

Speaking Truth to Power:  
The Prophet Elijah, #8

## “A Prophetic Succession”

### 2 Kings 2

--CEFC 3/1/20

(Read 2 Kings 2)

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This morning we conclude our eight-week foray into the books of the Kings.

We have been studying that section of the books  
that has a special focus on the prophet Elijah.

I have to say, I need to read these Old Testament historical books—

First and Second Kings and First and Second Chronicles.

I find their message extremely challenging and insightful.

Now why do I say that?

On one level, they record the political history of the people of Israel,

with its constant succession of royal rulers, one after the other,

with all their internal and international intrigues.

Their struggles and foibles are all too familiar.

That's all very interesting,

but that's not why I find these books so helpful.

What is particularly significant to me

is that when I read these books, I feel as though I am entering into another world.

They present a moral universe—a world of good and evil.

a world of blessing and judgment.

Great and powerful kings are assessed

not by their military exploits or economic prosperity,

but by their obedience or disobedience to the Lord their God.

These books remind me, in the words of Psalm 58:

**“Surely there is a God who judges the earth”** (v. 11).

And as a consequence, the world these writers present is supernatural—

this world is alive with the activity of God.

The hand of God is involved in all the affairs of the men and women

who populate this world.

Even an arrow shot at random

is directed by the hand of God to achieve his divine purpose.

The biblical writers of these books,

whom the Jews call the former prophets,

were attuned to what God was doing in the history they were recording.

When I read these books, I enter into that world,

and I am reminded that that is the real world.

And this modern, secular, scientific, naturalistic, material world in which I live—

the world of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*--

that is a superficial world—

it is a reductionistic world—

it is a world that is blind to those spiritual realities.

It is a world without windows,

a world that refuses to allow any transcendent rays of reality

to shine through.

The Bible's history takes us behind the scenes,  
outside our secular bubble,  
so that we can see what really matters in the sight of God.  
I need to be reminded of this real world, lest I become dulled to it  
and become trapped in what one writer has called  
a "horizontal frame."<sup>1</sup>

And we are, once again, confronted by that divine reality  
in our passage this morning.

The last verse of 2 Kings chapter one ends with a royal succession—

We read there that when Ahaziah died,  
his brother Joram succeeded him as king,  
and all that Ahaziah did could be found recorded  
in the official annals of the kings of Israel.

And in the first verse of 2 Kings chapter three

that royal succession is picked up without a beat—  
3:1—"Joram son of Ahab became king of Israel in Samaria  
in the eighteenth year of Jehoshaphat king of Judah,  
and he reigned twelve years."

But in between chapters 1 and 3, our writer interjects another succession—

one that is, in his mind, even more important.  
He records the succession not of political leaders,  
but of prophets.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor in his book, *A Secular Age*.

And Two Kings chapter two has been carefully crafted  
to help us see the significance of what is happening.

I want you to notice the way that geography holds the whole chapter together:

It begins with Elijah going to Bethel, then to Jericho, and then to the Jordan River.  
And then, after the succession of prophetic power from Elijah to Elisha takes place,  
that geographical progression is reversed,  
moving from the Jordan River, to Jericho, and then to Bethel.

And in the final verse of the chapter,

Elisha goes to Mount Carmel—

the scene of Elijah's great victory over the priests of Baal.

And as Elijah's attested successor, he is now ready to pick up where Elijah left off  
in the war against the worship of Baal,  
and, to pursue that war, he returns to Samaria.<sup>2</sup>

The first eleven verses of our chapter focus on Elijah's dramatic departure.

Verses 12-25 then shift to Elisha's divine attestation

as Elijah's true heir,  
inheriting a double portion of his spirit.

And in the middle of the chapter, vv. 7-15 overlap these two divisions,

with vv. 7-10 mirroring what we find in vv. 12-15.

with v. 11—where Elijah is taken up to heaven in a whirlwind

as the center of the whole episode./

With that overall structure in mind,

<sup>2</sup> So Provan.

let's look more closely at the story.

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The first verse reveals what is about to happen—

Elijah is going to be taken up to heaven in a whirlwind.

Everyone in the story--

Elijah, Elisha, and the company of the prophets in Bethel and Jericho—

they all know that this is going to take place—

but it seems a forbidden subject.

Twice the prophets say to Elisha,

**“Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?”**

**“Yes, I know,” he replied, “so be quiet.”**

**“Let's not talk about it.”**

There is an air of mystery leading up to this great event,

almost a “quiet dread”<sup>3</sup> at the thought of the loss of Elijah,

this great man of God.

What will happen to God's people without him?

It's the same question Joshua must have pondered at the death of Moses.

As that dramatic departure draws near,

Elijah seems to want to ditch Elisha and go on by himself,

but Elisha shows his intense loyalty to his revered master and mentor

and refuses to abandon him at this critical moment.

Elisha is later referred to as the one

**“who used to pour water on the hands of Elijah” (2 Kgs 3:11).**

He has been Elijah's devoted servant ever since Elijah had called him

<sup>3</sup> Davis, p. 31.

and thrown his cloak over him,  
back in 1 Kings 19 (vv.19-21).

Elisha is not about to leave him now—not on this day.

So they arrive together at the Jordan River,  
and Elijah takes that cloak,  
(his “mantle” as the King James translates it),  
and he strikes the water and divides the waters of the river.

This immediately makes a connection with Moses who divided the Red Sea  
and then with Joshua, Moses’s successor,  
who divided this same Jordan River.

They cross to the east side of the Jordan,  
the same side where Moses had died.

The moment we’ve been waiting for since the opening verse has finally arrived,  
and Elijah asks a final question:

v. 9--“Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?”

“Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha replied.

Here Elisha speaks as a spiritual son to his spiritual father,  
and requests the double share of the inheritance given to the firstborn--  
not twice the spirit that belonged to Elijah,  
but double of that spirit  
that would go to any of the other heirs.

And it is the spirit of Elijah that he wants,  
which really is the Spirit of God that empowered this man of God.

He knows that that spiritual power is what he needs above all else.

v.10-- "You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said,

difficult because it is not his to give—

this sort can come only from God himself.

"yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—

otherwise, it will not."

The "seeing" here, I think, refers to that spiritual sight that sees what God is doing.

Elisha will be Elijah's heir and successor if he has that kind of vision.

And he does—

v. 11—"As they were walking along and talking together,

**suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared**

**and separated the two of them,**

**and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.'**

The divine army, last encountered waging war on Ahab (1 Kg 22:19)

has come for Elijah.

And Elisha sees it, we're told.

It is that same spiritual sight that Elisha will later display in Dothan

when he was surrounded by the army of the Arameans.

There Elisha saw,

and he enabled his servant to see,

the hills "**full of the LORD's horses and chariots of fire**

**all around Elisha"** (2 Kg 6:16,17).

v. 12—"Elisha saw [Elijah going up to heaven], and he cried out,

**“My father! My father!”**

You sense the deep emotion of this cry

as he sees his beloved mentor taken from him.

Then he exclaims, **“The chariots and horsemen of Israel!”**

This is not so obvious.

Is this just a description of what he saw?

or is it a cryptic way of describing Elijah, his **“father”**?

I say that because these words are later used of Elisha himself

by Jehoash king of Israel as Elisha was about to die (2 Kg 13:14).

**“The chariots and horsemen of Israel!”—**

In a sense, Elijah represented the power of God in the life of the people.

He was worth more to them than all their mighty military defenses.<sup>4</sup>

Now he was gone.

The prophet Elijah did not die.

Like Enoch, who walked with God,

Elijah was mysteriously taken up to heaven.

It's no wonder that Elijah became a prominent figure in Jewish thinking,

as they wondered, “If he didn't die,

could he return to life in this world?”

Elisha is mentioned in the very last passage of the Old Testament

which we read earlier— Mal. 4:5,6—

the Lord says,

**“See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you**

**before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.**

<sup>4</sup> for they were not to trust in horses and chariots-- Ps. 20:7; Dt. 20:1; Cf. Wiseman.

He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children,  
and the hearts of the children to their parents;  
or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.”

And when people heard of Jesus’ miracles  
many thought that he might be that Elijah.

But that role of Elijah is especially associated with John the Baptist—  
for Jesus says it—

“if you are willing to accept it,  
he is the Elijah who was to come” (Matt. 11:14; 17:10-13).

And it is Elijah who appears with Moses  
on that mountain when Jesus is gloriously transfigured  
before Peter, James, and John (Mt. 17:3).

As Moses represented the law,  
so Elijah represented all the prophets.

Such is the prominence, the legacy, of this great man of God. /

But now in our passage, Elijah is gone—  
“And Elisha saw him no more,” we read (v. 12).

The company of the prophets, who stood at a distance,  
they didn’t see what Elisha saw.  
So when Elisha returned to them alone,  
they can’t believe that Elijah was really gone.  
They think, maybe he is still alive somewhere.

As you’ll recall,

Elijah had a reputation for disappearing and popping up in unexpected places.<sup>5</sup>

v. 16—"We need to go look for him," they say.

"No, don't bother," Elisha says.

"Oh no, but we must," they insist.

"OK, go ahead, but you won't find him."

And they don't find them, and Elisha just says, "I told you so." /

Elijah, that powerful man of God, was really gone.

"What are we going to do now?"

We was our leader, our champion.

Who could possibly replace Elijah?

Now who can bring the word of God to us?"

That's the question that had to be burning in their minds.

It's the question Elisha voices in v. 14—

**"Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?"**

The God of Elijah had shown himself to be a providential God—

providing for him by the brook of Kishon in the time of famine;

The God of Elijah had shown himself to be a life-giving God—

when he raised a widow's son from death.

The God of Elijah had shown himself to be a powerful God—

when he caused fire to consume the altar on Mount Carmel.

The God of Elijah had shown himself to be a merciful God—

when he met the prophet in his time of despair

<sup>5</sup> cf. Obadiah's complaint:—"I don't know where the Spirit of the LORD may carry you when I leave you" (1Kings 18:12).

renewed his zeal with a renewed mission.

And the God of Elijah had shown himself to be a just God—

when he brought down the evil reign of Ahab and Jezebel.<sup>6</sup>

But Elijah was gone--

**“Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?”**

Wouldn't that have been the same question the Israelites asked

when their great leader Moses had died.

How could they go on without him?

**“Where now is the LORD, the God of Moses?”**

But the Lord raised up someone to take Moses' place—it was Joshua.

And here, the Lord raised up Elisha to take Elijah's place.

You see, no one is indispensable in the Lord's work.

No prophet is indispensable,

and, I would say, no pastor is indispensable.

And it has been interesting in recent days

to see a number of transitions taking place in our area

of pastors who had served in their churches for a very long time—

Lon Solomon at McLean Bible Church is now gone;

Steve King at Cherrydale Baptist Church is now gone;

John Yates at The Falls Church Anglican is now gone.

They are all gone,

but you know, the Lord is still very much alive at all of those churches.

<sup>6</sup> so Ryken.

The saying is true: “Every pastor is just an interim pastor”—  
even someone who has been in a church for over thirty years.

**“Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?”**

Not to worry.

Elisha quickly answers his own question.

After tearing his own cloak in two as a sign of mourning,

Elisha takes up Elijah’s cloak that had fallen from him.

He goes to the river and repeats what Elijah had done,

doing just what Joshua had once done—

**“When [Elisha] struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left,  
and he crossed over.**

**15 The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said,**

**“The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha.”**

Yes, God’s leaders may change,

but God’s powerful presence among his people endures.

And the rest of the chapter retraces the steps of Elijah earlier in the chapter

to provide a divine affirmation of what these prophets had just declared to be true:

**“The spirit of Elijah is [indeed] resting on Elisha.”**

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First, Elisha goes to the city of Jericho.

Like Flint, Michigan, Jericho had a water problem.

Somehow the spring that provided water for the city had become contaminated.

Poor Jericho—

it had lots of problems, you might say it was cursed—

for it had been cursed.

After its destruction when the Israelites entered their promised land,

Joshua proclaimed a solemn oath:

**“Cursed before the LORD**

**is the one who undertakes to rebuild this city, Jericho”** (Josh. 6:26).

You’ll recall that in the time of King Ahab

a man named Hiel had done just that.

But rebuilding this cursed city

cost Hiel the lives of the oldest and youngest sons (1 Kg 16:34).

Now the leaders of the city appeal to Elisha for help—

their water was making the land **“unproductive”**—

using language that may suggest that the water was actually causing miscarriages.

Elisha comes to their aid—

he takes a new bowl, puts salt in it,

and then throws the salt into the spring.

Now, why he used salt is not clear—

but salt was often associated with the making of a covenant.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the salt was a sign of a renewed covenant between the Lord and this city.

Elisha declares, **“This is what the LORD says:**

**‘I have healed this water.’**

And it was healed—

the water was made pure

**“according to the word Elisha had spoken.”**

Elisha’s word, which was God’s word, was a word of blessing.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Nb. 18:19; Lev. 2:13; 2 Chron. 13:5.

The prophet says what the Lord says,  
and what the Lord says comes true,  
confirming that that the prophet is a true prophet of the Lord.

Here Elisha shows the grace of God  
in blessing a city,  
for pure water is a sign of blessing.

And in this case, as one commentator put it,  
Elisha's ministry proved that "God's Word through God's prophet  
brings God's grace to God's people."<sup>8</sup>

This miracle again reminds us of Moses  
who once through a piece of wood into a spring at Marah  
because it was bitter  
and that water became sweet—fit to drink (Ex. 15:22-25).

But doesn't this miracle also point us to Jesus,  
who used water as an image  
of his redeeming and renewing work in the human heart.

To that Samaritan woman at the well,  
Jesus said, **"whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst.  
Indeed, the water I give them will become in them  
a spring of water welling up to eternal life"** (John 4:14).

And, at another time, he said,  
**"Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.**

<sup>8</sup> Davis, p. 36.

Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said,  
rivers of living water will flow from within them” (John 7:37,38).

Elisha healing the waters of Jericho

points us to that even greater healing,

that even greater blessing

that comes through Jesus Christ.

God’s word through God’s prophet brings God’s blessing.

But that’s not all it can bring—

for our final episode in this chapter

shows that God’s word through God’s prophet

can also bring God’s judgment.

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The story of vv. 24,25 is, without a doubt, one of the most curious narratives

that you will find anywhere in the Bible,

and, some might say, one of the most frightening.

One commentator labeled it a *Bubenmächen*—

a German term for a scary children’s story

meant to frighten the young into respect for their elders--

as in, “Be nice to your pastor or a bear will get you!”<sup>9</sup>

It reminds me a little of that verse from Proverbs

that Susan and I used to cherish as parents

<sup>9</sup> So Ryken, p. 37.

and would often share with our boys:

Prov. 30:17--“**The eye that mocks a father,  
that scorns an aged mother,  
will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley,  
will be eaten by the vultures.**”

So what are we to make of this story of “Baldy and the Two Bears”?<sup>10</sup>

First, we might take note of the location—

It is in Bethel, where King Jeroboam had once promoted idol worship  
by setting up golden calves.

Bethel is seen in the books of Kings

as the focal point of Israel’s apostasy (1 Kgs 12:25-13:34).

This sort of irreverent mocking behavior by this teenage mob

may be what you could expect from such a place.

These brash and brazen delinquents had no respect for God’s prophet,

and they go out of the city to confront him as he traveled on his way.

They jeered him--

“**Get out of here, baldy!**” they said. “**Get out of here, baldy!**”

They could have been simply telling Elisha to “**Get lost,**”

which would be rude enough,

but with these words,

they could have been mocking his claim to prophetic authority.

The Hebrew here is actually “**Go up**”—

the same verb used to describe Elijah’s “going up” into heaven.

<sup>10</sup> In this section, I draw esp. on Ryken.

They could be taunting Elisha—

“So, if you really are a prophet of God,  
let’s see you do something miraculous just like your master.”

And as for the term “baldy,” or “bald-head,”

frankly, I don’t really know what’s wrong that  
as a description of a person at all(!).

I mean, what’s so special about having hair?

I don’t think the offense in this case was that Elisha was follically challenged,

But again, I think the real offense was found

in the contrast with Elijah

who in the last chapter was literally described as a “hairy man” (2 Kg 1:8).<sup>11</sup>

It as if they were saying, “Who do you think you are, you bald head?”

You’re certainly no Elijah!”

These bad boys of Bethel were belligerently belittling this man of God,

taunting God’s prophet,

treating him with disrespect, derision,

and sneering contempt,

defiantly denying his status as Elijah’s successor as a prophet of God.

Notice, Elisha doesn’t lash out in anger.

There is a calm deliberateness to his action.

It says in v. 24 that “**He turned around,**

**looked at them”**

and then he called down a curse on them—

not in his own name, but “**in the name of the LORD.**”

It was the LORD’s honor that was at stake here,

<sup>11</sup> r\$DoEc lAo∞A;b vyla, So Wiseman.

not Elisha's.

And it is the LORD, not Elisha, who acts to punish these juvenile delinquents,  
using a natural means to achieve a supernatural end—

**“Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys.”**

It doesn't say that they all died,

but those bears certainly taught that insolent gang

a much-needed lesson.

And what was that lesson?

Simply, that to mock God's messenger is to mock God himself,

and that is no small matter.

And as the Apostle Paul puts it:

**“Do not be deceived: God is not mocked.**

**For a man will reap what he sows” (Gal. 6:7—AT).**

This solemn truth was embedded in the Old Testament law:

Lev. 24:15,16—**“Say to the Israelites:**

**‘Anyone who curses their God will be held responsible;**

**anyone who blasphemes the name of the LORD is to be put to death.”**

And this refusal to respect the Lord's messengers

was central to the Lord's punishment of the entire nation.

After the destruction of Israel in the north by the Assyrians

and then of Judah in the south by the Babylonians,

the Chronicler concludes his account by saying,

**“they mocked God's messengers,**

**despised his words and scoffed at his prophets**

**until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people**

and there was no remedy” (2 Chr. 36:16).

No, this story is no fanciful fairy tale that we should be embarrassed about.

Certainly, in its context,

if affirms that Elisha really is Elijah’s true successor.

And it reminds us that, as Earl Davis puts it,

“Yahweh’s word can bring both healing (v. 21) and harm (v. 24),

either deliverance (vv. 19-22) or disaster (vv. 23-24).”<sup>12</sup>

But it also speaks of a deeper truth—

that is, that the **Lord God is holy and must be honored.**

And you dishonor God whenever you dishonor his representative on earth.

Now in one sense, God is represented by every human being—

for every human being is the sacred image of God in his creation.

That’s why Prov. 17:5 can say—

**‘Whoever mocks the poor shows contempt for their Maker.’**

To demean a person who is different or disadvantaged or disabled,

to make mean-spirited sport of someone you don’t like,

or to make pejorative jokes about some ethnic group—

that’s serious stuff in the eyes of God.

You are mocking God’s image in the world,

and those who mock God will be held to account.

**“Do not be deceived: God is not mocked.**

**For a man will reap what he sows” (Gal. 6:7—AT).**

<sup>12</sup> Davis, p. 39.

Every human being bears the image of God  
and must be treated with respect.

But how much more serious  
to mock those entrusted with God's word.

Make no mistake, as this little story makes clear:

whoever mocks God's messengers, and scoffs at his prophets,  
arouses God wrath,  
and that person deserves to die. /

And that cannot but make us marvel at what we see in the Gospels.

When the Gospel writers tell the story of Jesus' crucifixion,  
the emphasis they give is not so much on the physical pain of it,  
but on the mocking and ridicule he endured.

When he was before the Jewish Sanhedrin  
they "spit in his face and struck him with their fists.

**"The men who were guarding Jesus began mocking and beating him.**

**They blindfolded him and demanded, "Prophecy! Who hit you?"**

**And they said many other insulting things to him" (Luke 22:63-65).**

The Roman soldiers gave Jesus a purple robe,  
put a crown of thorns on his head and a staff in his hand.

Then they knelt before him and mocked him,  
saying, "**Hail, king of the Jews!**"

And instead of saying "**Go up**," those who mocked Jesus said "**Come down**"—

**"Those who passed by hurled insults at him,  
shaking their heads and saying,**

“So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days,  
come down from the cross and save yourself!”

In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law

mocked him among themselves.

“He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself!

Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross,  
that we may see and believe” (Mark 15:29-32).

Doesn’t this little episode in the life of Elisha

cast a new light on what was happening there on the cross?

It is God himself, in the person of his Son,

who is being ridiculed and mocked and scorned.

And he is bearing all this contempt in himself—

and he was doing it for us.

For the Jewish leaders, the Roman soldiers, and the passersby—

they are us,

for we mock God whenever we go our own way,

and we think we know better than he does

what is good and right and true.

We mock God whenever we treat his image on earth with disrespect.

But on that cross Jesus absorbed our evil in himself—

so that it is precisely because he didn’t come down off that cross

that he saves us.

Peter writes—“When they hurled their insults at him,

he did not retaliate;

when he suffered, he made no threats.

Instead, [Jesus] entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross,

so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness;

“by his wounds you have been healed” (1Pet. 2:23,24). /

We can learn from Elijah and Elisha.

But we are saved by Jesus.

“In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets

at many times and in various ways,

but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, . . .

After he had provided purification for sins,

he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (Heb. 1:1,2).

We come now to celebrate that saving work of Jesus as we come to this table.

As our servers come forward and we prepare our hearts,

let’s pray.

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Communion--

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Speaking Truth to Power:

The Prophet Elijah, #8

Mar. 1, 2020

## “A Prophetic Succession”

### 2 Kings 2

The writer of the books of Kings records the succession of rulers in Israel, but in our passage this morning he points to a more important succession: a succession of prophets who proclaim the word of God. Here we are reminded that God’s leaders may change, but his powerful word persists. In that we have hope.

#### I. Elijah: A Dramatic Departure (vv. 1-11)

##### Elijah’s Legacy

##### •A Spiritual Transfer (vv. 7-15)

*“Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?”* (v. 14)

#### II. Elisha: A Divine Attestation (vv. 12-25)

##### A. An Instrument of Blessing (vv. 19-22)

Producing Pure Water

##### B. An Instrument of Judgment (vv. 23-24)

## Cursing Blasphemous Mocking

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Sermon Response:

## **“A Prophetic Succession”**

### **2 Kings 2**

- How does the history recorded in the Bible differ from the history you read about in history books? What difference does that make in how you view the world?
- What might you see if you had the spiritual sight of Elisha?
- Successions can be hard. What encouragement do you get from the succession found in this passage?
- The healing of the water of Jericho points us to the living water that Jesus gives. How can Jesus quench your deepest thirst?
- What do you make of the story of the bad boys and the bears? How does it make you think about mocking? How does it make you think about God’s honor? How does it make you think about the cross of Christ?
- Take some time praying about the lessons of this passage and praise the God it presents. Pray also for “gospel conversations” with those God puts in your path this week.

