August 13/14, 2022

A Powerful God

Encountering God Series

2 Kings 6:8-23

Pastor Ryan Harmon

Why don't we pray before we open God's Word, ask that He opens our hearts, and let's also thank Him for His provision for us.

> *So, our Father, we do thank You that You are our great provider. We thank You that when we have needs, we bring them to You and we just trust You with them and, Lord, You have greatly supplied for our need. And we just want to honor You and thank You for that. Now, Lord, as we turn to Your Word, as we open up your Word, will You open up our eyes, open up our hearts, open up our ears to hear what You have to say. You, the living God, speaking to us through Your Word. And so, we ask that You will do that. We pray these things in Your name. Amen.*

So, I want to begin with a question. If God overslept tomorrow, hit the snooze button one too many times, would your day look any different? As you walk through your day would His absence, His slumber, be something that changes the way you go about your day at all? Would there be a discernible difference? If we sent one of our video teams to follow you, would they be able to notice a difference between the way you operated on the day when God was there, and the day when He was sleeping?

Of course, it's a nonsensical question, right? God does not sleep. He does not need sleep. Therefore, He does not oversleep. But the point of the hypothetical isn't to get us to reflect on the nature of God, it's to turn kind of the spotlight, the mirror, back on ourselves. And just to pause for a moment, and ask ourselves the question of whether or not we are people who are counting on God, leaning on God, relying on God? And if He doesn't show up, we are toast. Is that the way we are operating as we move through our days? There are people all around the world, right here in the city, some of our friends and family, that do not want to have encounters with God. Do they go about their life differently than us? Can you tell a difference because of our longing to encounter the living God? Because we know He doesn't sleep, do we as His people, do we walk through our days expecting to have encounters with Him on a regular basis? Is that our strong expectation? That's what we want to consider this morning.

We've been walking now for one week—this is the second week—and we're going to do one more week in this short little mini-series in August that we're calling "Encountering God." Last week, Tim opened the series up and took us into an incredible story in 1 Kings, chapter 19, with Elijah. And this week, we're going to look at another story in the life of Elijah's successor, Elisha. Elijah handed the mantle of leadership to Elisha, and we're going to look at a story in Elisha's life, the way God encountered him. So, turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Kings, chapter 6, beginning in verse 8—2 Kings 6:8:

Just a bit of context: we closed out the book of Judges, and then Israel went into a season of having these kings: King Saul and King David. But by the time we get to Elijah and Elisha, things had gone downhill quite a bit. The once unified nation was now split, and there was a divided kingdom into a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom: northern kingdom of Israel, southern kingdom of Judah. And God had increasingly turned to these prophets to be His leaders, to be the people through whom He guided, and He led, and He protected His people, Israel. Now in time, the Philistines who we've learned about through Judges and we always think about when we think of David, they had kind of faded from the scene. But in their place, the nation of Aram had risen up. And as we open 2 Kings, chapter 6, verse 8, the first person we're going to meet is Aram's king.

> **Now the king of Aram was warring against Israel; and he counseled with his servants saying, "In such and such a place shall be my camp." The man of God sent *word* to the king of Israel saying, "Beware that you do not pass this place, for the Arameans are coming down there." The king of Israel sent to the place about which the man of God had told him; thus he warned him, so that he guarded himself there, more than once or twice.** (*NASB, 2 Kings 6:8-10)

So, as we look at this moment in Israel's history, we're immediately encountered with something that is not surprising at all. There's another nation that's going to war with them, right? That just seems to happen over and over again. What a shocker! Someone wants to take out Israel. And this time it's Aram. The king of Aram consulted with his servants, probably a group of generals and some of his prophets, and he told him his plan. His plan was to camp in a certain place, so that he could essentially ambush Israel. He wanted to take out his enemy, Israel, but his plan wasn't working. His plan wasn't working because of the man of God, because of Elisha.

As we read these stories in the Old Testament, we have to remember that conquests and battles and going to war was commonplace in this day. This was as regular as you and I going to Costco or someplace, right? Kings went to war; nations went to war. We have to remember how much distance exists between our moment and this moment in history. This was 2,900 years ago. If we charted this out on a timeline, this moment, this story, occurs closer on a timeline to the building of the great pyramids in Egypt than it does to our moment today. This was a different world. This was a warring world, one of conquests-winning world, and the language in this passage suggests that what happened in this little moment was something that happened quite often. There's this sense of repetition because of the general language that is used. Did you find it odd that it said, **"In such and such a place**," not a specific location. That suggests that this was something that happened over and over. In other words, the king of Aram went to war often. He plotted against Israel often. Elisha learned of it often, and then he informed the king of Israel often. And each time the Aramean plans were foiled over and over again.

I think if you were a first reader of this text, you'd find this kind of amusing. It's almost a humorous situation. If you grew up when I did, you might have watched Looney Tunes, and as I was studying this text, it reminded me of the Road Runner and the Coyote, constantly trying to capture the Road Runner, constantly foiled. The king of Aram was constantly foiled because God was helping Elisha ruin his schemes. Might be amusing to us, but the king of Aram wasn't so amused. Verse 11:

> **Now the heart of the king of Aram was enraged over this thing; and he called his servants and said to them, "Will you tell me which of us is for the king of Israel?" One of his servants said, "No, my lord, O king; but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedroom." So he said, "Go and see where he is, that I may send and take him." And it was told him, saying, "Behold, he is in Dothan." He sent horses and chariots and a great army there, and they came by night and surrounded the city.** (Vs. 11-14)

So quite naturally, the king of Aram assumed there had to be a spy. What was happening was happening with enough frequency that it didn't seem to be mere coincidence. It was happening with enough frequency that even his semi-accurate prophets could not have predicted with this kind of regularity what was going on. And so, he assumed what was only natural; someone from Team Aram must have been working against him and working for Team Israel. There had to be a mole. But one of his servants speaks up, and I'm sure Elisha's reputation was large on the scene in the Middle East. They knew of the *Meta,* the incredible works that God was doing through Elisha. And the servant speaks up and says, "No, master, here is what happened. God is telling Elisha what is happening. And then Elisha goes and tells the king of Israel what is happening. God is the informant. God is the mole." The king of Aram has no shot, no chance. Elisha, illumined by God with the plan of the king of Aram, would warn the king of Israel, thus saving the king, and thus saving Israel along with the king.

Now upon learning this, the king of Aram didn't back off. Instead, it seems as though he thought this was a strategic opportunity. Maybe rather than thinking, "You know what? There is a bigger God that is at work here. I stand no shot. I can't go up against this God," instead of thinking that, he thought, "Maybe I can bring this Elisha into my quarters, and Elisha can be a weapon in my arsenal." And so, he launched a plan, "Let's go capture the prophet. Let's go capture the man of God. Let's go kidnap Elisha." And so he dispatched a large army to Dothan to snag the prophet. Now we don't know exactly where the king was when he made this plan, but we know Dothan was about 25 miles west of the border of Aram.

Now, you might be thinking at this time, like, "What is he thinking?" When God has foiled his plan over and over again, why would he be so arrogant, so brash as to think that he could somehow dupe God and capture this prophet of God? Why would he do that? And I think all I can say is that sometimes when people go up against God, they just don't think straight, right? They get full of pride. They overestimate their capabilities. But we do see in his actions that he was at least a little nervous. He was a little nervous because the goal was to capture one person. But he sent a great army, and he sent the great army by night to surround the city. The language here indicates that it was a ridiculously large group of soldiers, given the task at hand. We need to capture one person, and he sends a massive dispatch of his army.

You can't help when you're reading this, when you're thinking about this, I can't help at least feeling like this is a little bit like a movie plot. We've all seen those movies where there's someone that needs to be captured, and the enemy forces come, and they bring an entire army to surround this one person. Helicopters and tanks, and you just, you just laugh at it. And clearly, it's because they recognize the power of the person they are trying to capture. And that's just what's happening here. The king of Aram knows the power of God working through Elisha.

Now as the text continues, the scene cuts to Dothan; we go down to where Elisha is. The city that, over the course of the night, was surrounded by an Aramean army. We read this in verse 15:

> **Now when the attendant of the man of God had risen early and gone out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was circling the city. And his servant said to him, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?"**

Now again, if this was a movie, this scene would fit right in. And I imagine it going like this: You know, the attendant wakes up early in the morning, rolls out of bed, rubs his eyes; he's kind of groggy, puts on his robe, grabs some Folgers, and then he wanders out maybe to get the paper, do some errand for Elisha. And as he's kind of stumbling out to do this early in the morning, he reaches down to grab the paper, and he sees the horizon and he sees this army camped on the edge of the city. They are surrounded, and I'm sure if it were a movie, he dropped the cup of coffee, right? You drop it and you turn around and you run in. And he goes and he finds Elisha and he says, "**Alas, my Master, what shall we do?"** And indeed, what shall they do? They are surrounded; the city is surrounded. But listen to Elisha's response. Verse 16:

> **So he** (that is Elisha***) answered, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."*** (What an incredible statement! "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.") **Then Elisha prayed and said, "O LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see." And the LORD opened the servant's eyes and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.** (Vs. 16/17)

What an incredible scene! Elisha, with eyes of faith, could see beyond the merely physical. God had allowed him to see what was the spiritual reality, that God had dispatched His armies to stand as a protecting agent in-between him and the army of Aram. God had opened Elisha's eyes, that he might see the spiritual realm, this realm where God exists and God moves, and is active. This realm that we are often blind to, but that doesn't make it any less real. And Elisha could see God was protecting him. But the servant could not see that. And so, Elisha prays, "Lord, open his eyes that he may see." And God does. The attendant's eyes are opened, and he can see the protection of God. Chariots of fire! Horses! The army of God, powerful on display, protecting Elisha, protecting this servant. God's full power on display—what an encounter this is!

But before we continue on, I have to just say for a moment, sometimes when I read the Old Testament, I do find myself longing for experiences like this. Do you ever find yourself thinking that? I want to have encounters with God, but I find that when I think about encounters with God, sometimes I think of these dazzling encounters that we see in the Old Testament. I think, "Lord, I wish I could see chariots of fire. I wish my eyes would be open, and I could have experience after experience after experience just like this." But, if I'm honest with you, I don't have too many experiences like this. In fact, I have exactly zero. We have to ask, "What do we do with that?" When we think about encountering God, when we consider this call, this encouragement to encounter God, how do we process that? And how do we match our experience with what we see here? We're going to come back to that in just a moment, but let's finish this story. Verse 18:

> **When they came down to him** (that is the Aramean army), **Elisha prayed to the LORD and said, "Strike this people with blindness, I pray." So He struck them with blindness according to the word of Elisha. Then Elisha said to them, "This is not the way, nor is this the city; follow me and I will bring you to the man whom you seek." And he brought them to Samaria.** (Vs. 18-19)

So, after asking that the servant's eyes would be opened, now Elisha prays just the opposite. The Aramean army comes down. Apparently, the Lord's army lets them pass just enough, but the protection is still there because Elisha prays, "*Lord, close their eyes. Blind them.*" And God does just that. Some commentators debate: Was this physical blindness? Could they actually not see? Or it's also likely there could be a reading that this was kind of a mental confusion, there was a stupor; they were confounded. They couldn't think straight, so they could be tricked easily. And in some ways, it seems like that's the more likely reading because what would proceed is that Elisha was going to take them on this 10-mile march down to a city of Samaria through the wilderness. That's a tough task if every soldier is blind, but we don't know.

Either way, what we do know is that God did an incredible work. God miraculously, powerfully, creatively provided deliverance for Elisha. Just think about what just happened. Without a single sword being lifted, an enemy army was subdued and then delivered to Samaria, which, by the way, is the capital of the kingdom of Israel, the capital of the northern kingdom. God has not allowed a sword to swing, and yet an army has been delivered right into the hands of Israel. Just an incredible scene, an incredible display of God's procreative power! Finishing the text here in verse 20:

> **When they had come into Samaria, Elisha said, "O LORD, open the eyes of these *men*, that they may see." So, the LORD opened their eyes and they saw; and behold, they were in the midst of Samaria. Then the king of Israel when he saw them, said to Elisha, "My father, shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?" He answered, "You shall not kill *them*. Would you kill those you have taken captive with your sword and with your bow? Set bread and water before them, that they may eat and drink and go to their master." So, he prepared a great feast for them; and when they had eaten and drunk, he sent them away, and they went to their master. And the marauding bands of Arameans did not come again into the land of Israel.** (Vs. 20-23)

One incredible scene, one incredible moment in this story finishes out this story, this encounter that God has with Elisha, that God has with those around Elisha. As they enter the city of Samaria, Elisha now prays once again, "*Lord, open their eyes, let them see what has happened. Let them see the reality of the situation they find themselves in."* And their eyes are opened, and they find themselves in the heart of the capital of their enemies, Israel's capital city, and right before the king of Israel. But in a final surprising act, the king turns to Elisha and says, "Should I kill them?" And Elisha, clearly in charge of Israel at this moment, says, "No." And instead, he is gracious, and he offers them what is essentially an olive branch of peace. He said, "Let's make them a meal." And essentially, Elisha is brokering a peace deal between Aram and Israel. And Aram, of course, has now seen the power of God on display, and of course, if they are smart, and apparently they were smart, they would take Elisha up on the offer, because before God, they stand no chance. And we're told that at least during the days of Elisha, there were no more marauding bands of Aram that came down and harassed Israel.

As we look at this text, the overwhelming message of this story, the thing that we have to take away is that we serve a God that is incredibly powerful. But not only incredibly powerful, He has innumerable resources to accomplish what He wants to accomplish. Consider what just transpired. God has accomplished His mission, accomplished His goal, and He's done it in a way that no one would suspect. Infinitely creative! Infinitely powerful! Just consider God's acts through Scripture. We've sung about them this morning. Consider all the ways that God, throughout Scripture, accomplishes what He wants to accomplish. He does it through a flood in Genesis. He does it through Joseph being taken into slavery. He does it through encountering Moses in the burning bush, and then through swarms of locusts, by turning a river into blood, by bringing his people out of Egypt, parting the sea…meeting them on a mountain, meeting them in the tabernacle, leading them by a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. Through judges, through kings, through prophets, He delivers them by a slingshot; He delivers them by the sword. He opens people's eyes; he closes people's eyes. He can accomplish His will in an infinite number of ways because His mind is infinitely wise, infinitely creative, and more powerful than we can possibly imagine. It's on display in this story. And when we talk about encountering God, we have to remember, this is Who we are talking about. This is Who our God is.

Recently, I picked up a classic book, Augustine's Confessions. I have tried to read this book like 32 times. I fail every time; I lose my endurance. But I'm giving it a go again…picked it up recently, and as I got into the first or second chapter, I came across this description that Augustine has of God, and it was just so beautiful, so grand, that I thought I just need to share it with you. So, we're going to put it on the screen. This is Augustine. Just imagine him sitting in North Africa around 400AD. And he writes this of God:

> He says, *"You are most high, excellent, most powerful, omnipotent, supremely merciful and supremely just, most hidden, yet intimately present, infinitely beautiful and infinitely strong, steadfast yet elusive, unchanging yourself, though you control the change in all things, never new, never old, renewing all things, yet wearing down the proud, though they know it not; ever active, ever at rest, gathering while knowing no need, supporting and filling and guarding, creating and nurturing and perfecting, seeking although you lack nothing."**

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(***The Confessions of Saint Augustine: Villanova Edition for Students and Teachers***
by Saint Augustine and Paul Comacho, e-book published by Villanova University, 2021)

Church, we cannot think too highly of God. Part of what we hope to do whenever we gather together, wherever the context is, is that we can stir up our vision of just how magnificent our God is. If He overslept, would it make a difference? Well, it all depends on what we believe about Him, right? If this is who God is, if He is this all powerful being that goes before us, that fights our battles, there is nothing more important than that we encounter Him by seeking Him. Not just sometimes, not once a year, not once a month, but constantly, constantly seeking that we might encounter the living God. There's a prayer of AW Tozer's that I love because it captures this idea of, "How can we ever get enough of God?" We can't.

Tozer said this:

*"Oh, God, I have tasted of your goodness, and it has both satisfied me and made me thirsty for more. I thirst to be made more thirsty still. Every little taste of God stirs up a longing I need more because He is so incredible." **

(***AW Tozer: An Anthology*** by Harry Verploegh. Christian Publications, Incorporated, 1984)

Over the course of these weeks, we've wanted to talk about encountering God, and we long for each of you to be so stirred up with this enticing idea of encountering the living God, that you are driven to seek after Him constantly. Seek after the God of all power and, in seeking Him, that you would find Him and you would have personal encounters with Him. More than any other thing we could do, the most pressing need for us as a body of believers, for us as a local church, is that we be people marked by authentic encounters with the living God. Whatever good flows from us, if it is going to endure, it has to flow from transformative encounters, authentic encounters, with God Himself. There is nothing more important.

Whenever we gather, whether it be in Life Groups, or these Sunday or Saturday night gatherings or classes, whenever we gather, the most important thing is not who is speaking or what songs we're singing, or who is leading the group. The most important thing is what God is doing right in our midst: How He is encountering you. How He is encountering me. How He is encountering us. That's the most critical thing we can think about when we gather: Encountering God! Oh, that we would be a people that, when they describe us around this city, they say, "What do you know about these people at Lincoln Berean?" and the first thing out of their mouth would be, "Oh these are people who have met God. They have met God, and it shows they have been changed!"

During these weeks, we're aiming to be pretty practical. We want to try to provide ideas of ways that we can seek. And in just a few moments, I'd like to share a few significant encounters that I've had with God. But before I do that I wanted to just let you know, I wanted to kind of taper your expectations a bit, okay, because I've just got to tell you that in each of these encounters that I'm going to share with you, there are no chariots of fire. There are no angels at bedside. There are no words written in the sky. But I wish there were. I long for those types of experiences. But we need to remember that God is absolutely free, and He can show up to us however He wants, whether it be in whispers or in storms, with loud voices or with gentle whispers. God can show up to us however we want, but we have to make sure that our expectations are appropriately aligned. Because if our expectation is that the only way He can show up is with chariots of fire and horses and just dramatic noises, then what can start to happen is we can start to miss some of the regular, quiet, subtle ways that He shows up every single day. So, as we talk about encountering Him, let's remember He is the powerful God that is quick to save. He fights our battles for us, and He is completely free…free to show up however He chooses. The questions we need to ask ourselves is, "Do we long to encounter Him? Are we looking? Are we seeking? Are we seeking to see where He is showing up in our story right where we are living right now?"

So last week, you'll remember that Tim's first encouragement to us was to *Remember*, remember times that God has shown up to us. So I wanted to share with you a few of those stories from my life and I'm going to do it with some pictures. Okay? So, we're going to take a little photo journey. All right. The first story up is in northwest Iowa. That right there, my friends, is the Okoboji Bible Conference. Has anyone ever been to the Okoboji Bible Conference? Okay, a couple hands, like

two. All right. Every year, my family makes this trek up there around the first week of August. We just got back. We were there last week, and every year my family anticipates ways that God will show up, ways that He will meet us. It's always something that we look forward to. This year was particularly fun because Bryan was able to speak two nights. So, he and Patti were up there with us. It was great to have them up there.

But this picture is taken from a certain angle, and the angle is significant to me, because in the back row there that's empty, that's where I was sitting when I was a sophomore in college, when I felt God calling me to ministry. He showed up in a way that I wasn't expecting at all. I had never even considered stepping into ministry. But I was sitting in that room, in that row, and a pastor said, "Who feels like God might be calling them to full-time vocational ministry?" And suddenly I was standing. I did not see it coming at all. God totally caught me off guard; I wasn't expecting it. But everything in me, when he asked that question, all that happened to me was a resounding, "Yes!...a resounding Yes!" And I remember every time I'm there, I think about how God spoke to me there. It's a significant place for me—northwest Iowa.

Fast forward three years to the next picture. This is a train station in Wheaton, Illinois. It's where I went to college and to grad school. I lived in that building right there. I was still on the way to ministry, but I encountered in my senior year what I can only call a period of depression. I got to the point where life was joyless…emotionally, spiritually, I just felt flat. I never got to the point where I questioned whether God existed; that was so ingrained in me from my youth. But I did start to wonder whether it was worth it to follow Him, because my life just felt so full of burden. His yoke did not seem easy to me, and I was wrestling with that. I was desperate, and so I did what I only know to do sometimes. I brewed a big pot of coffee. It's always a first step for me. And I wandered out to that train station and I sat down on a bench, and I basically just said to God, "God, I need You to show up. I just need some burden to be released. I need You to show up for me." I hoped there'd be chariots of fire; that would have been amazing. But after a few hours of sitting there and just wrestling, this overwhelming sense came over me that just said this, "God is full of mercy." Not what I was expecting, not what I was looking for, but that phrase calmed every question that I was asking. It allowed me to stand up from that bench, walk back to my apartment, and continue this long journey of obedience in the same direction that makes up the Christian life. It was not what I was expecting, God showing up to me at a train station.

The last picture, maybe not what you'd expect, that's my family. It's my wife Janae and my son, from left to right there, Sam and Lucia and Jacob. And you might say, "Why are they up there?" (If I could put one of your pictures up there, I'd put whatever your context is.) "Because I spend a lot of time with those people. I spend a lot of time with them." And I will tell you that I am desperate for God to show up and encounter us there. I need God to show up in my family. I cannot give my kids all the things they need. They need Him, and I need to see Him move. You know, I think back to my years in college, and when I was in college, I had these long, leisurely times where I could just go sit in a field or go be alone with God. But that is not so easy anymore. Some of you might know what I'm talking about. I'm 43. These people, I love them to death, and they take up a lot of my time. And so I have a choice. Either they can be an obstacle to all this free time that I want to have to seek God, or I can look at them as people through whom God can reveal Himself to me. A place, a context, a venue where God is at work, and He can be met, He can be encountered. And if you don't have a family, it's wherever you are…with your roommates, with

your coworkers. God is active, He is moving around us, and He can show Himself to us right where we are right now.

I remember when my kids were first born, and I met them. You know, they come to you and you've never met them before. You've been anticipating them for nine months, but you've never met them. I looked down at these beautiful little children; they can give me nothing, but I remember thinking, "I didn't know it was possible to love a person that you don't know this much." Everything in me just ached with love for them. As I was thinking about that, it occurred to me that's just how God loves me. What can I offer Him that He needs? Nothing…yet He loves me. It was through an encounter with my kids that God taught me something deep and meaningful and profound about Himself. God can show up right where we are.

Church, our God is all powerful. He is the One who fights our battles. Let us turn to Him. Our God is near; He is more present than we could ever possibly know. You will remember in our story, Elisha did not pray, "God, will you please show up now." That wasn't the prayer, was it? He prayed, "Lord, open his eyes that he may see. Open his eyes that he may see You because you are already here. You have been dispatched. You are working right here in our midst. Open his eyes that he can see that God is here."

He is here in this room. He is working right now. He is in northwest Iowa. He is in Wheaton. He is on campus at UNL. He is in the elementary, middle school, and high school classrooms around Lincoln. He is in the places that you work, in the coffee shops, working in the midst of your families, your friends, your neighbors. He is working. He is near. He is active. We need not travel far to find Him. It doesn't take a plane ticket. We simply need to look for Him right where we currently are. He is near. He can be encountered wherever faith rises up to meet Him.

So, let us be a people that cling to God, that trust that He is fighting our battles for us, that He is the One that will bring victory. Let our days be marked by clinging to Him, looking for Him, but also let us be a people that are constantly seeking and believing that He is near, and that as we seek Him, He will be found. And may we be transformed by those encounters. Let's pray together:

> *Our Father, You are more present than the air we breathe. You are right here in our midst. Lord, will You give us eyes to see You working? We can become so distracted as people, so distracted with just kind of the daily things in life. Lord, let us not lose sight of You, that You are moving all around us. Give us eyes to see You. Give us ears to hear Your Word, whether it be in a gentle whisper or in a loud shout. May we hear Your voice because, Lord, there is nothing we need more than to encounter You. So do that, we pray. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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