

Leper Catering

By: Keith Keyser

Hard times came to ninth-century Israel. 2 Kings 6 and 7 recount the tale of the conflict with their northern neighbors the Syrians - also known as the Arameans - and the ensuing siege of Samaria. A severe famine upon the inhabitants of the Israelite capital followed, leaving the people in desperate straits. Things became so difficult that certain women resorted to cannibalizing their own children in an effort to assuage their incessant hunger (2 Kings 6:26-29.) Formerly worthless, but edible commodities like a donkey's head suddenly became costly delicacies. This high price for a ceremonially unclean animal indicated the extreme suffering playing out within the city walls. Such misery engendered a collage of colliding emotions in the Israelite king - including frustration, perplexity, rage, and helplessness. His ire soon turned against the Lord's faithful spokesman, Elisha, but the latter was not to blame for the calamity (v. 31.) Instead, he pronounced a message of unparalleled deliverance to the astonished monarch and his advisers.

Elisha's message of sudden salvation with an overnight economic turnaround was so amazing that one of the king's officer's exclaimed: "Look, if the Lord would make windows in heaven, could this thing be?" (7:2.) Like modern unbelievers, this cynical man deplored the prophet's "pie-in-the-sky God-talk" in the face of their dire circumstances. This practical-minded military man could not envision any real-life solution that could bring about this rapid recovery. Theological platitudes would not put food on the table, nor lift the Aramean blockade which prevented needed supplies from reaching the starving citizenry. His impetuous answer - positing the making of "windows in heaven" in order to effect this implausible scenario - met with Elisha's solemn prediction that the disbelieving pragmatist would indeed see it occur, but would not partake of the blessing.

A Divine Stimulus Package

The biblical narrative then turns to the plight of four lepers, barely surviving on the fringe of Israelite society. Under normal conditions, they were diseased outcasts, shunned by uninfected society. The famine added hunger and the prospect of almost certain death to their troubled lives. Imminent death drives people to extreme behavior, and these men were no exception to the influence of this fear. Their reasoning was simple, yet logical: "if we go to the city it will mean our certain demise; if we go to the Aramean camp at least they might pity us and show charity (or at least, give us a last meal before executing us.)" The first choice led inexorably to the grave; the second - however improbable - offered a ray of hope. Happily, God was going to do something well beyond their wildest imaginations.

Instead of finding bloodthirsty soldiers preparing for the final assault on Samaria, the lepers encountered a buffet. The camp was abandoned. The Lord caused the Arameans to hear the sound of a great army. In the previous chapter, God's invisible host struck the Arameans with blindness (6:14-23.) Now all they had to do to defeat this second force was to make a terror-inducing noise (v. 6.) In their haste to leave, the troops deserted their gear and provisions, thereby providing an exquisite repast for the four impoverished pariahs. In the midst of their feasting, their consciences kicked in: "We are not doing right," said they. We need to tell the

famished Samaritans of the food that is so near to them (v. 9.) Thus, these four unlikely caterers became God's instruments to tell the Israelites of the tremendous salvation that was divinely prepared. True to Elisha's word, the king's officer was trampled to death in the gate by the starving masses as they hurried to feast on the Aramean stores (vs. 17-20.) As in every age, disbelief in God's Word leads to destruction.

Unlikely Messengers

Who would have thought that four lepers would be the conduit of blessing to the beleaguered city dwellers? It should not come as a surprise, however, for God still uses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise and the weak things to defeat the mighty (1 Cor. 1:26-31.) In that day, He used four men who were as good as dead to preach His message of salvation, so that no one would doubt that God had brought about the rescue. Likewise, today He uses people who were spiritually dead and hopeless to preach the great Gospel of God's incomparable grace. As wretched as was the siege of Samaria, it cannot compare with the misery of being in bondage to sin under the divine wrath, facing eternal separation from one's Creator. Just as the Lord powerfully delivered the Israelites in that day, even so today Christians proclaim the glorious story of His gracious salvation through the death and resurrection of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Heaven's windows have opened with Glad Tidings of free deliverance in Christ.

This wonderful historical event also reminds saints of the spiritual resources at our disposal. When things seem the worst and all hope is lost, then we can look up to a God, who at a moment's notice, can change tragedy into triumph. His wisdom and power are capable of solving the most intractable problems. What is more, His love and light shine the brightest when things are the darkest. When human thought is confounded, when the swift are torpid, when the strong are enfeebled, then the Lord comes forth in power to save. Whatever bleak situation the believer faces, he can be confident that his Redeemer is mighty and has appointed him to salvation (1 Thes. 5:9.)