

An Eye Opener

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 0 0] Now, on just for a little while this evening to look at the passage that we read together from the Life of Alicia. It's a great passage and it's got great, I hope, you'll find great encouragement and challenge and just teaching for us about the nature and the character of God and grace and salvation. And we remember that all of the Bible is God's book and that as we kind of dip into little bits of the Old Testament, we remember that that Old Testament in many ways is preparatory. It's beginning to point us towards Jesus Christ because Jesus is the middle of the book and everything after Jesus looks back to him, doesn't it? So Jesus is the focal point because Jesus is the Word. He's the Word incarnate. So everything points towards him and we know that the Bible didn't stop at this point and this isn't the end of Revelation. We recognize that the

Bible is a progressive revelation. So we learn more about God and we learn more about His purposes and also that things change within the canon of Scripture so that the Word itself and the Bible is its own final authority. And I think I would agree with Dietrich Bonhoeffer who says the Old Testament was the only place where there were any holy wars in the whole of history.

So you know, the whole idea of holy wars is branded about and maybe we're hearing a little, but just now about holy wars and about, maybe not from a Christian point of view, G. Hadwars today, but in reality the Bible gives us, in the Old Testament, particularly gives us really the only justification as God was at work using His people in the Old Testament, as it were in judgment and in holy war. And there has been no time in reality where, other than that, it is justified to take that particular theological stance. But we do recognize and see that many of the Old Testament physical battles have spiritual application for us in our lives in the New Testament era, as it were, because of the spiritual battles that we face and the spiritual battles that we recognize are very real in our lives. But that's not the only application here. There's, the character of God is unfolded a little bit for us. And God is, you know, as we said the last time we looked at that, God is unchanging. He's the same yesterday, today and forever. He's not a different God, but an Old Testament God and a New Testament God and a post Bible God and then a 21st century God who's altogether more trendy and acceptable.

We have God. We have God who's truth. We have God who reveals Himself. We have God who's not different. We have God who's God. And we learn little bits about God here. And one of the great things we learn about God is His all-seeing eye in this passage. He sees everything in the beginning of that story. It's perplexing. We don't have anyone's names here. We don't even know exactly which particular, definitively, which particular kings are being spoken of here, King of Israel, the King of Adam, all we're told, Elisha is the only named person we have in the story. It's rather vague. So we don't have a fixed historical exact time for this story. But the King of Adam is frustrated and angry because they're at war with the Israelites, people of God's people in the Israelites. And every time their far superior forces go to attack the Israelites,

Israelites seem to know about it and are prepared. There's no surprise element in anything that he does. And this is really beginning to frustrate the King of Adam. And it's so frustrating that he asked, you know, who is the one who's in our ranks who is giving away this vital information?

[4 : 29] Who's the turncoat? Who's the Judas in this camp? And the men around him, his officers, they seem to already know. I don't know why they didn't tell him earlier, but they seem to, maybe you didn't speak to the King unless you were asked. And so the King asked them and he said, well, it's because they've got Elisha. And Elisha has the ear of God and God is telling Elisha where you're going to attack. And so they are prepared for that. And that was a reminder, even at this early stages, if you imagine the later Jewish people who read this story, who was written for, they constantly needed reminders of who God was and of his knowledge, because they sometimes felt God wasn't interested in them and God didn't care and God didn't know and God could be surprised by them and God could be shocked. And the great reality for them in their position where they were taking captivity in Babylon hundreds of years later was that God didn't know what was going on and was aware of their situation and would act on their behalf as they called out to him.

And that reminder is continually significant and important to us, that this is also our God, that this is the God that we go to and we recognize is all-knowing. He knows our hearts, but he knows tomorrow, he knows our situation, he knows what lies ahead, and he understands even the blackness that sometimes we feel that we are in. And that's a great and significant and important reality as we worship God this evening. At some levels, it may be for us a blow to our pride, because we sometimes live with the pretence that God doesn't really know what's going on.

Here, he even knows the pillow talk of the King of Adam, as it were, what he says in his bedroom is known to God. And that is hugely significant for us as we try and hide our sins and our rebellion from him. Now, we work very hard at hiding our sins and our rebellion and sometimes our unbelief, our bitterness, our pride, our jealousy from other people. And somehow we feel in so doing, we're outsmarting God and we're hiding it from him. But the great reality is that he sees all things.

This evening as we come to worship this evening, all is laid bare before him, at this great sovereign, all seeing all knowing God, our deepest fears, our blackest guilt, our rage, our insecurity, our difficulties, our fear of the future, our fear of the present, our fear of the past. All of these things are known to him and he recognizes and understands who we are. And that's a hugely liberating reality, hugely liberating, because it means we don't need, as Neil was talking about this morning in Cornerstone, we don't need to have any degree of hypocrisy before him. We don't need to put on any show before him. We don't need to pretend that we are not who we are, because even knowing all that about us, he still goes to the cross, still pays the price, still loves us enough to be a redeemer and our Savior. And that's not a recipe for a careless life that doesn't matter how we live, he knows anyway. It's a recipe for worship and for adoration and for repentance and faith and humility before a God who knows all things.

We are absolutely limited in our knowledge. Alicia was limited, he only knew what God revealed to him. The King of Adam, he had no idea what was going on and how his plans were being thwarted.

[9 : 16] And the reality is that we need to recognize and know and appreciate the bigness of our God, the greatness of our God, and the reality that he knows and he understands and he is aware of our situation. And I think as we move on, we recognize and see that this is a God who can show us the unimaginable. It's great. This is a great story. It's one of my favorites in the whole Bible.

And we spend a lot of time and I'm going to embarrass Neil, okay, because I went to Cornerstone this morning and I thought what Neil preached was brilliant today. It was a really difficult passage from the New Testament, very difficult passage and he courageously and bravely unpacked it.

And it was a great message and one of the points he was making was that we have a danger of trying to tame God and make him easy and in a sense inoffensive at one level.

And maybe we fear just now today in our society, in a society for the most part seems to reject God, that we need to make him acceptable to them in order for them to think of believing in him. A word that's cynical and doesn't care particularly sometimes about God. And yet, we simply need to be faithful to who God is and reveal him as he is in humility, with respect and gently, with love and compassion. And that will be what attracts people to him, not some kind of siphon, tamed down, shaved version of God that isn't really God that we think people will accept.

And here is an example of that in many ways because we see God opening up to us a spiritual realm that the world outside would laugh at and would be cynical about. But by faith and because we understand and recognise and know who God is by his grace, we rejoice in this truth that is spoken of here. So the King of Adam goes up to Dothan where he is told that Elisha is and Elisha and his servant are there and the servant kind of you can imagine him waking up in the morning and opening up his curtains and there's massive army outside and he says, oh my Lord, what shall we do?

[12 : 28] The servant is perfectly within his rights to think that. He's been absolutely rational and reasonable. He's looking out and he sees what's there and he panics. That's the reaction that he gives. That sheer and absolute terror and panic because with the eye of sight it's a terrifying vision that he sees before him, this whole army and they're not prepared for that. We don't know if there's any defense forces there. We don't know whether there's any Israeli army or anything. He just sees himself and Elisha and this great army. But yet Elisha's response is just outrageously full of faith and great where he prays, he says, don't be afraid. How often does Jesus say that?

How often is Elisha's life linked to Jesus' life? Don't be afraid. Those who are with us are more than those who are with them. Oh Lord, he prayed open his eyes so he may see and Lord opened his eyes and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire. This great situation that Elisha reminds the servant and all the readers of this book who were in captivity of God's people who believed in God's faithfulness and covenant and us as we look at this picture that things are not as they seem. Things are not as they seem. There's this kind of, it's a token-esque picture of these army chariots of fire and horses. God's army is it where the angelic forces, we sung about them in Psalm 91 and we'll sing about them again at the end of the service that there was a different reality here, that it wasn't just as it seemed for them and that again is a great lesson for us as we rely on God and as we have faith in God and trust in God particularly in bleak situations and it may be that even if it's not for us tonight, it may be that it will be for us at some point that generally as a people or personally in your own life you feel absolutely alone. You feel the opposition to your life and particularly your Christian life is overwhelming and that there's simply the odds seem to be stacked against you at every level at all points and what shall I do? Well it's important for us in an ongoing way in our Christian lives though it doesn't seem like that, absolutely doesn't seem like that, consider the power and the forces and the protection of God that is on our side and remember who God is.

So we fix, 2 Corinthians 4 18 says we fix our eyes not on what is seen but what is unseen because what is seen is temporary but what is unseen is eternal and isn't that the big battle we face day to day in our lives. We fix our eyes on what is seen, we fix our eyes on our mortgage, we fix our eyes on our job, we fix our eyes on our relationship, we fix our eyes on the opposition we find outside, we fix our eyes on the smallness of the church, the defeatedness of the church, the emptiness of the pews, we fix our eyes on all these things and we've got as abandoners, he's walked away, he's left, he's not interested, he doesn't care and it's important for us that we fix our eyes on Jesus as Christians. Now in September in the morning worship we're going to spend four weeks looking at the kind of main vision and strategy of the church and in many ways it doesn't really get beyond this. We might have some ideas and different aspects of it but it really doesn't get further than fixing your eyes on Jesus Christ because as we do so he says himself he will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you, he will show us himself. Isaiah 33 says you will see the king and his beauty and view a land that stretches afar.

Why are we struggling in our Christian lives? Why is it such a battle for us every day because we choose to take our eyes off Jesus, we choose to close our eyes, we choose not to delve into him.

I learned so many new things about Jesus this morning that I was able to praise him because of who he is and because of his perfection and his beauty and the way he dealt with people as we looked at that passage and as we fix our eyes on Jesus we see things that we see by faith and we ask God to reveal it to us. It's hugely significant, hugely significant that we do that in our lives and we recognise who he is. It's when we do that, when we fix our eyes on Jesus and when we ask for our eyes, spiritual eyes to be opened then we see with a different perspective and we see things as he wants us to see and the great thing is that he also acts on our behalf as well as showing us who he is because the story is great because a remarkable thing happens is that oh somehow Elisha obviously goes to meet this enemy as he draws towards them and again Elisha prays and Elisha prays as his Lord opens the, strikes the people with blindness so he strikes them with blindness and then he leads them straight into the capital city of the Israelite people in Samaria and so there's a complete reversal of the situation. You see that interesting reversal that we have in the situation? He prays for the servant Lord open his eyes so you can see and then he prays here for the enemies and he says Lord close their eyes so they can't see. I'm not sure exactly what happened to them, some kind of temporary visual amnesia, something that enabled them to walk and follow him but didn't really understand what was happening and they come into the city and they at this point are surrounded. It's a complete reversal from being absolutely in control of the situation coming to nail Elisha and get rid of him. All of a sudden Elisha himself leads them to a place where they're surrounded by their enemies. The whole situation is turned entirely and completely upside down and God takes what is a difficult and a problematic and a bad situation and he turns it on its head completely and absolutely and is going to use it for good and this is God at work, this is God at work in this situation and it's the bigger picture of salvation that we have here and we recognize what Satan right from the beginning has intended for evil in the garden with his the introduction of death and rebellion and sin and that God takes that same thing that death is introduced and he uses that on the cross to be the pathway to life and to future and to God's grace and God's goodness and I think that's a hugely significant and important reality for us in our lives particularly when we are in battle you know there's this constant reality that we have a great gift of salvation but there's still a lot more to come we're in what theologians will call the already what we received but there's not yet in the future which is still to come and in this what we have just now there's a great deal of battle

[21 : 13] and struggle particularly in our own hearts with doubt and with unbelief and with greed and fear and lust and all these sins that battle with us and often it can feel overwhelming and impossible the servant was here and he saw an impossible situation maybe this evening you're facing an impossible situation as you go into the working week I don't know what it might be it might be something very kind of for everyone else mundane but for you hugely significant and quite impossible it might be a relational issue where you can't deal with the other person because it's the other person you can only deal with yourself but it's nonetheless an impossible situation it may be a marital issue maybe a family issue it may be a financial it there we could there could be an unending list of what it might be of impossibilities but we ask God to show us his purposes in these and we trust in him to work out what Satan intends to be destructive to separate us from God to destroy our faith to be something that builds up our faith and makes us stronger and so often that will be that is the testimony of many Christians here mature older

Christians that they have battled and struggled and they have gone through times where they didn't know what was happening and they didn't know what God was doing and they didn't know why it was happening but as they trusted and as they waited on God and as they sought his help and as they prayed for strength and vision they saw God taking that and turning upside down my life is full relentlessly full of miracles of answered prayers every day ordinary miracles that you know you wouldn't testify you wouldn't speak about but nonetheless are there that God he takes the you know he makes the rough places plain he brings down the high mountains and he raises up the valleys so that we walk that way as we walk and trust in him and as we see that happening simply crying out to him praying for the eyes to see and the faith to follow him through that and it's tremendous to know that the ongoing darkness and evil that we face in our lives will be used by God to transform our situation and to bring out of it good rather than evil and then the story finishes with a beautiful twist and pointing towards the grace and love of Christ in the New Testament when they're in the city you know that you can almost imagine the king of Israel jumping up and down with joy and say yes I've got my enemies here can I kill them now please let me kill them we destroy them they're here in front of me and he'll shall I kill them shall I kill them he asks eagerly and quickly don't kill them malicious says would you kill men you've captured we don't serve set food and water before them so they may eat and drink and then go back to their master so you prepare the great feast for them finished eating drinking they went back to the master so the bands from Adam stopped reading Israel's territory it's not a great picture that we aren't the ones that make the judgments we aren't the ones that call down fire from heaven on God or fire from heaven on people we aren't the one that decides to turn our backs on those we feel have no hope of the gospel God is judge and this was not their time this was time for mercy this was time for grace their sin as the sin of the canaanites was full their sin at this point was not and he showed this people grace and reminded the

Israelites 300 years later the Israelites here and us that the gospel was to be something that was to be offered the mercy of God something that was the offer not just to the Jewish people but to the Gentiles to all who would come to him by faith and so we have this lovely picture of Jesus teaching but I tell you you know love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you and a picture that goes right back to proverbs in the old test we say if your enemy is hungry give him food to eat if he's thirsty give him water to drink and doing so you will heat burning coals in his head and the Lord will reward you there's this great picture of how we are to treat people in our lives as Christians that we recognize and see and know and understand that we act counter culturally with people we don't condemn we don't separate ourselves we don't judge we show them grace that's our calling leave the judgment up to God we show grace to those who are our enemies we love our enemies you know the New Testament the Pharisees taught you know love your friends and hate your enemies and that's very often what the world teaches isn't it that's not how God wants us to be there's nothing in our Christian life and there's nothing

Christ like about revenge about retaliation or about evil for evil please remember that many people will live their lives thinking I'm going to get my own back I've been treated badly I will treat badly I will give what I get that is that's the law of the jungle that's the world in which we live and sadly many Christians think like that and think that is the way that we should act and maybe call God's hand of judgment down and people who are opposed to them but we see that Christ is very different and the gospel is very different and we are to live very differently people are not our enemies sin is our enemy sin is our enemy but people are not our enemies we are to love people whoever they are and bring them grace and you know so much would be different in this world if Christians you know sadly Christians sometimes are the worst for acting without grace and venomously and revengefully and in a self-centered way if we acted with grace and heaped burning coals on the heads of those who we feel are against as many things would be different in our lives it's a great place of safety we have been treated with grace we treat others with grace they don't deserve it did we deserve grace we write with God that we deserve what we get the more we understand and appreciate who we are the more we will treat people the way Christ has treated us that is a core lesson for us in our day-to-day living it's not highfalutin theological truth it's everyday living that we treat all who we meet with grace with the grace of God and we share that grace with them in our lives and we pray for them and we plead that they will be able to see Lord show them because isn't that what happens eventually with these same people that Alicia prays that they too will be able to see so we're praying in our lives a lot for sight pray Lord help me to see help me to see spiritually help me see clearly help me to see the way you see but we're also praying Lord help them see please help my best friend to see Jesus Christ please I can't make them see they're blind they don't understand they don't recognize the digger and please help them to see I have lost that sense of dependence and urgency is all very clinical and just neat and packaged for us so that we no longer are pleading for our friends our friend comes to church what we say what do we say may they preach or preach a great sermon today or may this singing be really fine or may people speak to them all important but but do we say please Lord can they please see today show them who you are show them your love show them your grace show them their need show them who that you are worthy of worship and act in their lives with this great grace towards them and these will be the things that begin to unravel the darkness and the blackness in their souls so just as we close can I remind you and remind myself of two very important things one is that set ongoing sense of need I like the servants prayer oh my

Lord what shall we do you know I think that's a great prayer and I think we should pray that prayer more you know Lord I don't I don't have the answers Lord show me what to do you know we spend a lot of time telling God about ourselves and about himself and about what he should do maybe but that sense of need isn't it isn't it great Lord I just I don't know what to do it's a sense of childlike dependence and need and it's a great prayer because it's asking for that guidance we're not saying okay I've got it all such today I know where I'm going I just want you to you know back up a little bit just want you to stamp of approval on it Lord I don't know and help me to see show me that's a that's a great prayer of dependence for our day-to-day living and that sense of need backed up also by the genuine faith of Elisha who was an ordinary person a prophet of God but he was confident in his God who believed in his God who knew who could see by faith and to took that gift of faith and lived it fixed his eyes on his God and to genuinely trusted in him that faith is is a gift it's one we ask for battle don't you battle with faith do you want everything to be by sight but he wants us to live with a greater and a stronger faith and sometimes the deeper the hardships we face the stronger as we rely on him our faith will be getting it's like it's been tested in the fire and the gold becomes more pure impurities come out of it so don't rebel against God in the struggles in the battles don't question his love and his grace but see what he's doing and ask what he's purifying it and what he's removing from our lives and can I ask you to kind of pray this passage into your life you know just pray it into your life so that you take and learn from this God from this passage and bring it into the 21st century of your life and of your living and and see and hear God and be reminded of the

[33 : 38] God who says look don't be afraid it does seem impossible your situation that all the odds are against you but please don't be afraid those who are with us are more than those who are with them not a great encouragement to us in a city where only five percent of the population go to church let alone we don't know how many of them have a faith in Christ but we're part of a great army of God and God is with us and he's greater than him who's against us but may just drive us to pray and drive us to pray for those who don't see and who can't see and maybe for us if we have become blinded this easy isn't it for us to become blinded again to lose sight to lose our vision for Christ to lose our interest in Christ we're bored and dulled by him pray that we can see and be enthused and rejoice in him and understand him better amen let's ask that of God in prayer Lord Lord help us to understand and know you better as we live our lives we recognise the struggles that people face and recognise the battles that we are in

I read of a quote this week Lord some great Christian from the past who said give a word of encouragement to every Christian you meet because everyone is in a battle maybe remember that word of grace not just to our fellow Christians but may we shower love and goodness and kindness on to those who may be regarded as enemies of the cross those who don't believe or those who are who may be mock or give us a hard time about our own faith and may we simply pray for them with love and grace and act in love and grace towards them and pray that they will see because we know each of us had people in our lives particularly parents maybe grandparents friends who prayed for us and said Lord help them to see and so we may share that burden and concern for others and lovingly ask you to act on our behalf in their lives we ask this in Jesus name amen