

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Believers Wear Bifocals

2 Kings 6:8-23

Last Sunday, during our pastor appreciation emphasis, we reflected on the bond we have cultivated as pastor and congregation during our nearly fifteen years together. A lot can happen during fifteen years, including declining vision. In this case I don't mean vision as in our church's plans for the future. I mean literal eyesight.

Several years ago, when I first started seeing an optometrist about changes in my vision, he walked me through the usual set of exams. I asked some questions of my own, trying to get a better sense of what was actually happening inside my eyes, and why. I still remember his very diplomatic answer: "Well, you know, as we mature. . . ." Okay, I get it. You don't need to say anymore. "As we mature." In other words, you're reminding me that I'm getting older, eyes included.

So I stand here before you this morning, wearing glasses that I didn't need when you first called me to be your pastor. Like many of you, I wear bifocals, which can be challenging, especially if they're progressive lenses. It takes time to adjust to wearing them. In fact, my eyes still get a good workout when I'm shifting my focus from my notes here on the pulpit to all of you there in the pews. Those of you who wear bifocals know what it's like to operate, day in and day out, with a keen sense of how you're managing two fields of vision at the same time.

In this morning's Scripture passage, Elisha doesn't say to his assistant, "Here, borrow my bifocals so you can see what I see." No, Elisha uses a very different method to deal with his assistant's spiritual blindness. He prays. "O Lord, open his eyes so he may see" (v. 17a). Think of it as a pray-per-view, a case where Elisha intercedes for his assistant so that new realities come into much greater focus. "Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" (v. 17b).

Remember that there are already lots of other horses and chariots in this scene. The ones that are literally surrounding the city of Dothan, where Elisha is staying. Recall that Ben-Hadad, the king of Aram, has been ordering his troops to conduct border raids into Israel. But each time they invade, they've lost the element of surprise. The Jewish forces are already waiting for them. Naturally, the king assumes he has a security leak, a traitor, among his forces. But he soon finds out that Elisha, God's prophet, somehow knows every move he is about to make, and keeps tipping off the Jewish military. It's as if Elisha is a fly on the king's office wall. So Ben-Hadad sends an army to capture Elisha. Overnight, they surround the city. When Elisha's assistant wakes up the next morning, all he sees is an overwhelming show of force.

But not overwhelming to Elisha. That's because Elisha is wearing spiritual bifocals. In one field of vision, he sees the enemy, poised to attack, kill, and capture. But in another field of vision, Elisha sees another army, a battalion of the heavenly host, whose mission isn't to capture but to rescue. Elisha has the spiritual discernment to know that those who are doing the surrounding are themselves surrounded by powers sent not to destroy but to deliver, to save God's prophet and God's people. In other words, Elisha knows that there's more to reality than what the naked eye can see.

Some of you may remember actor Peter Falk. Though he played in a wide range of roles, he's probably most noted for playing an eccentric, ruffled but always triumphant detective in the hit show "Columbo." In real life Falk had a glass eye, resulting from an operation to remove a cancerous tumor when he was three years old. In spite of his missing eye, he participated in high school sports. In one story he liked to tell, an umpire called him out at third base, whereupon Falk removed his eye, handed it to the umpire, and said, "You'll do better with this."¹

Notice that Elisha doesn't throw up his hands in frustration and make light of his assistant's inability to see things the way he sees things. He doesn't say, "Here's my glass eye. You'll do better with this." Instead, Elisha prays to the only one who can really open our eyes to see that there's more happening, in our lives and in the world, than just what's on the surface. It turns out that reality is much richer and deeper, more complex and multidimensional, than we often realize.

We ourselves regularly look at our lives, and the life of the world, and see only those things that appear to war against the will and purposes of God. International conflicts, poverty, hunger, racial and ethnic strife, environmental disasters, political corruption, economic injustice, and on the list could go. Add to these the other threats and forces that seem to encircle us daily, like illness, grief, family division, domestic violence, financial loss, addictions, and the greatest enemy of all, death itself, and it's no wonder that we join Elisha's servant in crying out, "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?"

For Christians, the answer to that question begins not with what we should do, but with what God has already done in Jesus Christ. Because we believe that through Christ's death and resurrection, God's reign, a new world of righteousness and peace, has invaded the old world, marked by sin, decay, and death, we live with the solid hope that when Christ comes again, the reconciling love of God will have the last word, and the saving sovereignty of God will prevail over all opposing forces.

It's no wonder, then, that we sing, pray, and preach so much about the victory we already have through Jesus. And it's no wonder that Elisha himself points us toward the victory of God, when he looks at Ben-Hadad's battalion, with all its might and muscle, and still says, "Don't be afraid. Those who are with us are more than those who are with them" (v. 16). If, as we profess to believe, God really is with us and for us, not against us, and that his redeeming purpose for his creation will not be thwarted, then we dare not look at our lives, and the life of the world, and assume defeat. Instead, we need to look to God and ask him to heal our impaired vision, so that with the eyes of faith we can see what's already a done deal through Christ, and then live accordingly.

Author Peter Kreeft asks us to imagine the day when sin, death, and evil are finally defeated by Christ. He writes:

Suppose God took you on a crystal ball trip into your future and you saw with indubitable certainty that despite everything—your sin, your smallness, your stupidity—you could have free for the asking your whole crazy heart's deepest desire: heaven, eternal joy. Would you not return fearless and singing? What can earth do to you, if you are guaranteed heaven? To fear the worst earthly loss would be like a millionaire fearing the loss of a penny—less, a scratch on a penny.²

Like Elisha's assistant, we need God to open our eyes to heavenly realities. That doesn't mean turning a blind eye to all the disobedience, sorrow, and suffering in our lives and in the world, as if those things aren't real. If we try to ignore those realities, we end up living in a dream world, occupying space within an illusion, out of touch with the hard and horrible facts of our existence in a world that's passing away. As long as we're still living on this side of the final resurrection, we're going to need our spiritual bifocals, so that in one field

of vision, we see clearly and honestly the brokenness of the world and the powers that oppose God's will for our lives.

But with our bifocals, we have another field of vision, a heavenly focus that demands just as much attention and concentration. The things of this present world are real. But the things of the world to come are just as real. In fact, they're even more real, in the sense that they're forever. They're much more solid, permanent, and lasting. That's where we're supposed to be looking.

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art, there's a famous 17th century painting called "The Vision of Saint John." It's based on a passage in the book of Revelation in which the martyrs who bore faithful witness to Christ are given white robes. Beside them is the Apostle John, who stands looking upward toward the epiphany of the Lamb. But the painting as viewed today is only a fragment. It doesn't tell the whole story. That's because, in the course of a restoration project, the unfinished canvas was trimmed to almost half the original painting. So when you look at the painting, it appears that John's arms reach upward to nothing, to the top of the frame, the edge of the canvas. And the martyrs seem to be waiting for gifts from nowhere. They all seem to be looking for something that's no longer there.

But we know it is there, this heavenly reality. This world more real because it's a realm where God's glory fills it and God's will governs it. I believe that this heavenly realm, where the saving power of God has fully prevailed, is what Elisha's assistant saw when God opened his eyes and showed him that another army was present that morning in Dothan, a heavenly battalion sent to ensure that God's purpose for his prophet and his people wouldn't be thwarted. In fact, by the end of our text those who came to capture the prophet end up being captured by the prophet and eventually sent back to where they came from. That's because the God we worship this morning is a God of deliverance. He even saves us from our own spiritual blindness.

James Byrd tells of a Sunday when his church's pastor was introducing a hymn, but when he looked in the bulletin for the name and page number, he couldn't find it. Thinking the hymn had been overlooked in printing, the pastor asked Byrd if they were going to sing a closing hymn. "It's there in the bulletin," said Byrd. The pastor looked again but still didn't see it. "What was the hymn?" he asked. The pastor and the congregation burst into laughter when Byrd announced: "Open My Eyes That I May See."³

The refrain of that hymn says: "Silently now I wait for Thee, / Ready, my God, Thy will to see; / Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!" As believers, we wear bifocals. We see two worlds simultaneously. We see the world of sin and death, a world scarred by human rebellion, a world that God has brought to an end through Christ. At the same time, we see the world of righteousness and life, a world healed by grace, a world that's being brought into existence through Christ. In one field of vision, we see vivid reminders of the pain, sorrow, and suffering of the present age. A diagnosis of illness, a severed relationship, a horrible act of oppression. In the other field of vision, we see glimpses of the age to come. A body healed, a relationship restored, an injustice set right. One moment, we're crying out, "Lord, what shall we do?" The next moment, we're shouting, "Lord, look what you've done." May the Lord continue to heal our vision and give us the eyes of faith, so that we can see the unseen, and live accordingly.

¹ Bruce Weber, "Peter Falk, Rumpled and Crafty Actor in Television's 'Columbo,' Dies at 83," *The New York Times* (June 24, 2011).

² Quoted in Tullian Tchividjian, *Glorious Ruin* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2012) 175.

³ James Byrd, Shelby, NC. Christian Reader, "Lite Fare."