

God's Prophet to a Broken Kingdom

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Preacher: Andy Meadows

[0 : 00] Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. 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 and said to him, Do you know that today the Lord will take away your master from over you?

And he said, Yes, I know it. 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 it. Keep quiet.

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 will not leave you. So the two of them went on.

[1 : 09] Fifty men of the sons of the prophets also went and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his cloak and rolled it up and struck the water, and the water was parted to the one side and to the other, till the two of them could go over on dry ground.

When they had 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 have asked a hard thing, yet if you see me as I am 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 chariots 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 on 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?

[2 : 20] 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, they said, The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.

And they came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. And they said to him, Behold now, there are with your servants fifty strong men. Please let them go and seek your master. It may be that the spirit of the Lord has caught him up and cast him upon some mountain or into some valley. And he said, You shall not send. But when they urged him until he was ashamed, he said, Send. They sent therefore fifty men. And for three days they sought him, but did not find him.

And they came back to him while he was staying at Jericho. And he said to them, Did I not say to you, Do not go? Now the men of the city said to Elisha, Behold, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my Lord sees, but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful.

He said, Bring me a new bowl and put salt in it. So they brought it to him. Then he went to the spring of water and threw salt in it, and said, Thus says the Lord, I have healed this water.

[3 : 26] From now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it. So the water has been healed to this day, according to the word that Elisha spoke. He went up from there to Bethel, and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, Go up, you baldhead.

Go up, you baldhead. And he turned around, and when he saw them, he cursed them in the name of the Lord. And two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the boys. From there he went on to Mount Carmel, and from there he returned to Samaria.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that all Scripture is God-breathed. Please help us now to listen to you this morning. Amen. Well, I wonder if you've ever asked yourself the question, Where is God? Where is the Lord? Perhaps when a particular season of life hits us, and we ask, Where is God now? What is he doing?

As we look around the world, where is God? Is he really with us? We can see the growing hostility to God's people, both in the UK and around the world, and think, Where has he gone?

[4 : 47] Well, that is the key question on Elisha's heart in our passage this morning. It's there in verse 14 of 2 Kings 2. Do turn to it in your Bibles.

Elisha asks, Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? Well, our passage this morning helps us answer that question, and it shows us that the Lord remains present through his spirit-filled Saviour Judge. Now, we're on series 3 on our time in 1 and 2 Kings. Series 1 and 2 came last year, and when you watch series 3 of a TV program, you can enjoy it if you've not watched any before it, but it helps to know the backstory, doesn't it?

Especially if you're watching Line of Duty. And it's the same when we come to the Bible and to 2 Kings. So we're going to do a bit of previously on Kings.

Now, 1 Kings and 2 Kings were all one book originally. So it's all one volume, then split into two volumes later on. I don't quite know when.

[5 : 59] Now, 1 Kings started with Israel at the high point in his history. King Solomon is in charge, son of King David. He builds God's temple.

There is peace. There is prosperity. He has God's wisdom with him. But Solomon and Israel hit the self-destruct button.

They turn away from the Lord. Solomon turns his heart from the Lord and to false gods of Baal. And so in judgment, sometime later under his son, God splits the kingdom into two.

The northern kingdom, which confusingly is still called Israel, and the southern kingdom, called Judah. And 1 and 2 Kings tells the story of decline and fall of both kingdoms.

The northern kingdom goes into exile in Assyria and doesn't come back. It's wiped out. And the southern kingdom is taken into exile in Babylon sometime after that.

[7 : 05] And this book was written to them, the captives in Babylon, the slaves, with a historical and theological explanation of why things have turned out the way they have, what has happened and why.

And they too probably had that question of Elisha's. Where is God? Where is the Lord? Both volumes cover over 400 years of history and yet one third of it focuses on two people, the prophets Elijah and Elisha from 1 Kings 17 to 2 Kings 13.

They were sent to the northern kingdom in Israel. And Elijah's job was to call people back to worship the true God, call people back to the covenant God made with his people under Moses. You may remember from our last series that he had a great victory on Mount Carmel against the prophets of Baal when he called down fire from heaven. But not much changed.

The king and the people were still rejecting God and worshipping false gods. Elijah was kind of at his wit's end. And if you turn to 1 Kings 19, we see where Elisha fits in.

[8 : 33] 1 Kings 19 verses 15 to 18. Elijah meets with God up the Mount Horeb and God gives Elisha his plan.

What is he going to do to sort out this rebellion? Well, God plans to retire Elijah. and he's going to anoint three assassins.

Three people who are lined up after him. An external king, Hazael in verse 15. Jehu the internal king, verse 16.

And Elisha as well, verse 16. And Elisha's ministry is one of judgment. he is there to put to death people who escape the other two, people who have turned back, turned away from God.

But, there is a glimmer of hope. Verse 18, God says that he will also save people. So, Elisha's job, his ministry as he comes, is one of being a saviour and a judge.

[9 : 50] And after this meeting with God, Elijah found Elisha and he was his assistant and they went around together like Ant and Deck or Batman and Robin.

They just came as a pair. And then, so turning back to 2 Kings chapter 2, out of nowhere in verse 1 comes the news that lift off for Elijah is T-minus any time now.

Have a look down at verse 1 in our passage. Now, when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah is going home.

And the author of 2 Kings makes it clear in this chapter that Elisha really is the true successor. He is the saviour judge to come. And it's broken down into a few scenes, four scenes, and so we're going to take each scene and see how that works out.

So have a look at verses 1 to 6 first, the journey. The journey. Elisha and Elijah walk on a journey together and Elijah hasn't actually handed over to Elisha at this point.

[11:09] He hasn't anointed him to take over and now he's really against the clock. Everyone knows Elijah is going. It's the elephant in the room. Have a look at verse 3 and verse 5.

People say to Elisha, Elijah's off today. And the subtext is, are you taking over? Elijah doesn't seem so sure.

He tells him, it's a bit awkward, we're not talking about it, please don't bring it up. And it looks a bit odd, doesn't it, that Elijah, on this journey, wants to shake Elisha off his tail.

So have a look down at verse 2. Elijah says to Elisha, get them mixed up, please stay here, for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel.

That happens again and again with different places in verses 4 and 6. He seems reluctant to carry on the handover. Perhaps he doesn't quite back Elisha.

[12:12] Like at work, when you don't quite back the person taking over from you. Or perhaps he hasn't come to terms with his retirement. He's carrying on.

Probably though, what's going on here is that he's testing Elisha. He's giving Elisha a way out, a chance to turn the job down. Because staying behind would be like resigning from the role of successor and saviour judge.

But Elisha's character and his stickability make sure that won't happen. Have a look down at verse 2. But Elisha said, as the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.

That response comes again in verse 4 and verse 6. Things come in threes. We're meant to sit up and take notice. This is Elisha's total loyalty.

I will not leave you. He sticks like glue and only chariots of fire and fiery horses can separate them. Elisha is saying he's willing to go through with what he's been called to do, despite how much of a hard thing it will be.

[13:31] Now just at this point, if you're following on the handout that was sent around, I put a map of the journey and a diagram pointing out all the links of how Elijah and Elisha are like Moses and Joshua in that journey.

I've actually cut that bit out for time. So if you want to know the deeper significance of this journey, then come talk to me afterwards. It's amazing, actually, all these links to Moses and Joshua and the conquest of the land.

Come speak to me afterwards. But in these first six verses, we are to notice Elisha's total stickability, willingness to take on the role, to be Elijah's successor.

He will be the saviour judge to come. And so then they move on to the second scene, the handover confirmation in verses 7 to 18.

Here we hit the centre of the action showing us Elisha is unmistakably the saviour judge. I wonder if you saw the symmetry of how that section starts and ends.

[14:41] We see that Elisha parts the Jordan just as Elijah did. Have a look down at verse 7 with me. Fifty men of the sons of the prophets also went and stood at some distance from them as they both were standing by the Jordan.

Then Elijah took his cloak and rolled it up and struck the water and the water was parted to one side and to the other till the two of them could go over on dry ground.

People see Elijah parting the river Jordan with his cloak and then after Elijah is taken to heaven, Elisha takes up Elijah's cloak.

The point is not that this is some kind of Harry Potter magical cloak, that this is Elijah, the true successor. Elijah, he strikes a draw in verse 14, where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?

What happens? The water part. Elisha crosses over. The people saw it and they saw Elisha do the same thing that Elijah did. And so verse 15, the answer to verse 14, the spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.

[15:58] God really is with Elisha. Further confirmation is given as Elijah is taken up to heaven. Realizing that he can't shake Elisha off his tail, Elijah says, what do you want?

Elisha says, verse 9, please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me. Now, Elijah's not being greedy, a double portion is inheritance language.

Back then, the eldest child got twice as much as the other children. That doesn't happen nowadays, James will be disappointed, but this is Elisha asking to be Elijah's heir, to take over.

He's saying, do the handover. Let me take over to finish the job. Elijah knows from 1 Kings 19, what a tough job and tough ministry it will be for Elisha.

So he sets up a kind of final test in verse 10. If you see what happens, then you'll know for sure.

And what happens, verse 11, and that they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them.

[17:16] And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it and he cried, my father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen. And he saw him no more.

Elisha saw what happened. He really is Elijah's successor. Again, we see the Lord remains present through his spirit filled saviour judge.

The spirit of Elijah is now with Elisha. And so scenes 3 and 4 give us further proof. The author is really drumming this home for us.

That Elisha is the saviour judge in action. He brings salvation at Jericho and judgment at Bethel. If you are looking for somewhere to live, Jericho was somewhere to avoid.

It may have looked good, but it was unfruitful. It was under a curse. When it was first conquered, Joshua pronounced that cursed is the one who rebuilt the city.

[18:36] They will lose their eldest son and their youngest son. And that actually happened in 1 Kings 16. As a guy called Hyle of Bethel rebuilt Jericho, his son dies.

This is a city under God's curse. And it's striking that this is the first scene that we see the saviour judge in action. Because what we see goes against what we would expect to happen.

have a look down at verse 19. We see the problem. The men of the city said to Elisha, Behold, the situation of this city is pleasant, but as my Lord sees, the water is bad, the land is unfruitful.

It may have good views, but it's got a toxic water supply. It's killing people and causing miscarriages. And what do we expect with 1 Kings 19 in our background and the curse that Jericho is under, what do we expect to happen?

What do we expect Elisha to say? You lot are cursed because you're living in a place which never should have been rebuilt in the first place. That's not what he says, is it?

[19:58] Have a look at verse 21. Then he went to the spring of water and threw salt in it and said, Thus says the Lord, I have healed this water.

From now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it. So the water has been healed to this day according to the words that Elisha spoke.

The people at the city, they turn to Elisha and because they turn to Elisha, the saviour judge, they're turning to God and they are saved.

Salt is not normally a way of decontaminating a toxic water supply. I don't think Thames Water would try that. But this is underlining the point that God really is with Elisha.

And the very first thing Elisha does is to bring word of healing and grace to the first people who recognised him as God's man.

[21:02] Because as they come to him, they say, as my Lord sees it. It's quite striking, isn't it? The first thing we see the saviour judge doing, the judge who's going to put people to death, is to save.

But the opposite happens at Bethel. Instead of a respectful my Lord, Elisha gets a baldy baldy. Have a look down at verse 23.

He went up from there to Bethel. And while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, go up, you bald head, go up, you bald head.

Now, we shouldn't imagine a primary school on their school trip in their high-vis jackets walking along the road. shouting abuse.

They're a bit older than that. And there are lots of them. We're told that 42 of them were torn.

There's probably more in the group. Imagine walking home and over 100 youths came out of Dulwich to meet you, to take you on.

[22:19] You'd be pretty scared. that. This is not just kids at a bus shelter trying to be funny. This is an unruly mob looking for a fight and they come across Elisha.

there. And the point here is not a warning to not take the mickey out of people who are follically challenged, shall we say, or that asbos are a good thing.

The point is don't take on God's man. Don't take on God. A go up might be a reference to get lost like Elijah did.

Are you going to go up into a whirlwind too? Or it simply could be a get out of town sharpish. And so the point is that rejecting Elisha, God's saviour judge, they are rejecting God himself.

And so Elisha pronounces judgment. Not out of personal hurt and spite, but because they're rejecting God.

[23 : 28] And so God acts. He does what he said he would do. In Leviticus 26, I put the reference on the handout, God said that if people turned away from him, he would let loose the wild beasts that would rob them of their children if they wandered from him.

And that's exactly what happens here. The bears come out, the wild beasts are sent among them to bring down God's covenant judgment against a rebellious people.

And so as we pause and reflect, this chapter does teach us about the God of the Bible we serve, that he doesn't desert his world or his people.

However bad it gets, however widespread the rejection in Israel, God will not leave himself without a witness in the world.

He will carry on his work. And we know, from Elijah's job description for 119, we're supposed to be more shocked at what happened at Jericho rather than Bethel.

[24 : 47] God is the God of grace and blessing. He longs to bless all those who will turn to him, who will be humble and submit to him.

But God is not someone to pick a fight with. Those last few verses are supposed to leave us uncomfortable that God does what he says he will do.

So through this chapter we learn God remained active in the world. Yes, Elijah went home, but God carried on his work in Elisha to save and to judge.

He was full of God's spirit that come to do God's work. The Lord remains present through his spirit-filled saviour judge. And all of this points forward to the true fulfilment of another saviour judge.

Because the answer to the question in verse 14 for us is the Lord remains present through his final spirit-filled saviour judge.

[25 : 59] Elisha and Elisha, yes, they point back to Moses and Joshua, but they point forward to another pair, John the Baptist and Jesus. There's a picture at the bottom of my handout, and I think there's a picture on the screen as well, with some arrows.

What we see in the Bible is God acting in similar ways, with certain patterns emerging. It's like going to a musical, maybe you're looking forward to going to a musical again, or any song really, if you listen to it, a particular melody often reappears and keeps coming up throughout, and then in the end it all builds together, with all the previous patterns arriving in a final, triumphal climax.

I didn't watch your revision last night, but maybe you saw some of that go on if you did. And it's a lot of how God works in the Bible, from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

Patterns come up time and time again, and reach a crescendo. Because in the Old Testament, God promised a great day when his final, spirit-filled saviour judge would come.

He said at the Old Testament that in Malachi, Elijah would return before that day. And the Gospel writers show that this was fulfilled in John the Baptist.

[27 : 19] He is that Elijah figure who was to come. If you did read 2 Kings 1, you'd see in verse 8 that we're told that Elijah is marked out by wearing a particular clothing, a garment of hair and a leather belt.

Well, in Mark's Gospel, Mark wants us to see that John the Baptist wears the same clothes. It's like he goes to a fancy dress shop and picks out the Elijah costume.

And then Jesus explicitly says that John the Baptist is the fulfilment of that promised return of Elijah. And like Elijah, John too was followed, not this time by his assistant, but by the one he was preparing the way for, for Jesus Christ, the saviour judge.

And it's amazing when you think more about these links. I can chat to you more about them afterwards. The transfer from Elijah to Elisha takes place at the Jordan River.

Elisha receives God's spirit. Jesus takes over from John. Where? At the Jordan River. What happens? He receives God's spirit.

[28 : 33] There's a similarity in names again. Jesus means the Lord saves. Elisha means God saves. Joshua means the Lord saves. This is God's saviour judge at work.

And what do we see Jesus doing? What are we going to see in the weeks to come as we look at Elisha? Are we going to see Jesus, or Jesus does what Elisha does?

He finds the faithful. He rescues surprising people. He brings deliverance out of destruction. He reaches out to save those under a curse.

God is eager to give grace and to save. And he does that supremely in his son, Jesus Christ, the saviour judge, who dies for us.

And so if you're here this morning investigating the Christian faith, you wouldn't call yourself a follower of Jesus. The Bible says that if we come to Jesus, the saviour judge in humility, and put our trust in him to be saved, he will speak a word of salvation.

[29 : 42] He will give us the blessings of forgiveness of sin, a relationship with him that goes from now into eternity. Perhaps some of us think to ourselves, can God ever forgive me?

Well, if Jericho can be saved, so can we, if we turn to God's saviour judge, and so can anyone. But as with Elisha at Bethel, if we reject Jesus, God's final saviour judge, he will speak a word of judgment.

We will be separated now from God, and in the future to come, which will actually be a lot worse than a mauling from a bear. And if you are a follower of Jesus this morning, all this, all this chapter and the fulfilment that happened should cement our confidence that Jesus really is God's final saviour judge to come.

As we see all the patterns woven throughout the Old Testament and reach the build-up and the climax in Jesus, we see him in action. We are to be in no doubt, this is the one.

When we have our doubts, when we think following God is not worth it, we can ask ourselves, how else can we explain all this?

[31 : 13] The one big story of the Old Testament over thousands of years. Only God could have pulled this off. God and this finally gives us confidence too that God still remains present with us now through the word of Jesus, through the spirit of Jesus given to us at Pentecost as we thought about earlier.

And just as we see Elisha sticking like glue to Elijah, we will not leave him, well through the spirit poured out to us, Jesus promises that he will never leave us.

His spirit is at work. Yes, he has been at work in particular times, in particular places throughout the world, but he will carry on his work through his word, through his spirit.

That gives us great confidence here at Dulwich as well going forward in the future. If Simon, our lead pastor, got hit by bus tomorrow or retires or moves on, that would be sad.

But God would carry on his work. As the minister Charles Wesley said, God buries his workers but carries on his work. Our nation is a nation that stubbornly refuses God and rejects the gracious God who longs to bless.

[32 : 46] So where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? What is he doing? Is he really with us? Well, however, we might sometimes feel, he's not deserted us.

The God of Elijah and Elisha is present in his final saviour judge and still active in the world today through his word and spirit, giving grace to the rebellious, calling people back to him, yet also warning about the judgment to come.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for two kings. We thank you that you are present with us today through Jesus and your spirit. Amen. Amen.