

Elijah and Elisha

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[0 : 00] Let's say our prayer together. Heavenly Father, we humbly bow in your presence.

! May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher,! and your great glory our supreme concern. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

History is one darned thing after another, or so they say. In my past life as a history student, I developed a habit of carrying a giant timeline around in my head so that I could slot events into it. Something happened in 1773? Ah, that's the reign of George III. 1668? It's the restoration. 1923? The interwar period.

Divvying up the past into these neat boxes so that history can be seen as simply one thing after another in its nice, proper order.

[1 : 06] But if you look at history more closely, you see that the starts and ends of things are never as neat as they look on a timeline.

History is messy. Things overlap. When one king dies and another comes to the throne, the people they reign over stay the same.

They don't, however inconveniently, take off their ruffs and put on periwigs to show that they're now stewards rather than Tudors. One of the pedantic joys of studying history is discovering how things are more complicated than they look on a timeline.

And as a recovering historian and recovering pedant, when I had to pick a dissertation topic in this last year of my studies, I thought that I ought to look at some of the historical books of the Bible, at the books of kings.

And here, history seems to be one darned king after another. They're all very neatly laid out, and their reigns all start and end in the same way, with something like, In the 18th year of King Jeroboam, Abijam began to reign over Judah.

[2 : 21] He reigned for three years in Jerusalem. Then Abijam slept with his ancestors, and they buried him in the city of David. Then his son Asa succeeded him. And then in the 20th year of King Jeroboam of Israel, Asa began to reign over Judah.

He reigned 41 years, and so on, for Asa and Asa's son Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat's son Jehoram, and so on. It's a nice, orderly succession of king after king, reign after reign, a nice tidy timeline for the history of Israel and Judah.

But what makes the books of kings so interesting as a presentation of history is that it is not just one darned king after another.

Because between and across these neat, self-contained reigns of kings are woven the stories of the prophets. And the stories of the prophets don't stick neatly to one reign.

They sprawl across them, fading in and out, coming and going as God sends them. In the reading, we heard of Elijah being taken up at the end of his life by chariots of fire and succeeded by Elisha.

[3 : 37] And that is precisely about how God works across lifetimes. God works through the prophets in God's own time, between and through and across the human ways that we split up time, whether in reigns or parliamentary terms or life stages or career moves or generations.

God moves in the world through all of these according to God's own timeline, not our timeline. And whereas the rest of the books of kings are about king handing over to king, the passage we heard today is about prophet handing over to prophet.

And it's actually very unusually placed between the record of the death of one king and the start of his successor. It's happening out with the timeline that covers everything else.

It's almost an event outside of normal history. And it's also a passage that is slap bang in the middle of the two books of kings in the second chapter of the second book.

Because you see, Kings was originally one book, but it got split into two because it fell so neatly into two halves. And this is the story that holds those two halves together.

[5 : 06] Kings has a sort of sandwich structure where this chapter is the filling right in the middle. It starts with the reigns of David and Solomon and the split of their united kingdom into two kingdoms.

And then you get a series of rather brief and boring kings before things pick up again with the much more exciting stories about Elijah. And you get the handover between the two of them in two kings too that we heard.

Elijah handing over to Elisha. If you ever get the names confused, by the way, remember that they come in alphabetical order, which is very convenient. I'm sure John's pronunciation of Elisha is probably more accurate.

But the advantage of an ancient language is we don't know how they pronounced it. So it's always correct, however you pronounce it. And then after the handover, we get the stories of Elisha's career as a prophet.

And then another set of brief and boring kings before you get the exciting conclusion of the fall of the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah as they are invaded by foreign empires.

[6 : 10] And our passage is a linchpin holding together not only the Elijah stories and the Elisha stories, but the whole two halves of the two books and the rise and fall of Israel and Judah.

And putting this story right at the center means that this succession of prophets is in very deliberate contrast with the succession of kings around it.

With kings, you very simply get one king and then another. The king is dead. Long live the king. But prophets are otherwise.

Elijah and Elisha overlap. They have, in fact, been traveling and working together for ten years at this point. That's why there's so much emotion behind their parting.

Why Elisha doesn't want to leave Elijah's side. And they overlap because they share a mission. They share a spirit from God.

[7 : 15] They share in doing God's work in the world. And kings don't share power any more than they share reigns. But those who are united by being servants of God, as we all are, share something that is shared between times and places and peoples.

So even as rulers or seasons change, that shared mission is a constant that holds us together. The thing that creates that unity is the one thing that Elisha asks for from Elijah.

God's spirit. Because Elisha has seen the spirit at work through Elijah, he thinks of it as being Elijah's spirit. He asks him for a double portion of your spirit, Elijah.

A double portion because that is the share that went to an eldest son or an heir. And afterwards, the sons of the prophets say that the spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.

But whatever his followers think, Elijah knows that the spirit is not his to give. You have asked a hard thing, he says.

[8 : 29] It's a hard thing because the gift is the spirit is not in any person's hands. It's not something we can be assigned or go out and earn or work towards.

God's spirit is simply the free gift of God. And Elijah describes the sign of receiving God's spirit as seeing differently.

If Elisha sees him taken up to heaven, then he will have received the spirit. and then he does indeed see chariots of fire and horses of fire.

This is seeing the power of God at work. Seeing a glory and a beauty that is hidden to others. Elisha responds to this vision by saying the chariots of Israel and its horsemen.

It's a way of recognizing that the true power of the kingdom is not in its own chariots and horsemen, but in those of God, in the will of the spirit.

[9 : 37] As we said in our call to worship from Psalm 20, some trust in chariots and some in horses and some in aircraft carriers and some in drones, but we trust in the name of the Lord.

The real power of God's people is not in the things of the world, but in God. So what Elisha is seeing is seeing according to God's time, not according to King's time.

Seeing God's power, not King's power. If we could see that way, not seeing the things that we usually measure, like money or headcounts or authority, but seeing where the spirit was at work, what would we see?

Where would we see people being led by chariots of fire? Where would they lead us? But seeing where we are going is also, Elijah would tell us, a hard thing.

The sons of the prophets, a group of other prophets or followers who gathered around Elisha, they show two ways of reacting to change that are so often our instinctive reactions.

[11 : 07] Before Elijah goes, there's this constant anticipation. They keep coming up to Elisha and saying, do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from over you?

And Elisha says, yes, yes, I know. Oh, but do you know? Yes, yes, I do. I've been training with the Church of Scotland for three years now, and those three years have seen a lot of change, both nationally and within Edinburgh.

And anticipating and discussing those changes has very often been the central topic of conversation, whether among churches that I've visited or among students at New College or talking to ministers.

It's the central topic of conversation just as it was for the sons of the prophets. when there's a change that you know is coming up, it's so easy to focus just on that.

And sometimes that's helpful and often it's necessary because it's important for people to know what is going on. But focusing on that to the exclusion of other things can be a distraction and can overshadow the immediate tasks at hand.

[12 : 22] And Elisha doesn't want that anticipation of change, that slightly fevered discussion among the sons of the prophets to interrupt the journey that he's on at that moment with Elijah.

A journey that is also part of that change. So he hushes them. He's very comfortable trusting that he is on a timeline that God has set that may or may not line up with the timelines that we usually see based around the reigns of kings or the timetables of leadership handovers or the dates for church procedures.

It's that hard thing of seeing the world by God's timeline, seeing by the spirit both where and when God is working.

And then having been focused on looking forward by anticipating Elijah's departure, once he's gone, the sons of the prophets then look backward and find it hard to accept that he's gone.

They go looking for him in case he's simply reappeared unexpectedly somewhere else, which earlier in the books of Kings had been something of a party trick of his. And again, Elisha is reluctant to indulge them.

[13 : 42] By the spirit, he's able to see where God's power is at work and so he knows that God is working through change, that the shared mission continues even as individuals come and go.

He's managing that hard thing of not being anxious about change before it happens and accepting it once it does. And note, by the way, that they look for Elijah for three days and cannot find him.

That's one of the little ways in which Jesus echoes Elijah and Elisha because in Jesus is a prophet who after three days after his death, he is found by his disciples at Easter.

And Jesus' ascension into heaven, also witnessed by his followers, is not, as with Elijah, simply a sign of God's power at work, but it's a sign of how Jesus is eternal and everlasting, the same yesterday and today and forever.

While prophets like Elijah and Elisha were tied to a time and a place, Jesus, as God incarnate, was not limited to his own time and place on earth, but in that God's eye view of history, he spills out from it and transcends his life on earth to be in all times and all places.

[15 : 14] He's not limited by history or space or even death, any of the things that we normally use to mark our timelines by. But Elijah and Elisha, by contrast, can only play a partial and imperfect part in God's plans.

And what's in the background of this story but is left unsaid, is the things that the two prophets have left undone, the ways in which they have failed to live up to the tasks that have been set for them.

Earlier in 1 Kings chapter 19, there's the famous story of Elijah encountering God on the mountain. There's an earthquake, wind and fire, but Elijah hears God in a still, small voice.

And what that still, small voice says to Elijah is to anoint Elisha as his successor, which he does.

But God also tells him to anoint a man called Jehu as king of Israel so that he can overthrow the idolatrous house of Ahab, the notorious Jezebel and her family.

And that Elijah does not do. And even after the succession of prophets, Elisha doesn't do it either.

[16 : 43] He actually eventually delegates it to one of the sons of the prophets. The task gets passed from one to another and to another. And it's then a great, if rather gory, story about how Jehu overthrows the house of Ahab.

But I find it fascinating that even two great men like Elijah and Elisha, who here are so clearly deeply admired by people like the sons of the prophets and others, even they are limited and floored in responding to God's call.

I think it shows how God works despite our failings and even through them, those things that we don't get around to, those lingering problems that don't get solved from year to year or age to age. God is working on God's own timeline, if only we could see it. What seems like failure to us will be picked up by God and passed onward to others.

And if we trust in the spirit as being the source and guide of our work, then we can learn to trust that even our shortcomings won't hold back God's work in the world.

[18:07] May we not only look at the world as something divided up under the reign of kings and rulers, but as a place under the rule of God, whose kingdom is breaking through in and around and between what we can see.

May we, like Elisha, receive the gift of God's spirit to see the world differently. May we, like Elisha, see the power of God at work in chariots of fire, leading other people onwards.

May we, like Elisha, not be distracted by the future or distracted by the past, but trust in the spirit leading us through times of change.

May we trust that God's plans are not in our own frail hands, but in the hands of God's own spirit, and so we'll unfold across and through around the plans that we might make or that we can see.

Amen. Amen.