

Succession | Good News from Bad Kings

“The Replacement”

1st Kings 19.15ff; Luke 9.51-62
11.26.23

1st Kings 19.15ff The LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you have arrived, you shall anoint Hazael king over Aram; ¹⁶ and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. ¹⁷ "It shall come about, the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall put to death. ¹⁸ "Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him."

¹⁹ So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, while he was plowing with twelve pairs of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth. And Elijah passed over to him and threw his mantle on him. ²⁰ He left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, "Please let me kiss my father and my mother, then I will follow you." And he said to him, "Go back again, for what have I done to you?" ²¹ So he returned from following him, and took the pair of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the implements of the oxen, and gave it to the people and they ate. Then he arose and followed Elijah and ministered to him.

(Luke CH 9) When the days were approaching for His ascension, He was determined to go to Jerusalem; ⁵² and He sent messengers on ahead of Him, and they went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make arrangements for Him. ⁵³ But they did not receive Him, because He was traveling toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ When His disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" ⁵⁵ But He turned and rebuked them, and said, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; ⁵⁶ for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." And they went on to another village.

⁵⁷ As they were going along the road, someone said to Him, "I will follow You wherever You go." ⁵⁸ And Jesus said to him, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." ⁵⁹ And He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father." ⁶⁰ But He said to him, "Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God." ⁶¹ Another also said, "I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home." ⁶² But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

We have been looking at the life of Elijah in the *Book of Kings*, events that occurred around 900 BC. And today, also, another episode that took place about 900 years later in the life of Jesus Christ. You may have noticed that the two passages have some similarities: there's actually a profound connection.

And believe it or not that connection is a key, maybe the key to living a life of spiritual greatness. And, I know, that's a really big claim – "today's sermon is the secret to becoming a spiritual superhero!" – and

you may be a little suspicious... But... Give me a chance and I think it will emerge out of these two stories. Let's look at:

- 1) The SUBSTANCE of the First Story (just the facts)**
- 2) The SETTING of the Second Story**
- 3) The SIGNIFICANCE In Combining the Stories**

Here's the first story: we saw last week, a despondent, depressed Elijah and how God "re-integrated" His prophet, encouraged, rescued and recommissioned him. God named to Elijah a second string – it's NOT all up to this one man to defend God. In fact, God had a second string and a third string and a fourth string and a line of 7000 backups. "I'll USE you, but I'll never NEED you."

And now Elijah goes to enlist his own replacement, his substitute, a farmer named Elisha and Elijah *literally puts the burden on the shoulders of his replacement* and keeps walking. This protégé prophet is apparently a landowner; he's leading a huge crew of plowmen and he's supervising, bringing-up-the-rear. This junior prophet recognizes immediately that the mantle on his shoulders meant that he would be Elijah's disciple and then eventually be his replacement or substitute.

So he runs ahead and asks permission to say goodbye to his parents. It's not that Elisha is making excuses or stalling. He recognizes what an honor this is and he's signing on...just wants to wrap up. And Elijah grants his request but also reminds him, and I think this is the best way to understand verse 20, reminds him, "OK, but don't forget what I've done to you... that you now wear the mantle.

Then, Elisha throws his own farewell party. In fact, he burns his bridges, kills the plow animal and burns the plow and thus Elijah got his replacement: "*Elisha arose and followed Elijah and ministered to him.*" That's the SUBSTANCE of the first story. Just the facts.

Now the SETTING of the second story. 900 years later Jesus Christ is now entering the final phase of His own work. This is Luke's "*travel narrative*", the journey from Galilee in the countryside of the north, the hill country, down to the center of the Jewish world, to the City of Jerusalem. And just as there are things going on with Elijah (remember the drought and the contest with the witch doctors and the rain and his depression) SO ALSO with Jesus there's a lot of stuff swirling around. So, let's take a still shot of this whirlwind around Jesus and try to identify some of the debris in the atmosphere surrounding Him.

There are at least THREE BIG ISSUES in the SETTING of the story. Number One: the first educational unit is ended and now the first exam (one question): Who IS Jesus of Nazareth?

And as you may know Matthew, Mark and Luke make the movement of the whole story peak and hinge on this question. And in this very chapter (*Luke CH 9*) Jesus finally puts the question plainly and unavoidably: "Who do THE CROWDS say that I am?... Who do YOU say that I am?" The disciples have finally gathered enough evidence to answer. Peter replies for the whole group, "*We have now concluded that you are the Messiah, the Christ of God.*"

And as soon as that summit is reached, and the disciples have drawn this first crucial conclusion i.e., the identity of Jesus, THEN, immediately the Teacher sets the next learning goal. His next task is to show the disciples that the Christ of God, the Messiah has come to suffer and die and to be raised from the dead.

It's instantly clear that while these disciples DO know that Jesus IS the Messiah, they don't know what a Messiah is! So, Jesus moves at once to fill up that term "Messiah" or "Christ" with meaning. He says, v. 22, "*the Son of man*, (a name for Messiah in Hebrew Bible), *the Messiah must suffer many things and be killed and be raised on the third day.*" In other words, Messiah is going to Jerusalem to die for your sins and for the sins of everyone who trusts in me".

A SECOND issue blowing in the wind of Luke CH 9 is, believe it or not: Elijah. I mentioned last week that, in the First Century, there was a lot of lore and legend about Elijah that had grown up over the centuries. You may know that modern-day Jewish people open the door, set out a glass of wine and set out an empty chair in case Elijah shows up for the Passover Meal.

The Heb. Bible ends with a direct reference to Elijah. Literally, the last two verses of the Hebrew Bible, right before the start of the *Four Gospels* are about Elijah. And since, as we've seen on Sunday mornings, since Elijah is such a fascinating character, the prototype of all prophets, and since the Old Testament ends foretelling Elijah's return, a prediction sadly understood in a hyper-literal flat way, but there was a LOT of speculation and superstition about this mysterious prophet.

AND there was also something, not just superstitious, but truly important about Elijah. If you're a fan of J.R.R. Tolkien, Elijah is like Bilbo Baggins or Frodo; they're NOT the great king, but they were bearers of the ring. Elijah is a ringbearer in the Kingdom of God, AND in this setting (context of Luke CH 9) Elijah is simply in the air. He's mentioned four times in this chapter. And right in the middle of this chapter after the disciples correctly identify Jesus as the Christ, then Jesus takes three disciples up to a mountain to pray and WHO shows up but the two ring bearers, Moses and Elijah?

And on the *Mount of Transfiguration*, Jesus tells Moses and Elijah about His own "departure" (lit "exodus" -v. 31). "*They were speaking of His EXODUS which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.*" It turns out, in the whole scope of things, the Old Exodus with the plagues and the Passover and the defeat of Egypt at the sea, those events, as big as they are, they set the stage for an even bigger Exodus, a universal Exodus Jesus Christ will accomplish for all nations not just for one ethnic group like the first time.

So Jesus Christ, standing on the mountain with Moses, (representing the Law), and with Elijah, (representing the Prophets), the Law and the Prophets, the whole Hebrew Church embodied in these two figures and Jesus Christ is telling them how He's going to do it. This is how He is going to pull off the final Exodus, how He's going to liberate the world from the slavery of sin and evil and decay. He's telling Moses and Elijah that He has come to fulfill the Law of Moses and to fulfill what the Prophets predicted – to die and rise again. And that's why I say Elijah is in the air.

THIRDLY, in the setting of Luke CH 9 is the whole question of spiritual greatness. The whole chapter revolves around what often called “*discipleship*” i.e., what’s really involved in knowing God and in following Jesus Christ as a disciple?

Verses 3, 7, 13, 23, 48 all address this crucial question: how does one become an authentic follower of Jesus Christ? And the culmination of all this disciple talk comes in our passage. Three attempts at spiritual commitment: “I will follow you, Jesus” but each commitment appears to be harshly scorned by Jesus Himself. It’s as if Jesus is saying, “*you don’t know what you’re getting into.*” And we wonder why Jesus is so blunt and bleak.

So that’s the setting or mood of the SECOND text (Luke CH 9): 1) The identity of Jesus as Messiah and “What IS a Messiah, anyway?” 2) The Prophet Elijah: the OT closes on Elijah’s return and everyone’s thinking about him 3) being “sold-out” for the Kingdom, bold, heroic love and self-forgetful commitment, as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Now, what is the CONNECTION between the two stories and how can that connection possibly lead us to live great lives, selfless and fruitful?

The disciples are passing through Samaria. It’s very dangerous for Jews to be seen in Samaria; there are deep, deep ethnic tensions and violence between the two groups. Most Jewish pilgrims going to Jerusalem cross the Jordan River to the East side and went South avoiding Samaria altogether. But “*I guess Jesus knows what He’s doing... This is not the route I would’ve taken.*”

And when the Samaritans act like, well like Samaritans (You’ve heard of the “good Samaritan”? That’s because most of them were bad, at least toward the Jews). And when they refuse Jesus, the disciples are reminded of an episode from the life of Elijah. Second Kings CH 1 (we’re NOT there yet in our study; hopefully next Fall) where the horrible King Ahaziah sends two groups of soldiers to kill Elijah and Elijah says, “If I’m really a true prophet of God, let fire come down and burn you.” And the fire came down.

And now the disciples of Jesus say, “Hey, you bad Samaritans, we have us a real Prophet and He may even be better than Elijah so, ‘Lord want us to do that Elijah thing? Call down fire to consume these enemies?’” And Jesus says, “You guys don’t get it. You don’t know yourselves, how judgmental and hateful you are, but the real tragedy is you don’t understand ME!”

I Am so much more merciful than you think I am. I Am so full of love and compassion and the burning desire to rescue and restore, to forgive and to heal. Do you think you have another Elijah on your hands or even one a bit better than the greatest of all prophets? But I’m not Elijah; I Am Elijah’s Maker and now I the Maker have joined the creation. The Maker, the One who made all things, IS COME TO BE UNMADE, undone on behalf of my enemies.”

And you guys can’t see this but IF I’d come to destroy my enemies, I would have already destroyed you. You don’t know what I’m about but soon you’ll know because “My face is set resolutely toward Jerusalem

(9.51). Then you'll see: I'm so much, much more merciful than you've imagined. *I didn't come to destroy men's lives but to save them.*"

The passage then continues with these three would be disciples each one seems to get a discouraging response from Jesus. And when you tie this story to the Elijah story, it's clear that Jesus is saying to these three applicants: "You can't follow Me because you don't know who I am. You put me in the same class as Elijah and it was all right for Elijah's disciple to say oh... 'Just one moment sir... Let me say goodbye to my folks!' And if I were just another Elijah (which would be huge in itself!) OR EVEN if I were greater than Elijah or Moses or Abraham, then it might be OK to put Me on hold, but I can only be compared to Elijah and to Moses the same way a builder can be compared to the house."

Elijah is My craftsmanship, My work of art. But I am not the art: I am the Artist. And when the Artist, when the Builder, when God Himself takes you by the hand and says 'Come!' and you say 'Oh... Yeah... Sure... Just...um... hold on one minute.' Well, the only safe conclusion is that you don't know who it is you're speaking to.

Jesus Christ told the woman at the well in John chapter 4, (a bad Samaritan woman by the way), *"If you knew the gift of God and you knew who it is who says to you 'give me to drink' you would have asked Him and He would've given you living water."* Jesus is saying to these three excited commitment makers, "If you knew that you were speaking NOT with another Elijah but with Elijah's Maker... You wouldn't ask 'How are the accommodations in this organization? Are there any benefits? How's the retirement program? Or 'yeah, just a minute, I gotta say goodbye' ..."

In fact, you wouldn't even ask, "Let me just make funeral arrangements" because you'd see that the Conqueror of death has grasped your hand and, in comparison to that, nothing else matters. Even the most basic urges or affections or obligations or responsibilities or desires are meaningless outside of Me, outside of the kingdom of God. Within the Kingdom, all is life, all is restored, all is fitting, all is healed, all is beauty, all his glory. Outside of the Kingdom all is fallen all is decay all is death...so... let the dead bury the dead," says Jesus.

Because, outside of My kingdom and outside of My new Exodus and My work in Jerusalem, outside of all that there are only the dead and the dying (Rev 22.15). If you knew who's speaking to you and into what I'm calling you, the Kingdom of Life, if you could see it, then any other obligation or urge or priority would seem minor and insignificant in comparison."

This is how the martyrs were able to pray aloud for their murderers. This is how Christian missionaries gave up lives of comfort in order to harvest the fruit of the Lamb's suffering. This is how Corrie ten Boom could forgive her tormentors after World War 2.

To the degree that I see and know that the Maker, the Great King has come and embraced me with His outrageous mercy (big mercy for bad Samaritans and bad sinners like I am) – TO THE EXTENT that I believe

this – that the Maker entered creation to become unmade for me – to that extent I can become self-forgetting, self-sacrificing and joyous in generosity.

Maybe it all comes down to the order in the second text: “Because I don't see how great is His mercy and grace toward me and how great is His UNIQUE Person, therefore the demands of the kingdom seem great. But when I see Him for who He truly is, Elijah's Maker, and I see His great mercy and grace beyond compare, that He goes resolutely to Jerusalem for me (His enemy! – Rom 5.10) when I see that, then the demands of the Kingdom seem small, light and momentary (2Cor 4.17).

This is how I can stop looking for a break in the conversation so I can add my clever two cents. This is how I can love, serve, give, listen intently with or without recognition. Jesus Christ is to Elijah, what a Builder is to a house and He came NOT to destroy our lives but to save them. TO SEE THIS, to believe, is the path to greatness.

Q U O T E S

Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession; He was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was in all His house. For (Jesus) has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, by just so much as the builder of the house has more honor than the house.

— *The Epistle to the Hebrews* [3.1-3]

The resurrection is the revelation to chosen witnesses of the fact that Jesus who died on the cross is indeed king - conqueror of death and sin, Lord and Savior of all. The resurrection is not the reversal of a defeat but the proclamation of a victory. The King reigns from the tree. The reign of God has indeed come upon us, and its sign is not a golden throne but a wooden cross.

— Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (1986)

I saw in our Lord Jesus Christ nothing more than a man of excellent wisdom, which nobody else could equal. I thought his wonderful virgin birth was an example of how he despised temporal things in order to gain immortality for us, and such divine care for us gave him great authority as a teacher. But the mystery of the Word made flesh I had not begun to guess. ... I thought that he excelled others, not because he was the personal embodiment of the Truth, but because of the great excellence of his human character and his more perfect participation in wisdom.

— Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* (400AD; 7.14.25) describing his pre-conversion attitude toward Jesus of Nazareth