

Trusting the promises and power of God

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Date: 16 November 2025

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[0 : 0 0] And encouraged by the promises and the power of God.! Because that's why these last two stories are here in the Bible.! But just to recognize as we begin that encouragement is a powerful thing.

I think we saw a brilliant example of this kind of nationally. I'm sure many of us were tracking Sarah Cox's Children in Need Challenge. You know, the equivalent of five marathons in five days.

And we saw her push through the pain barrier so often. And what was it that kept her going? It was messages coming in from the public as well as from significant people, Prince William and others.

It was the well-wishers, the dog walkers, the runners lining the route. It was friends who would take time out to run with her. It was the knowledge that money was being raised for a good cause.

All of this served as great encouragement. At a very local level, we have just shared our Confident Christianity Weekend. We've heard some great teachings, some practical help.

[1 : 0 7] A reminder that you and I, we can have conversations that count. That there are things that we can do with the help of God's Spirit to help move people closer to Jesus.

That's encouraging. In our experience, generally, I am sure we know the impact. You hear a positive word from a teacher or your boss.

You know the positive value of support from a friend. Encouragement. Or just learning from the positive example of someone. We can be encouraged to change our behavior to be more like the person that we admire.

Encouragement is a powerful thing. We come to Elisha's, the last two stories of Elisha's life. And they might seem somewhat strange to us.

A sick man in his bedroom, and there are bow and arrows and prophecy. And then he dies, and then there are life-giving bones. And we might find ourselves saying, these are kind of interesting, but why are they here in the Bible?

[2 : 1 4] To help us with that, I want us to just remember that we are not the first readers of the Bible. And the first readers of the book of 2 Kings weren't sitting in the comfort of Jerusalem, sitting in the temple, enjoying comfort.

They were exiles. Far from the city, far from the temple. They didn't have a king. Life was hard.

And then they read this book. And they read this story. And Elisha, this great figure, and they would have heard the stories of Elisha.

Elisha has gone. And they are in exile. But both of these stories that we've just read are saying to us, the Lord who makes promises is still powerful to see.

He is able to bring hope for the exiles. He is able to encourage us today. This is a dose of hope in dark times that no doubt was intended to encourage those exiles.

[3 : 27] But in God's providence, they're a word for us too. In a sense, a bit like the book of Acts. The Lord Jesus left to return to heaven.

And the disciples are looking up. What comes next? And the book of Acts reminds us of those words of Jesus, that promise that He would build His church.

And the gates of hell would not prevail against it. That Jesus would send the Spirit, that He would continue to work through the apostles and through His church. And isn't that what we've been seeing in the book of Acts?

The power and the promises come together to encourage the people of God. When we recognize that our God doesn't change.

Still faithful to His promises. Still full of power to redeem and transform. And so, little stories like these stand for us in the Bible as monuments.

[4 : 29] Reminders calling us back. Or calling us into a faith that we trust our God and our Savior. So, as we finish our time with Elisha, I really do hope that we will go away from his life and these stories encouraged.

As we're invited again to see the power of God and the promise of God. And to take hold of both. So, we're going to begin thinking about the promise that should encourage us.

Verses 10 to 19. I deliberately included the word should. Because as we'll see from King Jehoshaphat, it is not automatic that God's promises come as encouragement to people.

Jehoshaphat, I think, is in the Bible as a warning for us. He is someone who lacks faith. One of those Bible characters who's given a wonderful promise. Invited to take hold of it.

But he doesn't really grab it with both hands. He stands as a warning to us. Verse 10 to 13. We heard it read. The summary of his 16-year reign.

[5 : 37] It takes up just these few paragraphs. And the key statement that God makes about Jehoshaphat's life, it's here in verse 11. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

Yes, there were wars that were won. Yes, there was triumph that was gained. But in the final analysis, he was a man without faith. He was someone who was not truly worshipping his God.

There's only one event that is highlighted in King Jehoshaphat's life, and it's this scene in Elisha's bedroom in verses 14 to 19.

One story, one event, one lesson. What we do with the Word of God ultimately defines our lives.

What we do with God's promise is what matters for now and for eternity. Regardless of achievement, regardless of status, do I believe God's message concerning his son, the Lord Jesus.

[6 : 41] So let's take a look at the drama that happens here in the prophet Elisha's bedroom. So verse 14, we're told that Elisha is ill and he is dying.

And the king comes to visit. And there is this scene of lament. The king comes and he weeps. My father, my father, the chariots and horsemen of Israel. Now, if you are around in the story of Elijah, you'll remember this is the same language that Elisha used about Elijah.

There is this sense that to have the true prophet is to have God on your side. And so King Jehoshaphat understands that's true of Elisha.

And so now there's fear. Elisha's going to die. So what's going to happen next? And God through Elisha gives a message designed to encourage the king, to encourage the nation.

And it's where the archery kicks in. Verses 15 to 17. Elisha says to the king, get a bow and some arrows. And now begins some acted prophecy.

- [7 : 48] So did you notice that the king has to take the bow? And then the ill Elisha then puts his hands on the king's hands. The shout goes out.
- Open the window. Boys and girls, I don't know if you've done archery. Don't ever do it indoors. This is bad practice. And he shoots the arrow.
- And what does Elisha say? He says, the Lord's arrow of victory. The arrow of victory over Aram. So that arrow flying out the window represents the certainty of Israel's victory through God.
- And the point is this. Elisha is weak. And he is dying. But God is powerful.
- And God is still going to be for His people. And they are invited to trust Him to enjoy victory. So it all sounds very positive.
- [8 : 46] And it would be positive if it finished at verse 17. Elisha declared, you'll completely destroy the Arameans. But the prophecy isn't finished. Then he said, take the arrows.
- The king took them. Elisha told him, strike the ground. He struck it three times and stopped. What's the picture? Jehoash, take those arrows that represent certain victory.
- And you lay hold on that. This isn't, you know, World War II dig for victory. This is strike for victory. And so key now becomes, well, how much does Jehoash value and trust the promise?
- Will he, as it were, grab this promise represented by the arrows with both hands? He's been given an invitation to smash the living daylights out of these arrows in a great act of faith.
- But he doesn't. It's a half-hearted effort. And Elisha sees it. And Elisha's angry. You should have struck the ground five or six times.
- [9 : 57] Then you would have defeated Aramean and completely destroyed it. Did he feel a bit silly? Did it seem a bit pointless? We don't know. But it represents, in the king's life, a lack of faith.
- He didn't claim the promise. And so there would be a lack of total victory. And those were the last recorded words of Elisha. So again, what's the lesson from this rather obscure drama for us?
- Well, again, it's this. Responding with faith to God's word of promise is the most important thing about us. It's the most important thing in our life of faith.
- The Bible is full of hundreds of wonderful promises. And God is faithful to his character. He's never going to change. We are invited by faith to live in those promises.
- But again, the king stands as a warning to us. Don't miss out on the fullness that the Lord Jesus offers because we don't grab hold of God's promises.
- [11 : 09] We don't really trust that he will keep his word. We insert ourselves into the drama rather than looking entirely to God who is faithful. Let me give some examples of how this might play out in our own experience.
- So here in the Old Testament, we had a promise, a certain promise of destruction, of salvation for the people from God. Jesus promises us, promises us, certain salvation.
- In Acts chapter 16, verse 31, under the Philippian jailer, what must I do to be saved? Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved. It's Jesus' words.
- This is the one work that you need to do to receive eternal life. Believe in the Lord Jesus, the one who was sent by God. That's a certain promise.
- Believe and we will be saved. That's the only way. Maybe you remember the story of Nicola from Italy.

[12 : 17] We heard him last week on a video representing, I think, the story of so many trying for years to save himself by religious effort.

Full of guilt, full of despair, no sense of security. Until a friend cared for him enough to open up the book of Ephesians with him.

What do we find in Ephesians? For it is by grace. You've been saved through faith. And it's not from yourselves. It is the gift of God, not by work. So, no one should boast.

To believe in Jesus as Lord is a guarantee of forgiveness, of eternal life, of the freedom that we are brought into from trying to earn our way into the kingdom.

It's the joy of a secure identity that is ours as a child of God. It's the peace that we can have living, knowing there is no condemnation.

[13 : 21] And we are invited to grab that reality with both hands, to live in the gospel of our salvation, that we might live with peace and hope and joy.

Don't miss out on what Jesus died to secure for his people. In this story, there was a promise for God's people of a spiritual victory.

Jesus promises his people spiritual victory. At Romans 6, 14, A sin shall no longer be your master because you are not under the law, but under grace.

Here's the encouraging promise from God. By faith, we are transferred into a different kingdom. We have a new king.

Sin is not our master. Jesus is, and he's a good master. Now we are controlled by a new power, and it's the power of God's grace. Now we live with a new freedom. We're free from the grip of sin.

[14 : 28] So that in a radical way, we are changed, and in an ongoing way, we can change. Because sin no longer defines us if we are followers of Jesus.

Sin no longer holds us in its death grip. Do we believe that? So often as Christians, we don't always grasp that promise with both hands.

We don't live with that kind of confidence that Jesus has won the decisive spiritual victory and brings us into that victory with him.

We're more like soldiers going into battle with low morale, thinking, we've already lost. We're certain to be defeated. Do we find it to be the case that we fail to fight sin with Christ's power?

We look to our own resources, and we know we've failed in the past, and so we imagine a repeating cycle. We need to lay hold of this promise that by the power of the Spirit, we can say no to sin.

[15 : 34] We can resist temptation. We can grow in holiness. But we see the opposite pattern also in the Bible as a reminder.

When we rely on self rather than God's powerful grace. We see it in the story of Peter at the night of Jesus' arrest. Jesus said, watch and pray so you don't fall into temptation.

What was Peter's response? I'll never do that. Maybe other people will, but I won't. So he didn't watch. He didn't pray. And he did fall into temptation. And he did deny the Lord Jesus.

We need to claim the promise that there is power from our God and Savior to have spiritual victory over sin and temptation.

Here's another one. And we can do this with all of the promises that we find in the Bible, but we're not going to tonight. Jesus has come to secure our life with God, just as if the king had claimed the promise, Israel would have lived with security from the Aramean threat.

[16 : 46] But what do we need to do? James chapter 4, humble yourselves before God. Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you.

There's a promise. God would draw near to us. God would give us more grace. As Christians, we can experience every day more of God's grace, more of God's presence in our lives, not as theory, but as lived out experience.

We can every day taste and see that the Lord is good. But to claim that promise, by faith we must humble ourselves, and we must draw near to God.

Sometimes we find it to be the situation that God can feel distant. Sometimes we find that our sense of the Christian faith is a going through the motions.

Maybe you look back at a time in your past, and you think, well, I feel less joyful than I did before. Now, there are many reasons for that, potentially, but maybe, if we listen to James, maybe, it's a time to humble ourselves, and it's a time to draw near to God, to make that a priority in our lives day by day, to make time to be hearing from God, to be turning our hearts towards Jesus, our Lord and our Savior, to make time in our day to pray and to worship, to share fellowship, to act in faith, to claim this promise.

[18 : 39] Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. It's a great way for us to read our Bibles, to look, to find that where are God's encouraging promises, and then to pay attention, how do I need to act, to live by faith, to claim those promises in my own experience, to pray for grace, to live by faith, that trusts in the promises of God and the God of the promises.

Because this little story here is giving us a crucial reminder. It's as if it's inviting us to ask a question.

If God were to write the story of your life and of my life, how would He choose to sum that up? What is it that matters when, like Jehoshaphat, our time comes to an end?

Do I believe God's word of promise? Do I believe in the good news that's held out in the gospel of the Lord Jesus? Am I trusting He is the way, the truth, and the life leading me home to God and into more of God day by day?

So we have in this penultimate story of Elisha a promise that should encourage us. And then we come to the last story of His life, the power that should encourage us.

[20 : 15] The first story was unusual. This one, very obscure, but really striking, isn't it? I remember one of the first funerals that I conducted down in the borders, and it was almost canceled.

It was later on in the year than this, and the ground was so hard that they weren't sure they'd be able to actually break the ground, and the snow was falling heavily, and it wasn't clear whether the roads would be passable.

But we made it, and the funeral continued. But here in this final Elisha story, we have another Bible account of a funeral that actually was canceled, and not canceled by the weather, canceled by the resurrection power of God.

And again, think about this. If you're sitting in Babylon, and you're in exile, and you know that your city is in ruins, and your nation has been possessed, and you're here in your captivity, and you're wondering, can anything change?

Can anything good happen now? You read this story, and you recognize the true God. He's my God, and He's the God of resurrection power.

[21 : 33] He is the God who can restore and redeem. He is the God who can bring life where there is death. And that's the encouragement of this story.

So we're told in verse 20, Elisha died and was buried. But strikingly, Elisha's God is not done working in power after his death.

So there's a funeral service. But the funeral service is happening at the same time as Moabite raiders arrive. Every year, spring after spring, the Moabites come to raid the land.

And so these guys who are about to bury their friend, they make this decision. They see the raiders coming. So they open the tomb, and it's Elisha's tomb, and they place the body within the tomb.

What happens? When the body touched Elisha's bones, the man came to life and stood on his feet. And the message of the tomb that day is that the power of the Lord to restore and give new life is still available.

[22 : 45] It doesn't matter if you've got the prophet with you or not. You have the prophet's God. And that's the key thing. It's another one of these striking miracles that make up the life of Elisha just as it did with Elijah.

And we may look at a story like this and think, this can't be true. This must. It smacks of myth. It sounds like, you know, saints' bones and all those stories that arose in the Middle Ages.

Maybe we have questions that our friends ask us. How can you possibly believe in miracles? And I think it's reasonable when we think about it. Unless someone is prepared to say, with 100% cast iron certainty, I can prove that there is no creator God.

I can prove categorically that the world must be a closed system. That it must only work the way I expect, the way I normally see things happen. Unless a person can say that, then it is reasonable for us to believe and to assert that there is a God who created.

And if there is a God who created, then He is completely powerful. And that means He is free to act and to intervene as He pleases. He is free to perform miracles. And especially when we take into account the evidence of the life of Jesus and especially His resurrection.

[24 : 12] That's why I wanted us to hear Matthew 27. It sounded like a parallel passage, didn't it? You know, Jesus, the greatest of all prophets, when He dies and His body is placed in the tomb for those three days, what happens?

The tombs of believers open up. And when Jesus rises, the dead too are raised to life. And so we see in the Old Testament from the prophet, and in the greatest way possible, in Jesus, the ultimate prophet, God's resurrection power on display.

Because Jesus wants you and I to be encouraged that He has the power of resurrection life. He has the power to bring restoration and salvation.

He is a far greater than Elisha. He is the true and the final prophet. Elisha's bones, they raised one. And that man and his family would have had great joy on that day.

But Jesus' death and resurrection give new creation life to all who believe, continuing to act with power. That while Elisha remained dead, Jesus Himself was the first to experience true resurrection life and freely gives it to all who have faith in Him and who come after Him.

[25 : 33] And while Elisha's act was seen by a few, experienced by one, the life-giving power of Jesus will still be an experience today.

Hundreds of millions of Christians around the world enjoy resurrection life through faith in the risen Lord Jesus. And so here is some encouragement for us where we find ourselves as a church in November during Missions Month.

The Lord Jesus is still working powerfully to build His church. And we've been hearing stories from around the world to remind us of that. He is still bringing life in place of spiritual death.

He is still bringing hope and healing from places of great darkness. He is restoring people back to life with God. And so the question becomes for us, can I believe that He is still powerful to do that among us in Buclue, here in Edinburgh and in Scotland?

As we're given these last stories in the life of Elisha, we're being given encouragement as to how to live. That we would live with wholehearted worship that would place all our faith in the God of resurrection power.

[26 : 57] To understand that in Jesus, we can and we should by faith claim God's wonderful promises in our own life that we can expect to experience His life-transforming power and grace every day.

Until final restoration of life with Him in the new creation. So if you feel a bit like the exiles of Elisha's, after Elisha's day, kind of feeling despairing, hopeless, wondering if our day is done.

Maybe you're slogging along in life and the life of faith feels tough. Let the Lord Jesus encourage you on the marathon of faith as we remember and take hold of His promises and His power.

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