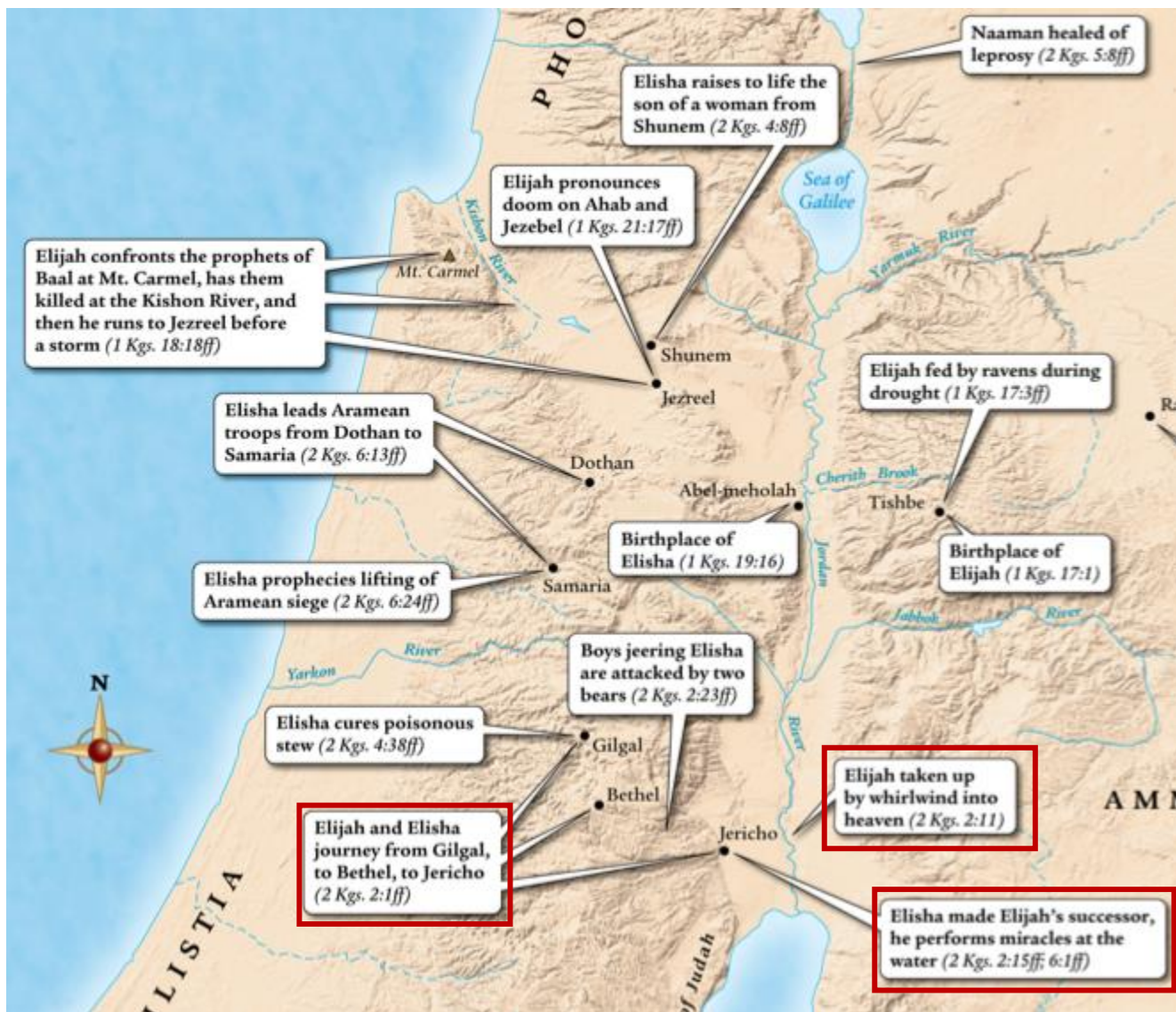


And the sons of the prophets that were at Bethel came forth to Elisha, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the LORD will take away thy master from thy head to day? And he said, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace. (2Ki 2:3)

Today we will continue our investigation into the life and acts of Elisha, seeking patience and comfort from these things that have been written for our learning

“For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.” (Rom 15:4)



Last time we looked at Elisha’s entrance onto the grand scene of God’s Providence and the things we can learn from that. This week we will look at Elijah’s departure from that scene, and Elisha’s taking ownership of his mantle.

Elijah didn’t just stand still or retire after putting his mantle upon Elisha’s shoulders. He still had business to attend to, including dealing with Ahab in the matter of Naboth’s

vineyard, pronouncing Ahaziah's doom, and the captains of fifties, but we're going to skip over those details and resume our study here

“And it came to pass, when the LORD would take up Elijah into heaven by a whirlwind, that Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal. And Elijah said unto Elisha, Tarry here, I pray thee; for the LORD hath sent me to Bethel. And Elisha said unto him, As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they went down to Bethel. And the sons of the prophets that were at Bethel came forth to Elisha, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the LORD will take away thy master from thy head to day? And he said, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace. And Elijah said unto him, Elisha, tarry here, I pray thee; for the LORD hath sent me to Jericho. And he said, As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they came to Jericho. And the sons of the prophets that were at Jericho came to Elisha, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the LORD will take away thy master from thy head to day? And he answered, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace. And Elijah said unto him, Tarry, I pray thee, here; for the LORD hath sent me to Jordan. And he said, As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. And they two went on. And fifty men of the sons of the prophets went, and stood to view afar off: and they two stood by Jordan. And Elijah took his mantle, and wrapped it together, and smote the waters, and they were divided hither and thither, so that they two went over on dry ground. And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me. And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so. And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; 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 the horsemen thereof. And he saw him no more: and he took hold of his own clothes, and rent them in two pieces. He took up also the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and went back, and stood by the bank of Jordan; And he took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and smote the waters, and said, Where is the LORD God of Elijah? and when he also had smitten the waters, they parted hither and thither: and Elisha went over.” (2Ki 2:1-14)

There's a lot going on here, so I'll break it down into what I think are smaller digestible chunks to assess and offer up a few things I think we can learn and apply to our daily lives.

One of the first things to take note of is that we don't hear about Elisha by name from the time he agrees to follow Elijah until now. Many things happened between Elisha's calling and Elijah's departure, but Elisha doesn't appear directly as a player in any of them. He has truly played the part of the servant. He could have taken a very different

approach to his new life, touting himself as the next prophet in Israel and pushing himself to the forefront. Instead, he fades into the background, serving Elijah faithfully as he had promised to do. It's an "eyes open mouth closed" kind of approach, speaking to meekness and humility.

Elisha is frequently labeled by expositors as a type of Christ's ministers as servants, juxtaposing him to Elijah as a type of Christ. While I suppose that's okay, I don't spend a lot of time looking to make types out of things. There are plenty of types in the Old Testament, but not everything we are told about each individual or every event in the Old Testament is meant to be a capital "T" Type in the way the elements of the Law, the tabernacle, temple, etc. are clearly Types and shadows. These folks are examples to be learned from, make no mistake, but that's not the same as being a Type. I say that only to make the point that when you are studying these stories and people looking to learn, don't get too wrapped around the idea their behavior must be a Type and ours has to mirror it precisely. Sometimes it is enough just to look at the simple facts and see how it applies to us.

Elisha's service is one example of this. He doesn't have to be a Type that we try to mirror precisely with the execution of miracles and doing exactly the things he does. The example he sets for us is more than adequate right on its face.

- **When we undertake the role of servant, we are not in the pre-eminent position and should be happy to give way to our Master.**

Elijah understood at least conceptually what was to happen on this trip, and while he may not have had the explicit details of where, he clearly knew his earthly occupation would imminently be closed out. As they travel, he tests Elisha's resolve to continue in this path as his servant and in this way of God's service

And Elijah said unto Elisha, Tarry here, I pray thee; for the LORD hath sent me to Bethel.

Elijah doesn't make this a commandment, he isn't harsh about it, but is simple and to the point – the Lord has sent **me** to Bethel, not **us**. Elisha's response is just as simple and straightforward

And Elisha said unto him, As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee.

It is very reminiscent of Ruth's response to Naomi when she told her to go back to her own people

“And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.” (Rth 1:16)

This is the way of God’s people when they are drawn together with these cords of spiritual bonding. It is more powerful than culture, blood, or any other tie.

Elisha had no reason to abide with Elijah other than that strong spiritual bond he had with him. In the flesh, his master is telling him “hang out here, I’ve got business to go tend to”. It seemed like a perfectly reasonable request that any master could make of their servant, but Elisha wasn’t going to be shaken off. It’s more than just that, though, and is what a number of expositors I think miss when they focus on Elijah trying to spare Elisha the heartache of his departure.

This is a testing of Elisha’s commitment. That I think is the main thing to take from this event. Look at the whole series of conversations:

“And Elijah said unto Elisha, Tarry here, I pray thee; for the LORD hath sent me to Bethel. And Elisha said unto him, As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they went down to Bethel. And the sons of the prophets that were at Bethel came forth to Elisha, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the LORD will take away thy master from thy head to day? And he said, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace. And Elijah said unto him, Elisha, tarry here, I pray thee; for the LORD hath sent me to Jericho. And he said, As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they came to Jericho. And the sons of the prophets that were at Jericho came to Elisha, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the LORD will take away thy master from thy head to day? And he answered, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace. And Elijah said unto him, Tarry, I pray thee, here; for the LORD hath sent me to Jordan. And he said, As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. And they two went on.”

Five times Elisha is confronted with the end of his sojourn with Elijah. By the sons of the prophets at Bethel, and again at Jericho, and by Elisha before Bethel, before Jericho, and before Jordan. We aren’t given to know how Elisha knew what was coming, but he understood that Elijah was to depart, and he was resolved to endure it patiently.

Matthew Henry thinks that these interactions with the sons of the prophets came about because Elijah went to them and explicitly told them he was to be taken, explaining their approaching Elisha in this manner. While that’s possible, that isn’t given to us in the words, and I like to stick with what’s there explicitly. As I see it, the Lord is testing Elisha here, and he is doing so in a significant way, from multiple angles. Not that

these sons of the prophets or Elijah are doing something wrong; they are the vessels or means of Elisha's test in this matter.

This is a stellar example of how a test may come from an unexpected place. We frequently think of trials and testing coming from our enemies and from those sins that so easily beset us. But that's not always their source. Sometimes our family, friends or fellow pilgrims are the source of a test – maybe without even realizing that is the role they are fulfilling.

This isn't obstinate stubbornness on the part of Elisha, either. This is the full realization of his faith. He knows something is in play, and he intends to see it through to the very end. He is working to fulfill his role as anointed successor to Elijah's office, to serve him until the end. Though this was likely very annoying, to have been pestered this same way repeatedly, he doesn't engage in argument with these sons of the prophets; he shuts down their fleshly concerns all the same. It is a fine line to walk when we choose to ignore counsel or dismiss the concerns of a friend.

- **When testings and trials come, we must call upon the Lord to help us balance how we exercise our faith when our path seems to conflict with or is at odds with the counsel and help our fellow pilgrims offer up in the way.**

Elijah and Elisha move on from Jericho to the Jordan, where we get to the crux of this matter.

“And they two went on. And fifty men of the sons of the prophets went, and stood to view afar off: and they two stood by Jordan. And Elijah took his mantle, and wrapped it together, and smote the waters, and they were divided hither and thither, so that they two went over on dry ground.”

Jericho is roughly four to five miles from the Jordan river, depending upon where they crossed, and where they were in Jericho at the time. In any case, it was a manageable walk, allowing plenty of time for discussion and reflection between these two friends. We aren't privy to that discussion, but there is little doubt it happened, and that it was fruitful.

These interesting sons of the prophets sought to witness what was to happen. It is unclear how much detail they had as to what precisely was going to happen, but they clearly knew it was going to be something to see, and they desired to be witnesses to the glory of God. This isn't a vainglorious or purely curious thing as far as I can tell. There are always witnesses to God's majesty and glory and it is a great honor to be such a witness. Witnesses establish the truth of a matter

“...at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established.” (Deu 19:15)

This matter of Elijah being carried up by a whirlwind would be well established and Elisha's receipt of Elijah's mantle would not be disputable. More generally, Elijah's translation is visible proof that this life doesn't just end in oblivion.

Here, within sight of these sons of the prophets, Elijah performs what some call his final miracle of parting the Jordan – not counting his bestowing of his spirit upon Elisha as a miracle in itself.

The Jordan has stood in scripture as representing the crossing over from earthly life to eternal existence via death many times. While Elijah will not cross that literal boundary, he must still cross it figuratively, and he does so on dry ground. This is not an insignificant thing. The men could have ferried across the river or gone across at one of the fords, which were indeed quite close to Jericho as we see here:

“And the men pursued after them the way to Jordan unto the fords: and as soon as they which pursued after them were gone out, they shut the gate.” (Jos 2:7)

This was a considered action by Elijah, I believe, intended to set Elisha up to truly take on his mantle in front of these same witnesses later. It was part of what needed to be witnessed, closing out Elijah's earthly mission in sight of these fifty in a magnificent display of God's power working through him, and then again through Elisha. It provided immediate credibility to Elisha and complete closure to Elijah's ministry.

- **God puts witnesses in the earth to testify to His glory and magnify Him in every age, to see to the testimony of all His great wonders. There are no events that are done in the earth that God wants witnessed which aren't.**

After crossing over on the dry ground, Elisha's character is then tested

“And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me. And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so.”

Elisha could have asked for any number of things – power, glory, wealth, followers, etc. He was in the presence of a man who had a powerful relationship with God. He had, by his simple prayer, put a stop to the rains and brought them back again. Looking at it from a fleshly perspective, he could have reasonably asked for anything because Elijah likely could have delivered on anything.

What he asks for instead is this double portion of Elijah's spirit. As Elijah says, this is not an easy thing to grant, but important. It is a request born of the spirit, not of the

flesh. This is a remarkable thing in light of the connection Elijah has to make requests of the Lord. It displays Elisha's humility in seeking what is necessary to do the service he has been enlisted to do, and not something for himself personally. He asks for the spirit of Elijah, not any other part of his persona, nor for any part of himself to be bettered or augmented.

Ben has spent some time with us in the final discourse of Christ, and it is clear from that discussion the Spirit is a necessary endowment for God's servants in the earth to fulfill their role and properly represent Him as ambassadors. Elisha clearly understood this. Be clear, he isn't asking for some general spirit of Elijah's, but that endowment he clearly saw bestowed on Elijah by God's grace. He recognized he didn't have it himself, but wanted God's glorification to continue. He saw firsthand the humility and service to God that Elijah operated under, and he wanted that spirit to consume him.

This is an interesting request when you consider the state of affairs at that time and the rampant idolatry and evil that ruled everywhere. He could easily have asked to be the tip of the spear in a great revival and return to God. That would have been a very logical and sensible request, I think. But his focus isn't on accomplishing something specific. His request is based in what it would take to be a servant that serves as well as Elijah has – believing with all humility he didn't have what it took to do that.

- **When we ask a thing, we must ask it for the glory of God, not our own glory, advancement or personal satisfaction.**

The request doesn't come without requirements. He has to first pass through the Jordan, a death to his old self. No longer is he to be the servant, ministering to the anointed prophet of God, he must take up the full responsibility of the role and all that it entails – he must step out of the shadow and into the full spotlight as it were. But he must also keep his eyes on his master up until the moment of transfer.

Our service is no different. We must keep our eyes fully focused on our master until the service is completed. Paul tells us

“I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” (Gal 2:20)

Our earthly ministry and service is not of us. We don't live in Christ through our own will or perseverance, but through His living in us. Elijah tests Elisha's commitment to service and his ability to keep focus precisely where it should be. God tests us similarly throughout our lives. Our focus is tested and drawn away from Him in a multitude of ways every day, and we must remember to seek His favor and His mercy, to keep our view focused on the cross and His sacrifice and to come back to Him when we lose that focus. Our duty to each other is to help keep our focus on Christ our

master as much as possible. Away from the screens, the draw of the flesh, the pull of the world, etc., etc.

- **What we seek is not attainable in this life without sacrificing self and complete obedience and loyalty to our Father.**

“And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

And so we draw to the conclusion of this dramatic event. The two companions cross over a dry Jordan riverbed and while engaged in comfortable conversation, Elisha sees a chariot and horses of fire and the whirlwind that takes Elijah to heaven without passing through the vale of death.

There are many things to make note of here. First, that Elijah doesn't stop conversing with and preparing his servant up to the very end. Though he is imminently to depart, he doesn't sink into his own personal meditation. He continues to engage in communion with his companion and does it right up to the literal very end. This is a grand example for us, that where we are able, we must do the same. Even if we perceive our departure to be imminent, we must do all we can to continue engagement. Christ was in discourse with his disciples right up to the point of His ascension

“And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight.” (Act 1:9)

How much more should we as servants endeavor to do the same?

The chariot and horsemen physically part the two friends. Though Elisha insisted he would not be parted from his master, in the end, he has no ability to keep that from happening. The parting of earthly friends is an inevitable event, one that as much as we might wish to prevent it, is utterly outside our control.

The servants of God will all be accompanied to glory by His angels, and they come in the form here of a fiery chariot and horsemen and they will not be deterred in their task by Elisha's immediate proximity to their target. They transport Elijah into heaven in triumph like a dignitary member of a royal family, riding in a chariot of fire. The words here don't necessarily mean flames, they refer to the brightness and majesty of the host sent to deliver Elijah to his final home; reference

“Who maketh his angels spirits; his ministers a flaming fire:” (Psa 104:4)

“And he rode upon a cherub, and did fly: yea, he did fly upon the wings of the wind.” (Psa 18:10)

This great spectacle raises an obvious question – do those sons of the prophets, playing the part of witnesses see this full drama? I don't think so. I think the placement of the requirement on Elisha to see the separation meant there was a unique ability there as well. If just anyone could have laid claim to that double portion by physically seeing these angels, it seems to lessen the importance of Elisha's steadfastness. They certainly saw something, otherwise what good would they be as witnesses, but I believe it to be the whirlwind and perhaps some general commotion, not the specifics of the chariot and horsemen.

- **The triumph of Elijah should not be thought to be an exclusive thing. All God's saints are escorted and welcomed into eternity in like manner, even if no one else sees it with their eyes.**

And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof. And he saw him no more: and he took hold of his own clothes, and rent them in two pieces. He took up also the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and went back, and stood by the bank of Jordan; And he took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and smote the waters, and said, Where is the LORD God of Elijah? and when he also had smitten the waters, they parted hither and thither: and Elisha went over.”

There are a lot of words from the expositors about Elisha's utterance here, and I tend to lean toward this idea – that this is not an utterance about this glorious host of angels sent to retrieve Elijah, but an utterance about Elijah himself, and an expression of Elisha's deep understanding of what Israel and indeed the world were losing in this moment.

He equates the loss of Elijah personally as the loss of his father, but the loss to Israel, even greater. He is witnessing the removal of a great adviser, reprover, preacher, prophet, counsellor, bringer of prayer, exhorter to righteousness and enemy of evil, and the weight of that is enormous. Israel had put their faith in their countless chariots and horsemen, but here only Elisha sees and laments the loss of their one actual chariot – Elijah. He was their strength and the stay that kept God's wrath at bay through his zealous drive for obedience.

- **The loss of a true preacher is possibly greater to the nation to whom they preached than to the people immediately around them.**

His grief is great – he rends his clothes after all – but not lingering or inordinate. He doesn't glory in his ascension to this new role, either, being the prophet in Israel. He absolutely laments what has been lost. Though he fully expects to receive this double

portion, he still walks in humility of spirit, not seeing himself as equal to this man of God whom he served.

He **immediately** picks up the mantle that fell to the ground. He doesn't wait, he doesn't attempt to plead with God that perhaps He might repent of this thing and not leave Israel in a bad spot by taking Elijah. He gets on with the business he had been called to some years back, picking up the very mantle Elijah had put on his shoulders and moving on to the work.

- **Loss doesn't justify being slack. When someone is called to this work of ambassadorship, it must be made preeminent in thought and action.**

Elisha doesn't linger with his thoughts or seek private time. He heads straight back to the Jordan and examines, with some boldness and confidence I perceive, whether he has been delivered that double portion. There is no iteration of his ask like we see with Gideon and his requesting signs. There is decisive action – Elijah took his mantle and struck the water of Jordan, and so Elisha now tests his portion of spirit by seeing if his action will be granted the same effect.

He doesn't ask where the God of Elijah is in a flippant manner, but he is asking if the God that cared for and caused Elijah to prosper, who was on Elijah's side, is now fully on Elisha's. I believe this to be more a declaration of faith than a question, truly. He is stating that the God of Elijah is right here with him. He has taken Elijah to his reward and is now the protector and master of Elisha, and here is the rock-solid proof of it in the parting of Jordan.

- **Having the confidence of the Lord when we've done what is required should cause us to walk without doubt or questioning of our faith and path.**

Next time, Lord willing, we'll look at the response of the witnesses and how Elisha goes about continuing the business of preaching to a wicked and perverse generation, looking for things we can learn from his life.