

Lesson 11: 2 Kings 2

Objective: In 2 Kings 2, we see the passing of power and authority from Elijah to Elisha. After seeing the failure of Israelite kings, we find hope in God's work. We see that He is still active; prophetic succession reminding us that the end of Elijah's time on earth does not mean the end of God's work.

Review:

In our last lesson, we saw the deaths of Ahab and Ahaziah. We saw in Ahab and Ahaziah an unwillingness to follow God and a willingness to worship other gods.

If you had been a faithful Israelite at this time, an Israelite who wanted to follow God, how do you think you would have felt living during this time?

It is easy to feel discouraged when we do not see good things happening around us. In the Israelite world, it was expected that the kings would follow God; however, this was not the case. It is easy to think that God might give up on His people, but He never does.

We have seen that throughout the reign of Ahab and the short reign of Ahaziah, God provided prophets to speak for Him, to turn His people back to him. Elijah is the key prophetic figure during this time - the prophet who looms larger than life, the prophet that God seems to use in the most powerful ways. He is often portrayed as a prophet

most like Moses.

Read 2 Kings 2:1-6

We move from royal succession to prophetic succession. The narrator leaves the scene of royal failure and disaster to take us to a scene alive with the news of a new divine initiative (Foster, et al, 2005). The narrator tells us right away what is going to happen to Elijah - he does not keep us in suspense.

What do we find out immediately is going to happen to Elijah?

The narrator does not keep us in suspense - we find out immediately that Elijah is going to be taken up to heaven in a whirlwind.

We see Elisha appear for the first time since I Kings 19, and we see that Elijah and Elisha are traveling together from Gilgal. As they travel, Elijah urges Elisha to stay where he is as the Lord sends Elijah to another place (Bethel, Jericho, the Jordan).

How does Elisha answer each time? Does his answer remind you of another Scripture in the Bible? (A different situation where one is being told to stay as the other travels on?)

Elisha is determined to stay with Elijah. He will not be dissuaded! Elisha's determination to stay with Elijah reminds us of Ruth's determination to stay with Naomi.

Ruth 1:16, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay.”

We see in Elisha and Ruth a strong determination to follow, to not let go. **What do you think made Elisha so determined to be with Elijah? What do you think made Ruth so determined to be with Naomi?**

When Elisha first followed Elijah in I Kings 19, we see that he had to almost chase after Elijah. He sacrifices all he needs for his trade in order to follow Elijah. Now, he persists in following him.

Do you have people in your life that you want to stay close to no matter what the cost? What makes you determined to follow them, to not let go of them?

We all need people in our lives who help us stay close to God, help us be the people who God wants us to be, encourage godliness in our lives.

We also notice that as Elijah and Elisha journey together, a company of prophets keep coming up to Elisha and saying, “Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?” And Elisha keeps telling them, “Yes, I know, so be quiet.” It is possible that they meant Elijah and Elisha would separate and that Elijah would no longer be “over” Elisha, but Elisha seems to know exactly what is going on.

Read 2 Kings 2:7-8

God used Moses to part the Red Sea as the Israelites left their lives of slavery in Egypt to journey to the promised land (Exodus 14:21-31). After the people had wandered in the wilderness, He parted the Jordan River by Jericho for the Israelites to cross into the promised land (Joshua 3:7-17). Now, Elijah parts the Jordan River for he and Elisha to walk through on dry land.

Why do you think this parting of the Jordan River is significant?

2 ideas:

1. It reminds us again that Elijah is a prophet like Moses. Just as God parted the Red Sea through Moses, where the Israelites could walk through the sea on dry ground, now Elijah and Elisha are able to walk through the Jordan on dry ground. The importance of the need for another strong prophet in the order of Moses and Elijah is underscored.
2. Just like Moses and Joshua parted waters to lead God's people to new life, Elijah and Elisha have come to lead Israel out of bondage and into new life under the covenant (Foster, et al, 2005).

Much later, Jesus will be baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan. He is the one who ultimately leads all of us out of bondage and into new life.

How do you believe God uses things He has done in the past to show us what He

is doing in the present?

Read 2 Kings 2:9-10

Now that they have crossed the Jordan, they are now in the region where Moses died.

Elijah acknowledges to Elisha that he is going to be taken away from him.

What does Elisha ask of Elijah?

Elisha wants a double portion of Elijah's spirit. There are a couple of interesting things to note about this:

1. A "double portion" does not mean he wants twice the spirit that Elijah has. Rather, he is asking for the portion that is the legal right of the firstborn. He is asking to be treated as Elijah's principal heir (Keck, et al, 1999). Giving the firstborn a double portion, recognizes that the firstborn is responsible for the family's welfare and future and for fulfilling the family's responsibility to vulnerable people outside of it, such as widows and orphans and immigrants (Goldingay, 2011). Elisha is asking for the resources that he needs to be Elijah's successor.
2. The spirit of Elijah is the "Ruah" of Elijah. In Old Testament terms, the *ruah* is not an individual soul or spirit but the creative energy of God. It is the creative wind that broods over the waters of chaos in Genesis 1. It is the breath of life from God in Psalm 104:29-30. It is the dynamic expression of God's power, often called the

“spirit of the Lord” (ie: Judges 3:10, 1 Samuel 10:6, I Kings 18:12). (Foster, et al, 2005).

How has Elisha seen *ruah* in Elijah? Why do you think he wants it also?

The early church speaks of the Spirit not just as divine power but as God’s own self, present to God’s people (Foster, et al, 2005).

John 3:8 “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

Acts 2:2-4 “Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”

John 3:5 “Jesus answered, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.’”

In the Old Testament, we see only select people have access to the Spirit of God and often only at select times. **Who has access to the Spirit of God (Holy Spirit) now?**

How does it make you feel that the same Spirit that empowered Elijah also empowers us today? How do we recognize and live out the power and presence of the Holy Spirit living inside of us?

Elijah recognizes that he has no control over how much *ruah* Elisha inherits. It is in

God's hands.

Read 2 Kings 2:11-12

Finally the scene most associated with Elijah! This scene has inspired the imaginations of many.

What happens first?

First we see a chariot of fire and horses of fire appear and separate the two prophets.

When people see fire in any kind of miraculous way, what does that mean in the Old Testament? What is the significance of fire here?

In the Old Testament, fire represents God or angels.

Exodus 3:2 - An Angel of the Lord appears to Moses in the flames of fire in a bush

Exodus 19:18 - The Lord descends on Mount Sinai in fire

Exodus 24:17 - The Lord looks like a consuming fire on top of the mountain

Deut 4:12 - The Lord spoke to the Israelites out of the fire

Deut 9:3 - The Lord goes ahead of Israelites like a devouring fire

When we see a chariot of fire and horses of fire, we know that it is God who has come for Elijah.

How does Elijah go up to heaven?

Elijah goes up in a whirlwind. He “ascends into the sky in a tempest” (Keck, et al, 1999).

Elijah’s disappearance parallels that of Moses in Deuteronomy 34, although Moses did die - but he was buried by God and no one ever knew where his grave was. It also parallels Enoch’s disappearance in Genesis 5:24, “Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.” In Jewish tradition Elijah joins Moses and Enoch as people who might be able to give us revelations from God. Since they did not experience death and burial in the regular way, they could be thought of as having gone to share in the life of heaven with other heavenly beings. (Goldingay, 2011)
*We will discuss the hope Elijah represented for the people of Israel more next week.

Read 2 Kings 2:12-15

How does Elisha react to what he sees? How do you imagine he feels?

His ripping of his garment in two is a sign of mourning. Although he seems to have known Elijah would be taken from him, he still mourns.

Notice what Elisha picks up - Elijah’s cloak (or mantle). **What has this cloak been used for? What is the significance of Elisha now having Elijah’s cloak?**

I Kings 18 - He tucked the cloak in his belt when he outran Ahab after the rain started.

1 Kings 19 - He pulls the cloak over his face when he stands at the mouth of the cave and talks to God. He throws his cloak around Elisha to call him to follow him.

2 Kings 2 - He rolls it up, strikes the Jordan with it and the Jordan parts.

Many compare Elijah's cloak to Moses' rod. Elisha having Elijah's cloak is another sign (beyond the fact that he saw Elijah being taken from him) that he has been chosen to succeed Elijah.

What question does Elisha ask as he strikes the water? What do you think he is feeling at this point?

How does God answer?

Just as the water parted for Elijah when he struck it with his cloak, now the water parts for Elisha when he strikes it with Elijah's cloak. Elisha's reenactment particularly reminds us of Joshua's crossing of the Jordan to enter the promised land after the death of Moses.

The company of prophets are watching and see Elisha's parting of the Jordan just as they saw Elijah's parting of the Jordan. They know that the spirit of Elijah now rests on Elisha. Joshua, the servant and successor of Moses, received the spirit of wisdom when Moses laid his hands on him (Deut. 34:9). Elisha is now endowed with the spirit of Elijah, and they bow down to him in the same way that Obadiah bowed down to

Elijah.

Read 2 Kings 2:16-18

Just as Obadiah told Elijah that he did not know where the Spirit of the Lord would take him, the prophets seem to believe that the Spirit of the Lord has picked up Elijah and taken him somewhere else...somewhere he can be found. Elisha knows this is not the case, but he is too embarrassed after awhile to tell them not to look for Elijah. It is easy to imagine the different thoughts that could have been running through his head at this point, "Will they think I did something with Elijah?" "Do they think I don't care about Elijah?" Of course, after they go and look for Elijah, they return only for Elisha to say, "Didn't I tell you not to go?" However this looking for Elijah, does show us that Elijah really did disappear from the earth without a trace, leaving the Israelites to wonder for years about when Elijah would return.

Read 2 Kings 2:19-22

Now the narrator shows us that Elisha really has received the power and authority of Elijah. Here, Elisha learns that the water at Jericho is not good and the land is "unproductive". Some different theories have been offered on this - some believe that due to geological disturbances, there was a high amount of radioactive pollutants released in the springs of the region and that as a result, the water caused sterility. A different hypothesis is based on the finding of a species of freshwater snails found in the excavations at Jericho - these snails are known to be carriers of a disease responsible for high infant mortality. (Keck, et al, 1999)

There is also the idea that Jericho was under a curse. In Joshua 6:26, Joshua said, “Cursed before the Lord is the one who undertakes to rebuild this city, Jericho: ‘At the cost of his firstborn son he will lay its foundations; at the cost of his youngest he will set up its gates.’” In I Kings 16:34, the city is rebuilt. “In Ahab’s time, Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of his firstborn son Abiram, and he set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, in accordance with the word of the Lord spoken by Joshua son of Nun.”

What does Elisha do to solve the problem?

The salt removing the impurities of the water is not logical but brings about an extraordinary transformation (Goldingay, 2011).

What does this story tell us about Elisha?

This story reminds us of Moses taking away the bitterness of the water at Marah by throwing wood into it (Exodus 15:23-25), but Elisha surpasses even Moses - he “heals” the deadly water. We see that God is at work in Elisha in the same kind of ways that He worked through Moses and Elijah.

Read 2 Kings 2:23-25

This story is much harder to read. It shows us what we perceive to be a harsh reaction to teasing.

Different commentators and interpreters have and continue to offer different interpretations of this. It is possible that the boys were rejecting Elisha as a prophet which in a sense was rejecting God. The boys are not accepting of Elisha's authority as a prophet. They are telling him to go away from them.

To the modern reader, this is a story that can be difficult to reconcile with what we know of God and of Elisha. However, this would have reinforced to the community Elisha's new authority to speak as God's prophet (Foster, et al, 2005). When we read this story with the story about the healing of the water in Jericho, we also see that just as God gives life through Elisha, He also gives Elisha the power to inflict deadly punishment. God is free to save and to punish, to bless and to curse, to give life and to take it away. (Keck, et al, 1999).

Where does Elisha go next?

We see that Elisha goes to Mount Carmel, the mountain where The Lord showed His power over Baal and his prophets. Then, he returns to Samaria, the capital city of Israel.

Why do you think the narrator includes the locations of the journey that Elisha

goes on?

These destinations shows us that Elisha is taking over Elijah's role in Israel - he is returning the way he came with Elijah, going to places where Elijah has been, and ending up at the place where kings reign in Israel.

What does this story tell us about the work of God?

God does not leave His people alone - He continues His work. Elijah fulfilled a unique role in Israel, and God makes sure there is someone to follow Him and continue his work. There continue to be people who proclaim the word of the Lord, the people of God are not left alone.

Throughout the stories of Elijah, we see a bleak picture of a nation that is not acting as the people God intended them to be. In fact, the leaders of God's people are worshipping other gods - failing God and His people at every turn. Yet, the whole time, God is at work. We see Him provide for Elijah and 100 other prophets as the drought goes on for 3 years. We see that although the altar on Mount Carmel is completely broken down, God can still light it on fire with fire from the sky - He is still alive and at work in powerful ways! When Elijah is dejected and overwhelmed on Mount Hebron, God reminds him that he is not alone and provides Elisha to carry on Elijah's work. At times throughout the time of Elijah, we see that other prophets are also working, reminding Ahab of what God wants from him.

How does it reassure you to see how God works in history, through different prophets during the life and time of Elijah?

God is always with His people, and there will always be some who recognize Him. I am reminded of Luke 19:37-40 when a crowd of disciples are crying out praises to God in loud voices, saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” and “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” Some of the Pharisees told Jesus to rebuke his disciples, but Jesus replied, “If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” God will always be at work, and He will always be glorified in some way. We get to choose if we want to be a part of what He is doing in the world.

Conclusion: Whereas we are captivated with the image of Elijah going up to heaven escorted by chariots and horses of fire, the main emphasis in this chapter is that the work of God goes on. Elijah gets to go and be with God, but God does not leave his people without guidance. He does not leave the kingdom of Israel without a strong leader. Elisha is granted *ruah* and carries on the work of Elijah.