

The Real World

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Date: 15 March 2020

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, can I just repeat something I said last night? What a pleasure it is to be with you and how much I admire those of you who have come with little children or even not quite so little children.

It's a big thing to come away for a weekend like this. It's tiring and stressful and you need a week off after it, that kind of thing, but it really is terrifically worthwhile.

It's worthwhile not only for you but for your kids and I just encourage you to keep on investing in church life as part of your family life.

It really is a big thing and will mean a lot and there are lots of good things we like to do for our kids. There aren't that many better than investing your life and your family's life in the life of God's people. However, I want to begin this morning.

[1 : 09] 2 Kings chapter 2 is the part of the Bible that you should have open in front of you. But I want to begin by just raising the question as to whether you've noticed how many people think that the world that they know and that they understand and they're familiar with is the real world.

You come across that kind of idea. Older people quite often look at younger people and say something like wait till they get into the real world. By which they mean the world of adult work and responsibility the world that they live in.

And then younger people often think that older people or at least some older people like me are out of touch. And by that they mean out of touch with the world that they know and understand.

Their real world. These days I find myself feeling as a city dweller watching the hard times being endured by so many people in rural Australia with drought and fire and so on and some recently with floods.

I sometimes wonder what I know of the real world protected as I am in my comfortable city existence. that idea that the world we are familiar with or world is the real world most of the time those who are accused of being out of touch with the real world find it a little bit insulting.

[2 : 56] We don't like being told that our world our experience our understanding is inferior is inadequate is out of touch with something more important.

And I found myself wondering whether that is part of the reason that people don't really like the message of the Bible. Because the Bible tells us that the real world the real world is bigger than any of us know.

We are out of touch. Seriously out of touch. The real world is more than we can see than we can hear than we can feel.

And this matters because well let's see why it matters by following the story of Joshua not Joshua Elisha these names get all confusing don't they?

They're all sort of so similar and overlapped. Elisha when he next appears in 2 Kings chapter 2. The event we're about to witness and I know you've been reading 2 Kings and so you are many of you at least will be familiar with this story it occurred these events somewhere in the 850s B.C.

[4 : 21] And the event in 2 Kings chapter 2 is one of those utterly astonishing events which the Bible records that shows us the real world.

indeed I would say here we have an event that actually illuminates everything. The event has links to others like it as you read through this chapter we won't have time to do very much of this but it reminds you of all sorts of other things other particular moments in the Bible story if we read it carefully it's hard to avoid being reminded of the exodus from Egypt in the days of Moses certainly we'll be reminded of the entry into the promised land under Joshua's leadership we might also find ourselves thinking of the occasion in the life of Jesus known as the transfiguration I'm not going to mention that but there are links to that event as well as the resurrection and ascension of Jesus and

the pouring out of the Holy Spirit they're all linked to what happens in 2 Kings chapter 2 the story we're about to follow is very weighty well I want us to listen to it we're going to do things a little bit differently to what

I usually do this time I told you last night you're guinea pigs this mightn't work too bad we'll just do our best it won't hurt you to listen to the Bible anyway whether the rest of what I say works that's another matter but 2 Kings chapter 2 I want us to listen to the whole story we're not going to go through it in detail in our thinking but having listened to the story I'm then going to try and pick up on four big things that we learned from what happened on this day long long ago alright follow with me in 2 Kings chapter 2 from verse 1 I'm reading in the ESV if your translation is significantly different and you're puzzled by that you can ask me about that later on 2 Kings chapter 2 from the top now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal just to insert here this is the first time that Elisha has been mentioned since the account we looked at last night in 1 Kings 19 that call although we can assume that Elisha has been with Elijah all the time we were told that he became his assistant and so I think Elisha has been there he hasn't been mentioned but now he is mentioned verse 2 and Elijah said to Elisha please stay here for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel but Elisha said as the Lord lives and as you yourself live I will not leave you so they went down to Bethel and the sons of the prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha these sons of the prophets we're going to hear a lot more about them they seem to have been kind of followers or disciples of Elijah and Elisha in various places around the countryside well they came out and they said to

Elisha do you know that today the Lord will take away your master from over you and he said yes I know keep quiet Elijah said to him Elisha please stay here for the Lord has sent me to Jericho but he said as the Lord lives and as you yourself live I will not leave you so they came to Jericho the sons of the prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha and said to him do you know that today the Lord will take away your master from over you and he answered yes I know keep quiet then Elijah said to him this is getting a little bit tedious isn't it not tedious it's actually very interesting but it's getting repetitive then Elijah said to him please stay here for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan but he said as the Lord lives and as you yourself live I'm not going to leave you so the two of them went on 50 men from the sons of the prophets

[8 : 49] I think the sons of the prophets in Jericho also went and stood at some distance from them as they both were standing by the Jordan there on the west side of the Jordan if you're trying to picture this scene and 50 men watching them then Elijah took his cloak you remember that cloak from last night and rolled it up and struck the water and the water was parted to the one side and to the other until the two of them could go over on dry ground and when they crossed Elijah said to Elisha ask what I shall do for you before I am taken from you and Elisha said please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me and he said you've asked a hard thing yet if you see me as I'm being taken from you it shall be so for you but if you do not see me it shall not be so and as they still went on and talked behold chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven and Elisha saw it and he cried my father my father the chariot of Israel and its horsemen and he saw him no more then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces and he took up the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him and went back and stood at the bank of the

Jordan then he took the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him and struck the water saying where is the Lord the God of Elijah and when he had struck the water the water was parted to the one side and to the other and Elisha went over now when the sons of the prophets who were at Jericho saw him opposite them this is the 50 men who'd been watching at a distance they said the spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha and they came to meet him and bowed down to the ground before him and they said to him behold now there are with you there are with your servants 50 strong men please let them go and seek your master Elijah it may be that the spirit of the Lord has caught him up and cast him on some mountain or into some valley and he said you shall not send but when they urged him till he was ashamed he said send they sent therefore 50 men and for three days they sought him but they didn't find him and they came back to him to Elisha while he was staying at Jericho and he said to them didn't

I say to you do not go quite a story eh quite an event I'm a little puzzled that we're not more familiar with it I mean it's not an unknown event it's not a really obscure event in the Bible but such a remarkable event it's not one of the top three that you'd think of in the Bible events you're familiar

with as the chapter begins the time had come we're told for Elijah to depart from this world it's quite a moment Elijah if you've been reading the whole story Elijah first appeared in this account in 1 Kings 17 verse 1 we noted that last night in the days of that dreadful king Ahab and his even more dreadful wife

Queen Jezebel and about 20 years have passed if you calculate it out it looks like around about 20 years can't work it out exactly but there's been about 20 years Elijah has been around and Elijah remember his name my God is Yahweh that's what his name means he's been a very powerful figure in Israel's history the story of Elijah has been exciting and dramatic but Elijah as we're going to see was actually preparing the way for Elisha and Elisha's time had come see how verse 1 says the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind now the departure of most people from this world including you and me time will come we presume the departure of most people from this world means their death and usually they're buried and for obvious reasons the Bible often describes this as going down in biblical history up to this point there have been just two exceptions or variations from the norm in Genesis 5 do you remember there was we read

Enoch who the text says it's really one of those phrases in the Bible what does that mean it says he was not for God took him whatever that precisely means it sounds as though it was a little bit different to most of us then much later Moses died and was buried but apparently not by human hand and we read at the end of the book of Deuteronomy that no one knows the place of his burial to this day so that was a little bit unusual but 2 Kings chapter 2 verse 1 anticipates that Elijah's departure will surpass in wonder and mystery the departures of Enoch and Moses the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind and as we'll see these words are to be taken quite literally now I'm sure as we read the story I wonder if your mind was sort of going in various directions and thinking of connections to other

[15 : 45] Bible events that crossing of the Jordan River on dry ground well that was just like what happened centuries earlier in the days of Joshua when the Israelites you remember first entered the promised land indeed if you get out a Bible atlas and it's a really good idea to have a Bible atlas or a good Bible map as you're reading particularly these Old Testament stories and following the movements because the assumption of the writer is that the first readers of this will know the geography most of us don't and so it's worth getting out a Bible atlas and seeing where and if you follow the movements of Elijah and Elisha you'd see that as they moved eastwards towards the Jordan River and across the Jordan River it looked as though they were following the path of Joshua and the Israelites but in reverse they were going in the opposite direction it sort of almost looks like it was a picture of the judgment that God had warned the people that they would suffer of being driven out of the promised land as

Joshua sorry as Elisha and Elijah take that path so strikingly similar to the entry of the promised land across to the east I think I'm getting east and west mixed up don't worry about it if I've got it wrong just ignore me but then what happened Elisha my God saves came back now without Elijah and it was a kind of return to the promised land it was a kind of picture of redemption now that's important for understanding the significance of Elijah my God is Yahweh and Elisha my God saves for the Old Testament people of Israel but I want to draw your attention to some other connections Elisha and Jesus it's interesting to me that after Elijah's remarkable departure in 2 Kings chapter 2 we find almost no mention of him throughout the whole of the rest of the Old Testament until the very last words of the last book in our Old Testament at the end of the book of the prophet Malachi we hear God's promise that goes like this so right at the end of our Old Testaments behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes and as Elijah with his message of judgment was preparing the way for what God was going to do through Elisha so God is going to send a new Elijah to prepare the way for the fulfilment of God's purposes the great and awesome day of the Lord well Elijah sorry I'm getting all muddled up this is Saturday morning I'm as bad as I was on Friday night it was about 450 years later after Malachi that John the Baptist made his public appearance in the vicinity of the events that we're reading about in 2 Kings chapter 2 and John the Baptist when he appeared he was clothed like Elijah and he was preaching repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand he looked like and he sounded like Elijah and the New Testament tells us that he was the promised new Elijah who was preparing the way for the one who would come after him and the one who came after John the Baptist was of course Jesus now I'm sorry making all these connections I hope you can keep up with this but I find it all interesting it's true that I find some things interesting that other people don't

find interesting but I'm hoping I can engage you with this Jesus' name is like Elisha's name do you remember Elisha means my God saves

Jesus follow these little technical details Jesus is the Greek for Joshua so Jesus' name was in Hebrew Jesus' name was Joshua and Joshua means Yahweh saves Jesus was given this name you remember by the angel who visited Mary because he will save his people from their sins now I don't want to explore this in further detail just now but we should be aware that as with the Old Testament generally we read and we listen to what the Old Testament teaches us aware that what we learn from these pages has important connections to even more amazing events concerning Jesus Christ now we're going to come back to that back to the story in 2 Kings 2 I'd like to think about what happened but I'm going to do it backwards you can cope with that just to be different and keep you on your toes on a Saturday morning

[21 : 15] I'd like to think a little bit about how the story that we just read ends remember there were 50 sons of the prophets from Jericho who I have suggested I think they were disciples of Elijah and Elisha that seems to fit with what we're told about them and they'd been watching from a distance as Elijah and Elisha crossed the Jordan going eastwards I think I've got it right this time the spectacular event that took place on the east side of the Jordan River was beyond their sight they didn't see it and then they saw Elisha return across the Jordan on his own and they drew the conclusion that Elisha had succeeded their master and their teacher Elijah you can see that in verse 15 what did they think had happened to Elijah because they didn't see what happened but they saw

Elisha come back on his own they knew from earlier in the story they knew that the Lord was going to take Elijah away and that had evidently now happened but how had it happened perhaps they thought he died or perhaps they thought that Elijah had been whisked away somewhere as was rumoured to have happened before with Elijah Elijah kept disappearing all the time and people had theories as to what was happening to him right through his life but they now say to Elisha you see verse 16 behold now they say to Elisha behold now there are with your servants 50 strong men please let them go and seek your master Elijah it may be that the spirit of the Lord has caught him up and cast him down on some mountain or valley somewhere now I imagine that these 50 are not necessarily thinking all that clearly but they were perplexed and they were perplexed about what they'd seen they'd been perplexed about what they were to do they were bewildered by what they had not seen and they had an understandable

I think even commendable desire to go and find their esteemed master whether he was still alive or dead they didn't want him left in the hills across the Jordan well imagine their confusion when their new master rather abruptly rejected their proposal it's in verse 16 again and Elisha said you shall not sin don't do it now of course Elisha knew that sending out a search party was pointless but I suspect that he felt sort of unable to tell the sons of the prophets what had actually happened to his master I mean how would you describe it even the writer here who's writing it sometime later with the calmness of a time having passed he can only describe it in one verse this spectacular thing that happened there's only one verse given to it but I'm sure that

Elisha was still rather overwrought by what had happened what he'd seen and hence his rather brusque words no don't don't do it now you notice if you read carefully that the sons of the prophets they accepted Elisha's new authority they didn't feel free to act without his permission but at the same time they were not comfortable with this refusal don't do it I wonder whether they suspected that perhaps Elisha's judgment was impaired by his grief he's not he's not thinking clearly what possible justification could there be for not sending a search party out to find Elijah or his body and so verse 17 you've got this rather strange description but when they urged him until he was ashamed he said okay send they pressed him to authorise a search until apparently he felt he couldn't go on refusing it was becoming embarrassing presumably because

Elisha found himself unable to explain the reason for his refusal what had happened I'll describe it as the ascension of Elisha that's the right kind of language I think it's not the kind of event you could easily take in let alone explain to anyone else the heavenly world had invaded the world with which we think we're familiar the Lord had taken Elijah up to heaven how could Elisha explain that to the sons of the prophets I find myself thinking of Jesus attempts to explain to his disciples what was about to happen to him you remember at one level his words were plain enough remember Jesus said and there are a number of occasions when he said something like this this from Mark chapter 9 the son of man is going to be delivered into the hands of men they will kill him and when he is killed

after three days he will rise rise what does that mean the disciples couldn't understand and we read that they were afraid to ask him it was really quite beyond them but

[27 : 00] Elisha was unable to persist in his refusal to allow a search party to go out so he relented he said send them therefore verse 17 sent 50 men and for three days they sought Elijah but of course they didn't find him it was mission impossible the search party would have crossed the Jordan river close to the spot where Elijah and Elisha had crossed I think their feet would have been a little bit more damp but then they would have fanned out to search through the hills and the valleys for any sign of Elijah 50 strong men on the move for three days from dawn till dusk they would have covered a lot of territory particularly as they were searching for something as large and visible as a human body and to their surprise and their puzzlement they're not out we're not puzzled but they would have been puzzled they did not find him well of course they didn't we might say he is not here just as surely as they did not find the body of Jesus in the tomb on Easter day they would not find the body of Elijah on the hills or in the valleys across the

Jordan he's not here well the search party returned to Elisha who was waiting for them in Jericho verse 18 they had nothing to show for their search and Elisha said to them in verse 18 did I not say to you do not go one of the interesting things as you read the Bible and you read conversations is to try and imagine what was the tone how did he say that I don't think it was I told you so I don't think it was that but he was reminding them that he had known all along that a search party was not necessary now we don't know whether Elisha now made some attempt to explain to the sons of the prophets and to the search team why it was that they had not found

Elijah and how he had known all along that they wouldn't they were a bit like the disciples of Jesus on Easter morning cast your mind back then they had one vital piece of information the tomb was empty the body of Elijah was nowhere to be found but that didn't tell them what had happened and when they eventually learnt what had happened they could understand that it was this kind of event he is not here the ascension of Elijah I'll get this sorted out by the end of the weekend I promise the ascension of Elijah takes its place with a small number of other events in the history of this world recorded in the Bible most importantly the resurrection and ascension of Jesus that tell us that the Bible's message is a great deal more than a philosophy of life the Bible's message is a great deal more than a kind of you know how to live a good life message in time and space the heavenly world has impacted this world world the real world is bigger than this world well let's take a closer look for a few minutes at what happened on the east side of the Jordan that the sons of the prophets were unable to see it was beyond their gaze there had been we just go back to verse nine I'm reading the passage backwards because I've got tired of reading forwards go back to verse nine there had been a remarkable conversation between Elijah and Elisha in verse nine Elijah said to Elisha ask what shall be done for you before

I am taken from you and Elisha said please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me it's a very strange expression that and no one's quite sure what it means but there is it's in the book of Deuteronomy from memory I think it's chapter 21 verse 17 if you're taking notes the only other place where you find this expression of a double portion being used and there it's talking about the heir the firstborn who will be the heir and the inheritor and so it's probable whatever else Elisha means he's saying please let me be your heir and successor something like there may be more involved but that seems to be what is implied and verse 10 Elijah said to him you've asked a very hard thing yet if you see me as I'm being taken from you it shall be so for you but if you don't see me it shall not be so

[32 : 39] Elijah you see seems to be aware of the enormity of the task ahead for his successor you've asked a very hard thing he seems to be quite overcome this is not something that Elijah can do for Elisha it will depend on events beyond the control of either of them and they walked on the two of them in deep conversation it's a very moving scene they're both conscious that they were enjoying their last moments together perhaps neither of them had any idea exactly what was going to happen but deep in conversation we're not quite sure how far they walked or how long they talked and we're not told that but we are told that suddenly their conversation was dramatically interrupted verse 11 and as they still went on and talked behold chariots or possibly a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven

I think you meant to say wow we'd love to know more we'd love to understand more there's a mystery here the relationship between the earthly and the heavenly worlds is beyond our comprehension it's a matter it's a very big mistake to either attempt a precise and literal account of

these things or to imagine that something we can't fully understand is unreal or unimportant the astonishing spectacle of Elijah's ascension though described so remarkably briefly here it ought to leave a deep impression on us as it certainly did on Elisha this was apart from anything else this was the most powerful possible vindication of the person and work of Elijah he'd suffered on earth he was hated by kings and one particular vicious queen you troubler of Israel is what Ahab had called him but he was received into heaven in stunning glory in the real world the real world the right side to be on is Elijah's side and at that moment you can see it now although the 50 men standing back on the other side of the Jordan couldn't see this it was witnessed by Elisha and impacted him deeply you see what he said in verse 12 Elisha saw it and cried my father my father the chariot the Hebrew is singular the chariot of Israel and its horsemen and he saw him no more can you sense the emotion my father my father Elisha's heart was torn Elijah and Elisha had grown close like father and son and when he cried out the chariot of Israel and its horsemen he wasn't describing what he's seen he was referring to Elijah I can demonstrate that to you but I won't go into the details now Elijah had been the true defender of Israel against her most deadly enemies he had been Israel's chariot and horseman but now Elisha saw him no more and then we read in verse 12 again that Elisha took hold of his own clothes and tore them into two pieces such was his grief but his action also meant that the time had come so to speak to don a new garment a new responsibility verse 13 he took up the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan keep your eyes on that cloak verse 14 then he took the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him and he struck the water saying where is the Lord the God of Elijah where is the God of my God is Yahweh Elijah has now been taken up to heaven what does that mean does that mean that the Lord has abandoned Israel the question was spectacularly and immediately answered verse 14 again and when he had struck the water the water was parted to the one side and to the other again and Elisha went over and what about those 50 men who'd witnessed Elijah and Elisha cross the Jordan together in the other direction out of the promised land and now saw Elisha crossing back into the promised land alone without Elijah verse 15 now when the sons of the prophets who were at Jericho saw him opposite them they said the spirit of Elijah is on [38 : 14] Elisha and they came to meet him and they bowed down to the ground before him the authority of Elijah had now passed to Elisha that much they understood what they may not yet have understood but I'm sure Elisha explained to them in due course was the massive significance of what had happened over there on the east side of the Jordan I've called it rather blandly on your notes this was the last talk I prepared of the four talks that's why the notes are so brief it was sort of done at the last minute and I've put the heading the unseen is bigger than the seen okay but Elisha you see had been given a glimpse of the world beyond this world and I want to suggest to you that the experience he had was like the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus do you remember what happened read to us a little bit earlier as the disciples were looking on in Acts chapter 1 he was lifted up and a cloud took him from their sight and while they were gazing into heaven as he went behold two men stood by them with white robes and said men of Galilee why do you stand looking into heaven this Jesus who was taken from you into heaven will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven and from that day on those who witnessed that event knew that the unseen is bigger and more important than the seen the ascension of Elijah provided motivation encouragement and strength to Elisha to continue the work of his master in the power of the spirit that had been given to him and so friends and I think I'll just skip over the last point our time has gone I think and your patience which is extraordinary must be getting near to an end but I want to remind us that what happened to Elisha now what's happened to Jesus we are now called the wonderful words in Colossians chapter 3 to set our minds and to set our hearts on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God we live our lives in this world we take this world seriously we take our responsibilities in this world seriously yes but we set our mind we set our heart heart on things unseen on things above where Christ is and we live in this world we live with our relationships in this world in the light of what is unseen because we are looking forward to the day when we too will appear with him in glory the experience on that day so long ago that Elisha witnessed was a glimpse of what has now been seen and passed on to us in the ascension of Jesus friends do you take life seriously like that do you live in the real world do you live in the light of the real world the world where Jesus

Christ reigns the world where he is seated at the right hand of the father the world where we are waiting for him to return for he will let's pray together our dear God and heavenly father we thank you that the real world has invaded this world so that we can live in this world this wonderful world that you have made and in which you've placed us we can live in this world in the light of reality we pray that you'd help us to do that we pray that you'd help us to lift our eyes not just to the ascension of Elijah but to the ascension of Jesus our Lord who has poured out his spirit on us so that we can live here and now in the light of reality we pray this in Jesus name Amen