

2 Kings 2 • The Legacy of God's Work

Introduction

Perhaps the greatest deception of modern times is “modern times” itself. We have a tendency to look at biblical role models and intone things like, “They didn’t have mass communication”, “Their lives were too different”, “They were limited by their technological inferiority”. The result is that we often dismiss their methods and actions, believing they need to be completely reinvented in order to be relevant to our “modern times”. Hence, the plethora of books and web sites devoted to “programs” and other methods purported to induce church growth. Such is not the legacy handed down to us through our biblical forefathers and even Christ Himself. In the end, God’s “old-fashioned” ways are numerically superior.

¹And it came about when the LORD was about to take up Elijah by a whirlwind to heaven, that Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal. ²Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here please, 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.

³Then the sons of the prophets who were at Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, “Do you know that the LORD will take away your master from over you today?”

And he said, “Yes, I know; be still.”

⁴Elijah 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.

⁵The sons of the prophets who were at Jericho approached Elisha and said to him, “Do you know that the LORD will take away your master from over you today?”

And he answered, “Yes, I know; be still.”

[Read v.1-5]

Q: At one point Elijah ran all the way to Mt. Sinai, believing, “I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.” (1 Kings 19:14). How might that compare to now in his last hours on earth?

A: Elijah visits not one, but two places each containing a school of prophets – Bethel and Jericho. He’s also doing it in the company of the person God had told Elijah at Mt. Sinai to anoint as the prophet to take his place, Elisha. (1 Kings 19:16) He was definitely not a lone, remaining prophet or Believer.

Q: What might Bethel and Jericho have in common from a spiritual point of view?

A: They contained truth, but not the whole truth. Jericho was only recently rebuilt after its destruction more than 500 years earlier and symbolized the original nations of Canaan which sought to entice others to their own false religions. Bethel was one of the two places set up with a golden calf and temple by Jeroboam in the northern kingdom of Israel to keep those tribes from going to Jerusalem and continuing to worship in the proper biblical manner. Both cities were “divided”, so to speak, between truth and error. The presence of schools of prophets in each would have probably been a very strong sign of encouragement to Elijah as well as strong symbols of where spiritual renewal needed most to begin.

Q: Why do you suppose Elijah kept trying to separate himself from Elisha?

A: From the whole text we might infer that Elisha was being tested, but the truth is that we don’t really know for sure.

Q: Why do both groups use the phrase “the Lord will take away your master from over you” in their discussions with Elisha?

A: This is probably a cultural reference to the fact that Elijah was the leader and Elisha the follower. But such relationships were much closer than we think of today, as such pairings often lived and traveled together, even supporting each other. They often came to refer to each other as “father” and “son”. So the removal of the master would mean that the servant then becomes the master/head/father-figure in his place. Elisha may have been just as reluctant to talk about Elijah’s departure because of their reference to his elevation in status as much as the thought of losing his “father”.

Q: What is implied in this short list of who knows what is about to take place concerning Elijah: Elijah, Elisha, and the schools of prophets?

A: The only people present and informed were those immersed in God’s Word. Those **NOT** immersed in God’s Word were completely ignorant of what was going to take place. [Note: Apply this to the End Times.]

⁶Then Elijah said to him, “Please stay here, for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.”

And he said, “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So the two of them went on.

⁷Now fifty men of the sons of the prophets went and stood opposite them at a distance, while the two of them stood by the Jordan. ⁸Elijah took his mantle and folded it together and struck the waters, and they were divided here and there, so that the two of them crossed over on dry ground.

⁹When they had crossed over, Elijah said to Elisha, “Ask what I shall do for you before I am taken from you.”

And Elisha said, “Please, let a double portion of your spirit be upon me.”

¹⁰He said, “You have asked a hard thing. Nevertheless, if you see me when I am taken from you, it shall be so for you; but if not, it shall not be so.”

[Read v.6-10]

Q: Why is there something familiar about beginning their journey in Gilgal and ending by crossing the Jordan on dry ground?

A: It's the exact opposite of what the Israelites did when they conquered Canaan under Joshua. They crossed the Jordan on dry ground and first set up camp at Gilgal.

Q: Is there a spiritual significance to this?

A: We know that Elijah comes again in the spirit of John the Baptist, is seen with Jesus and Moses on the mount of transfiguration, and is widely believed to be one of the two witnesses God raises during the Great Tribulation in the Last Days. This retracing of Israel's path and subsequent ascension may indicate that Elijah's work is yet to be completed, which would continue figuratively in John the Baptist and possibly literally in the Last Days.

Q: Is Elijah's mantle “magical”?

A: No, but like Moses' rod it is symbolic of the authority provided by God. As the story unfolds we will see that the mantle represents God's authority passing from Elijah to Elisha, an earthly sign for our benefit to see what God has accomplished on the unseen, spiritual level.

Q: In v.9-10 it might sound to us like “wishes” are being made and granted. What is really going on between Elijah and Elisha?

A: We have to understand their relationship (as explained earlier) as that of a father and a son. The custom of that time was for the father to split his inheritance among his sons, but giving his firstborn twice as much, what they called “a double portion”. (Deuteronomy 21:17) Since Elijah is not in possession of earthly wealth to pass on, and Elisha knows that the only inheritance he can possibly receive (or wants) is spiritual, he is requesting that the earthly tradition's requirements be instead carried out on a spiritual level. It's really a normal request of a faithful son. But this why Elijah cannot absolutely promise it, because they are riches only God can pass on.

Point: *Elijah went from believing he was the very last person left on God's side, to not only seeing God raise entire schools of prophets, but giving him a spiritual heir who desired to not just continue the work, but take it to an even higher level.*

Application: *Regardless of the spiritual status of our mentors and teachers, we must put into action for ourselves what we've been taught. We don't become them merely by association, but by inheriting the same behavior and actions as they practiced. This is one of the best examples of biblical discipleship.*

[Read v.11-14]

Q: What is the basic meaning of what Elisha saw, what he describes as “the chariots of Israel and its horsemen”?

A: To Elisha is revealed the reality of what exists in the spiritual realm – usually unseen by human eye – and working in the earthly. What usually has to be seen and believed only through faith is temporarily made visible to human senses. It's a visible testimony of the reality of faith.

Q: Why does he tear his own clothes?

A: This is the proper act of mourning in this culture, what any good son would do in losing his father. It's also symbolizes being permanently rid of his old nature and assuming the new by destroying his old clothes and assuming Elijah's mantle.

¹¹As they were going along and talking, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire which separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven. ¹²Elisha saw it and cried out, “My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” And he saw Elijah no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

¹³He also took up the mantle of Elijah that fell from him and returned and stood by the bank of the Jordan. ¹⁴He took the

mantle of Elijah that fell from him and struck the waters and said, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" And when he also had struck the waters, they were divided here and there; and Elisha crossed over.

¹⁵Now when the sons of the prophets who were at Jericho opposite him saw him, they said, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha." And they came to meet him and bowed themselves to the ground before him. ¹⁶They said to him, "Behold now, there are with your servants fifty strong men, please let them go and search for your master; perhaps the Spirit of the LORD has taken him up and cast him on some mountain or into some valley."

And he said, "You shall not send."

¹⁷But when they urged him until he was ashamed, he said, "Send."

They sent therefore fifty men; and they searched three days but did not find him.

¹⁸They returned to him while he was staying at Jericho; and he said to them, "Did I not say to you, 'Do not go'?"

¹⁹Then the men of the city said to Elisha, "Behold now, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my lord sees; but the water is bad and the land is unfruitful."

²⁰He said, "Bring me a new jar, and put salt in it." So they brought it to him. ²¹He went out to the spring of water and threw salt in it and said, "Thus says the Lord, 'I have purified these waters; there shall not be from there death or unfruitfulness any longer.'" ²²So the waters have been purified to this day, according to the word of Elisha which he spoke.

[Read v.15-18]

Q: Why might their urgent desire to look for Elijah not be completely irrational? Is there anything about Elijah's past that might make them think he's still alive?

A: Elijah was known to disappear for long periods of time and impossible to find, such as when the Lord sent him first to the brook in the wilderness and then to the widow's house. In fact, when Obadiah met Elijah on the road, his first reaction was fear that God would snatch Elijah away to places unknown. (1 Kings 18:12) So there was a kind of "reputation" that had to be dealt with here.

Q: Even though as an eye witness Elisha knew it was pointless to search, what is the actual benefit to their doing so anyway?

A: It provided proof that Elijah was not merely hiding, nor even that he died since no body could be recovered. It served to confirm what they saw and Elisha witnessed.

Q: Do you see any other parallels in their 3-day search?

A: We have great parallels as a type of resurrection in the person of Christ, and as a type of rapture of the church.

[Read v.19-22]

Q: Why do most Jewish theological sources call this a "miracle within a miracle"?

A: Because they recognize that salt in its natural state is not known to purify water much less such a small amount of salt to permanently cleanse so great an amount of water.

Q: If salt wasn't a literal agent for cleansing, then what was the spiritual significance it must have been symbolizing?

A: Salt was commonly a part of covenants with God, recognizing the fidelity and constancy of those covenants. It most likely spoke of a greater working of God's Word.

Q: Why do you suppose Elisha specifically requested a "new" jar?

A: By extension of salt being part of a covenant with God, it would represent a new and pure agreement, untainted by any previous past use or history.

Q: What might be particularly special about a new covenant involving the purification of waters at Jericho?

A: It was originally destroyed by the very hand of God and remained desolate for more than 500 years until recently being rebuilt. It would probably signify a new beginning with all the overtones and symbolism of biblical salvation and spiritual reconciliation, particularly powerful in a spiritual reclaiming at the site of Israel's first victory.

²³Then he went up from there to Bethel; and as he was going up by the way, young lads came out from the city and mocked him and said to him, "Go up, you baldhead; go up, you baldhead!" ²⁴When he looked behind him and saw them, he cursed them in the name of the Lord. Then two female bears came out of the woods and tore up forty-two lads of their number.

²⁵He went from there to Mount Carmel, and from there he returned to Samaria.

[Read v.23-25]

Q: What is the true meaning of their taunt? Is this really just some kids teasing an old man about his receding hairline?

A: The teasing is combined with a kind of blasphemy for God's messenger. The reference to "Go up" is their way of saying, "Go up to heaven just like Elijah did!" It's the same kind of taunting Christ experienced from unbelievers who tried to get Him to prove His deity by coming down from the cross. Their judgment is not for simply being teased, but for challenging God's authority and integrity through these recent events. They're actually mocking God.

Q: We previously traced Elijah's "backward" journey from Gilgal to Jordan. What is significant about Elisha's return itinerary?

A: Elisha returns to Jericho, the sight of Israel's first battle and a place divided in its loyalties to God (the school of prophets) and its Canaanite leanings towards alternative false gods. There Elisha seems to establish a new covenant with the Lord in the purification of the waters by salt. Then he proceeds to Bethel, a city conflicted by a school of prophets and a false temple. Through the judgment executed on spiritual taunters he seems to again be establishing a measure of God's truth. He thus goes to Carmel, the place where Baal was defeated by Elijah before settling in Samaria, the very heart of the spiritually unfaithful northern kingdom of Israel. All combined it seems to represent a spiritual assault to take the land for the Lord, very similar to the physical one originally undertaken by Joshua. It also seems to be the exact spiritual legacy Elijah desired when he thought he was the only one left.

Epilogue

In the Great Commission, Christ did not command that we make "converts" but "disciples". In a 21st Century consumer-oriented culture, this might seem clumsy, slow, and incapable of achieving significant change. But this is but one example of the fact that when God brings about something new and lasting, He does it through small groups and discipleship. Some other examples:

- Noah and his family repopulated the entire planet.
- Abraham and Jacob's sons grew into an entire nation.
- Gideon and the 300. (God actually cut back from larger numbers.)
- David began by small numbers coming to enlist with him.
- Daniel and a few God-fearing friends altered the lives of kings and nations.
- Jesus and the Apostles and the 120 at Pentecost.
- Paul and a few believers at the riverside at Philippi.
- In more "modern times", look at the Reformation, the Plymouth Brethren, the Methodists, the Jesus Movement, and so on.
- Others?

Biblical discipleship has resulted in greater effectiveness and extended reach than any other method in history.

Overall Application

- How seriously are you taking your own discipleship, both being disciplined and discipling others?
- What is your commitment to small groups? How are they actually a gateway to spiritual **AND** numerical growth?
- How are you using both of the above to continue the spiritual legacy of God's kingdom both in your life and the one to come?