

Certain hope in uncertain times

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[0 : 00] But let's begin with a question. What connects the following disparate figures?! Leadership brought success, shaped movements, dominated organizations, and indeed nations.

Such that their exits created uncertainty. Who is going to take over? What's going to happen next? Will there be a power vacuum? Will there be losses in their absence? Exits can create uncertainty. We come to the final story of the life of Elijah. Here is the moment where the changing of the guard, where the passing the mantle, passing the baton, comes to be fulfilled.

And everybody knows it's coming. We know it's coming from the very beginning of the text. We're told the Lord is about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha and the prophets, they know what's coming.

[1 : 35] We heard it in verse 3. The prophets asked Elisha, do you know the Lord is going to take your master from you today? Yes, I know. So be quiet. So everybody knows.

But it seems like nobody wants to talk about it openly. This is one of these moments that is so massive that it's creating so much fear in the hearts of many.

What is this going to mean for the nation? And what's this going to mean for us spiritually as this giant leaves the scene? If you turn with me to verse 12, you get a sense of just how significant Elijah is to the nation of Israel.

As Elisha sees the horses of fire with a chariot come down, he says, my father, my father, the chariots and horsemen of Israel.

And so we might think he's saying, Elijah, look, there's the chariots coming from heaven. But actually, Elisha is speaking about Elijah. In other words, to have the prophet Elijah on your side was to have the Lord's armies on your side.

[2 : 50] And so now we can perhaps begin to understand why the prophets are nervous and they're speaking quietly together. Do you know that this is about to happen? Uncertainty and tension is in the air.

And through this text, God wants to reassure Elisha and the prophets, but also more widely to think about the nation as they hear these stories, that they would understand that God is certain hope in uncertain times.

God isn't going to change. He's still going to be for and with his people. Now, as we think about tension and uncertainty, where do we enter into that story ourselves?

Perhaps it's because we're about to start university or a new term of university. We're thinking about how the course is going to go, perhaps how friendships are going to develop.

Or maybe it's a spiritual question. What's it going to be like to live for Jesus at uni? How will I get on in that? Maybe for others of us, it's major life moments.

[4 : 01] It's the empty nest or the expanding home. A change of location or a change of role. And it leaves us uncertain. What is life going to be like?

We can have a sense of uncertainty in our life together as a church. How are we going to make an impact for Jesus with his help?

How are we going to make and take gospel opportunities? We can feel uncertain as we look at ourselves and we feel anxious and fragile and weak. Perhaps it's as we look around society.

We take in the news headlines of a past week. And we see division and hatred and fear. And we wonder where is good news going to come from?

Where are we going to turn? Let me suggest that this story comes to us as a gift. If we find ourselves in uncertain times.

[5 : 05] Because it reminds us in so many ways that we can and we should find certainty in our God and Savior. Three ways I think the text does it for us.

First of all, you can be certain that God still works in power. This takes us to Elijah's journey. At first, did you notice that Elijah, as he knows he's about to be taken up to heaven, that he goes to visit the prophets?

Verse 3, he goes to the prophets at Bethel. Then in verse 5, he goes to the prophets at Jericho. And then we meet the prophets again, 50 of them watching, as Elijah and Elisha arrive at the Jordan.

Elijah's a faithful man. And here he is giving last words of encouragement. Not that long ago, he thought he was the only one. And he discovers there's actually 7,000 who are faithful to God.

And so no doubt he's urging them to keep the faith. Don't bow down to idols, but continue to follow the Lord. But more than that, what we have in 2 Kings 2 is a very significant journey.

[6 : 18] The places that are mentioned are important. Because 600 years ago, the people of Israel made another very similar journey.

You can read about it in Joshua chapters 3 to 5. The moment where Joshua led the people through the Jordan River into the Promised Land.

And then there was a covenant renewal ceremony at Gilgal. And of course, Jericho was the site of their first victory in the Promised Land, where God was clearly fighting and acting for his people.

So think about what was happening at that time. Another giant had just died. Moses had died. He'd led the people for decades. And Joshua had replaced him.

But wonderfully, the people in Joshua's generation are discovering God is still working powerfully in a different generation with a different leader.

[7 : 23] Now fast forward 600 years, and it's exactly the same message. God has been working, and we've seen it. God has been working powerfully through Elijah, and he's still going to work in power through Elisha.

And if we need proof, go to verse 8, where we find Elijah, at one last time, taking his cloak, rolling it up, and striking the water, and the water divided, and they crossed on dry ground.

And then verse 13 and 14, we have Elisha picking up Elijah's cloak, striking the water, and the water parts, and he crosses over.

God is still working in power. And this is a theme that we can track through the Bible. We've said it already, that when we get to the story of John the Baptist, we are to understand that he is the second Elijah who was anticipated, the one who was the messenger preparing the way for the Lord. So think about what's happening with John the Baptist and Jesus. John the Baptist, he had a very powerful ministry, didn't he? He was gathering many people, and they're turning away from darkness to trust in the Lord.

[8 : 41] But as soon as Jesus comes on the scene, John is very happy to acknowledge and point the people to Jesus, who is greater. He must increase, and I must decrease.

The one coming is so great, I'm not worthy to bend down and untie his shoelaces. And there at the Jordan, John the Baptist passed the mantle very happily to Jesus, the true and final prophet. And in the life of Jesus, we see that God still works in power, in great power, bringing in his kingdom, bringing us salvation.

And then in the, it's interesting, between Acts 1 and 1 and 2 Kings, so many themes connecting. In Acts 1, where we've been in the morning, Jesus with his apostles. He says, just before he ascends, that he will send the Spirit.

The Spirit will give them power to be his witnesses. And to read the book of Acts, we understand that Jesus continues to work in power while he has gone to heaven.

[9 : 49] Because God is unchanging in his power. God continues to work out his purposes.

His arm is never short so that he cannot save. And if that was true in the Moses and Joshua generations, if that was true in the Elijah, Elisha generations, if that was true in the John and Jesus and Apostle generations, it is true in our generation as well.

It is a truth for our church. It is a truth for your life and for mine. So if we find ourselves in a season of new starts or where everything is changing and everything feels up in the air and maybe it's clouded with uncertainty, we remember the God who never changes, whose power for his people remains unchanged, he is still and will always be the shepherd who leads and feeds and guides and protects.

He still cares. He still builds his church. He still invites us to him to find rest and to trust. And so we can pray and we can work with confidence.

We think about our own work in witness here. We think about the church plants that we support. As you think about the churches that you've come from, the nations you represent, we can be confident in God's mission in his world.

[11:20] We can be confident, weak as we often feel that God can change us and he can change others. He can use our witness to open people up to Jesus.

He can take our words to speak the gospel that saves. God is not limited to certain times, not limited to just the time of Elijah.

He's not limited to certain types of leaders, not just Elijah, but Elisha too will demonstrate God continues to work in power. And so our call is to have faith.

Our call is to look to the Lord as our rock, as our redeemer, but also our commander and mission leader because we can be certain that God does still work in power today.

Here's the second thing that we are invited to be certain of through our text. And again, it ties up with the book of Acts. You can be certain that God still sends his spirit.

[12:23] Now we have that phrase, don't we, the passing of the mantle in English, that idea of a succession that takes place. And you can almost imagine it could have its roots here with the symbolic passing of the cloak of Elijah to Elisha that is the symbol that Elisha is now being tasked to be God's prophet and he will receive God's spirit.

So those fears that the prophets had about a power vacuum, the anxieties, how will we cope without Elijah where those worries and fears are going to be answered by the Lord God in a visual, in a very striking way.

Just remind ourselves of the flow of this story. Verse 8, we come to the point where Elijah and Elisha have now reached the Jordan. Elijah strikes the water and they cross over.

And then in verse 9, Elijah asks the question, tell me what can I do for you before I'm taken from you? To which Elisha replies, let me inherit a double portion of your spirit.

Now this is not Elisha thinking, do you know what, I want to build a really big platform for myself, so I want double what Elijah had. This is him in humility, like Solomon when he's about to take over, recognizing, I need God's help.

[13:48] I need God's spirit if I am to serve in a way that pleases him. And so he asks for this double portion. And there is the promise that is given, verse 10, you've asked a difficult thing, yet if you see me when I'm taken from you, it will be yours.

And then you get that dramatic scene, the chariot of fire and the horses, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind, and Elisha saw it, and Elisha saw him no more.

And then symbolically, Elisha takes hold of his own cloak, and he tears it in two. He's done with that old cloak. He's done with that old way of life because Elisha then picks up Elijah's cloak, and he goes back to stand at the bank of the Jordan.

And he takes the cloak, and he strikes the water, and he asks that question, where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah? And of course, we know the answer. The Lord, the God of Elijah, is now with Elisha, the prophet.

And he sent him his spirit in power. What happens next maybe seems a little bit unusual. The company of the prophets, verse 15.

[15:03] They're watching, and notice there's certainty with them on the one hand. The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha.

So they're really clear that this succession has taken place. So there is a certainty there, but there's still uncertainty as well. There's uncertainty implied by the search that they suggest.

Verse 16, Look, we, your servants, have 50 able men. Let them go and look for your master.

Perhaps the spirit of the Lord has picked him up and set him down on some mountain or in some valley.

Why do they want to go on that search? Because they still are struggling to imagine what it's going to be like if Elijah's not around. They cannot imagine how things will go without Elijah, the servant, the prophet of the Lord, with them even as they know that that succession has taken place.

They're still struggling with what it's going to look like on the ground. But here we have Elisha and he's been filled with the spirit and he's been filled with the spirit of wisdom.

[16:20] And so he says, Don't go looking. That's a pointless search. But they beg and they beg and they beg until he gets embarrassed. He says, Well, have a go. On you go. And so they go for three days on a fruitless search and verse 18, when they returned, he said to them, Didn't I tell you

not to go?

In a sense, he's saying to them, Listen, I told you so. But not in that kind of annoying way. But rather, he's inviting them to learn, to rest, and to trust in the word of Elisha, the new prophet of God. To rest and to trust in God's wisdom as it comes through his prophet. To learn that just as God had been with Elijah and spoke through Elijah, so he will be with Elisha and speak through Elisha. God has sent his spirit and so the spirit will guide into truth and into life. We see the same principles in the stories that we've thought about.

If we were to go back just for a moment to the story, after Moses dies and there's that sense of uncertainty, God comes to Joshua and says, Do not fear, I am with you. I will do what I promised. [17:39] I'll take you and the people to the promised land. Go forward to John the Baptist and Jesus. Think about Jesus being baptized at the Jordan.

There's significance there. God's appointed one, God's final prophet, the baton is passed at the Jordan just as it was with Elijah and Elisha and the message is clear.

As the dove comes down, as the spirit descends, Jesus will be the spirit anointed, spirit filled prophet of God as God speaks in a whole new way.

As the book of Hebrews told us, in the past God spoke through the prophets but now he's spoken through his son. And Jesus gave wonderful promises to his disciples and to the apostles about the spirit.

So before Jesus went to the cross, John chapter 16, he said to them, the spirit, when he comes, he will guide you into all truth. Or Acts chapter 1, the spirit will be sent and the spirit will give you power, he will be your teacher, he will keep showing you the glory of the Lord Jesus.

[18:55] So even as Jesus returns to heaven, the church is not left alone, not left with a vacuum of wisdom because the church has given the spirit. And that's wonderfully true for every believer here today, that you and I, we have the Holy Spirit within us.

God the Father and God the Son are pleased to make their home in you and in us. And because we have the spirit, we have the power to live for God, we have the power to serve our Savior, and we have wisdom.

And we can ask for wisdom, to know, how can I live for Jesus today, in this moment, in this new situation? How can I walk worthy of him with my classmates or my colleagues, in this place, this conversation, what is going to bring glory to Jesus?

And remember, the privilege of prayer. And remember, we have a Father who gives generously. And one of the things the Father generously loves to give is his wisdom when we need it.

Wisdom that comes through the Spirit. in uncertainty, of whatever shape, there are times when we need a friend.

[20:19] There are times when we need someone who's going to give us good counsel. I think it's one of the reasons why fellowship is such a gift in the Christian church.

Why it's so important to find a church home to belong to and believers to connect with, to help us on the journey of faith. Because there are times when we need the wisdom of God that comes from other people, the prayers of other people for us.

That's why we value community group. But most of all, it's why we value what the Lord Jesus says. That we have him as a friend and a counselor and he sends us his Holy Spirit.

The Spirit of Christ is sent to live within us. So that no matter what's going on, we can be certain that God still sends the Spirit.

So we can be certain that God still works in power, he still sends the Spirit. Thirdly, you can be certain that God still rules as King of glory.

[21:33] And this really takes us to the drama of the last act of Elijah's life. It takes us to verse 11, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.

Elijah has been a faithful servant of God and he's been in spiritual battle against Baal and his prophets and now it's as if God, his commander, comes down to take him out of the battle, to take him up to heaven to receive his reward.

But what's significant for us is that for one last time in Elijah's life, we are getting to see who is really in charge. Who is the King of glory?

And one last time, Elijah's life is inviting us to recognize it's not Baal, although he has made or people make on his behalf big claims, it's the Lord God of the Bible.

So it's one of the great patterns of Elijah's life that he has used in his faithfulness to show the reality of the one true and living God versus the idols that people are bowing down to.

[22 : 48] Eugene Peterson has a really nice little book called A Long Obedience in the Same Direction. That's absolutely the pattern that we see in Elijah's life.

And do you know it's one of the wonderful privileges about life in this church that we have examples of godly older men and women who have walked in faith, who have walked that long obedience in the same direction, and they set us a wonderful example to live by, to learn from, by God's grace, to follow after.

But how does the story show that God is the king of glory and not Baal? Well, it takes us one last time to some of the big claims that people made about Baal.

In Baal imagery, if you went to see some Baal art, or if you went to worship Baal, certain things were associated with him. Baal was regarded as the storm god.

He was connected with fire and lightning. He was pictured as one who rode on the clouds. He was the weather god. He was associated with control over the rain and over the waters.

[24 : 04] And time and time again, in the Elijah story, Baal has been shown to be a non-thing, and God has been shown to be the true king. And here we see it again.

Who is the god of fire? It's not Baal. It's the Lord. Who is the god who rides on a chariot on the storm? It's not Baal.

It's the god of the Bible. Who is it that acts in the whirlwind with power? It's not Baal. It's Elijah's god. And think about verse 14.

Elisha's question as he strikes the water, where now is the Lord, the god of Elijah? He is right here showing his authority over the waters as he parts the water.

God's in charge. God's the king. God deserves all praise and glory. Elijah's life has shown it.

Elisha's life is going to show it too.

[25 : 09] But just think about that pattern of God showing himself to be over the storm, to be over the seas, and over the waters, to be the one true and living God. Think about it in the story of Moses and Joshua.

Where do we see it? We see it when the Red Sea parts to give salvation to Israel and bring judgment on Egypt. We see it as God appears in the desert as the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire.

We see it as the glory cloud comes to cover the temple and to guide the people. And what about when Jesus, the Son of God, comes? When do we see it then?

How do we see Jesus as Lord and King of glory? We see it as he walks on the water. We see it as he rebukes the storm with just a word.

Here is God in the flesh. Here is the Lord with all authority and glory. And when he returned in glory, he was taken up in the clouds with that promise that he would return in the same way.

[26 : 21] And everyone on that day will see his glory. But to take up that imagery in a different way, as Jesus dies on the cross, wonderfully in the story of salvation, Jesus experiences the fire and the whirlwind of God's judgment upon sin.

For everyone that Jesus came to save, he was loaded up with our sin. And in his great love, he took God's wrath for that sin upon himself.

He willingly went into the whirlwind so that you and I, by faith in him, we can be sheltered from the storm. That we can hear God's still, small voice speak good news of grace and salvation.

Undoubtedly, you and I are going to live through lots of times and places and experiences when life will feel very uncertain. And in those days, we could be tempted to look within ourselves and try and find solutions.

Or we could be tempted to throw our hands up in panic or despair. But what should we do as the people of God? What do we have as the people of God?

[27 : 49] We have certain hope. As we learn to behold our God seated on his throne. As we see the Lord Jesus, our King and our Saviour.

As we understand that he still works in power in and for his people. As he still sends his spirit to be with and for his people.

As he still rules as the great King of glory. Inviting us to trust him. To worship him. and to live for him today.