got injured.
      - Hell would love to make you feel happy that they got hurt and might also just whisper the idea of karma in there.
        - "Yeah, see. They got what they deserved. Ha, ha! Enjoy the karma!"
    - In this example, hell has taken a religious concept, messed it up so that it's no longer true, and used it to make us feel like the universe is orchestrating someone getting hurt and it's fine to feel happy about someone else's pain.
      - I think that that kind of thing might be an example of the Syrians attacking the Israelites.
- With these ideas in mind, let's go back to the story.

### **Protected from Ambushes**

- Do you remember why the Syrians had showed up at the city where Elisha was?
  - Because he had been foiling all of their plans
  - They were trying to ambush the Israelites and Elisha kept telling the king of Israel exactly where they were lying in wait.
- This, by the way, is what the Lord can do for us through His Word.
  - He can warn us against all sorts of traps and ambushes from the hells.
    - Take that example of the person who's been mean to you.
      - That's a tricky situation to deal with, especially if it's ongoing but the Lord can help you to know with certainty that it's not worth going down any road that feels like getting revenge.
      - Elisha can tell us, "Don't even go there! It's not safe that way. Hell is just waiting to ambush you."

- If you follow that advice it will keep you safe, time and time again.
- The Lord's Word can be our man on the inside – our source that tells us exactly what hell is planning against us.

## Taking Out Elisha

- And so the king of Syria sends his army to take out Elisha.
- Elisha's name means "God is salvation" and you can guarantee that hell will try to take out our belief that God can save us.
  - Hell will show up with all sorts of horses and chariots of false ideas to try to destroy Elisha.
    - It might be an attack on our sense that we can be saved using messed up ideas from certain Christian denominations that you are nothing but a sinful wretch who can't do anything to contribute to your own salvation.
    - Or it might be that the hells attack with the religious idea that God loves you no matter what and so you don't need to stress too much about the details of how you live your life – it's all good!
    - Or it might be that the hells attack with the idea that, just like God forgave King David for his sins, God will forgive you for your sins, as long as you're also trying to do some good in this world. It's no big deal if you don't keep all of the commandments.
  - Again, part of what makes the Syrians a difficult enemy is that the ideas that they attack with have some truth to them.

## "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

- Like Elisha's servant, each of us will likely sometimes feel hopeless and alone when under attack from the hells on all sides.
  - There are all these ideas and arguments and points of view surrounding you on every side.
- But then Elisha prays that the Lord might open the lad's eyes that he might see the fuller reality of the situation – that "those who are with us are more than those who are with them."
  - The Syrian army, the forces of hell, are overwhelming.
  - But, when we see the reality of the situation, "the mountain is full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" – the Lord and the angels have got this.
  - No contest.

## Struck with Blindness

- When the Syrians come down to attack, Elisha prays that they be struck with blindness and that's what happens.
  - It's not a punishment so much as a further revealing of the reality of the situation.
- The evil spirits of hell can't see basic spiritual realities.
  - They are blind to the fact that God is salvation.
  - They cannot comprehend that the Lord actually loves them and just wants to help them stop hurting other people and start treating other people well.

- The Syrian army is brought by Elisha into Samaria, where their eyes are again opened.
  - This symbolizes people being instructed by means of the Word.
  - Anyone who has been caught up in some messed up religious ideas can be instructed by means of the Word.
    - In the New Testament, that “the report of [Jesus] went throughout the whole of Syria” and then people from there came to be healed of all of their diseases, probably including blindness (Matthew 4:24).
    - The Syrians can be healed if they want to be.
- Because the Lord is not looking to get people in trouble for having wrong ideas.
  - As it says in the Psalms,
    - <sup>3</sup> If You, LORD, should mark iniquities,  
O Lord, who could stand?
    - <sup>4</sup> But there is forgiveness with You,  
That You may be feared. (Psalm 130:3,4)

### **“Set bread and water before them....”**

- And so Elisha does not tell the king of Israel to strike the Syrians but to “Set bread and water before them....”
  - Feed them and quench their thirst – help them experience goodness and truth again.
  - That’s what’s needed.
  - Messed up religious ideas can be made useful again, when there’s been instruction in what the Lord’s Word actually teaches and there’s an effort made towards doing good.
- Now let’s look at how some of these same ideas show up in the story of Naaman.

### **Naaman the Leper**

- Naaman was the commander of the army of the king of Syria (2 Kings 5).
- He was “a mighty man of valor” who had been a successful military leader but he was also a leper.
- Naaman ends up going to Elisha to be cured of his leprosy and he is angry when Elisha doesn’t even come to meet him but sends a message that says, “Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored to you, and you shall be clean.”
- Naaman asks, in a rage, “Are not the Abanah and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?”
  - Sometimes this is how we might feel – like ideas from other places are more interesting or potentially more powerful than the ideas from the boring old church.
  - Or we might feel like maybe the Syrian ideas are stronger in certain contexts.
    - There’s another story in which the Syrians fight against the Israelites in the hills and lose but then the Syrians say, “Their gods are gods of the hills. Therefore they were stronger than we; but if we fight against them in the plain, surely we will be stronger than they” (1 Kings 20:23).
    - Sometimes it can seem like we need ideas from other sources if we’re going to succeed at the level of the plains of every day life.
    - Maybe churchy ideas are good for more spiritual topics, but maybe we need the Syrians to be in charge in the plain.

- But, of course, the Lord is God of the plains and valleys just as much as He is God of the hills and mountains and He wins the second battle for the Israelites (1 Kings 20:23-30).
  - Teachings from the Lord's Word work on all levels, in all contexts.
- Naaman's servants convince him to try bathing in the Jordan and He does and it works!
  - Naaman says, "Indeed, now I know that there is no God in all the earth, except in Israel..." (1 Kings 20:15).
- Bathing in the Jordan seven times symbolizes full purification from falsified truths, using introductory truths from the Word (*Apocalypse Explained* 475:18).
  - This is a good picture of how a religious idea with some truth and goodness in it can potentially be incorporated into our lives.
    - It can be cleaned up when it's held in the context of teachings from the Word, particularly that the Lord is the only God and that we need to repent and follow Him.
    - This needs to be done fully – we need to wash seven times, not just encounter an idea and think, "Yeah, I'm sure the Word says that somewhere."
    - We need to really make sure that this religious idea is helping us worship and follow the Lord.
- When we talk this much about religious ideas from other sources, the temptation is always going to be there to take credit for the religious ideas that we are lucky enough to have access to and to look down on people with other ideas.
  - It's worth noting that Naaman is mentioned in the New Testament.
    - As we read in our lesson from Luke, the Lord pointed out that there were lots of lepers in Israel in Elisha's time but only Naaman, the Syrian, was cleansed (Luke 4:27).
    - It might be that people with other religious ideas are actually doing better than we are at going to the Lord and being healed by Him.

## Conclusion

- If we return to where we started at the beginning – Elisha's servant staring out at the Syrian army surrounding the city – it makes sense that he felt overwhelmed and hopeless.
  - There are lots of other stories about the Syrians that we didn't talk about today.
  - And there are lots of different messed up religious ideas that we're going to run into in different contexts in our lives.
  - And they're going to be overwhelming sometimes.
- But, in the end, the servant didn't have to do anything – Elisha and the Lord had it totally under control.
- If we keep trying to follow the Lord, He will protect us from Syrian ambushes, He will cure our leprosy, and He will open our eyes to see the fuller reality of the situation – that we are not alone and we can feed the Syrians and send them on their way.
- Amen.
- If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at [malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org](mailto:malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org).