

## Sermon 37, Elijah Taken Up to Heaven, 2 Kings 2

Concentric Locations in chs. 1-2<sup>1</sup>

Samaria, 1:2

Unidentified mountain, 1:9

Bethel, 2:2

Jericho, 2:4

The Jordan, 2:6

The Transjordan, 2:9

The Jordan, 2:13

Jericho, 2:15

Bethel, 2:23

Mount Carmel, 2:25a

Samaria, 2:25b

This pattern is intended to “emphasize the interrelationship between Elijah and Elisha and to demonstrate that Elisha is indeed Elijah’s divinely sanctioned replacement.” Elijah proves the guilt of the house of Omri, while Elisha oversees its punishment.<sup>2</sup>

“With so many unresolved spiritual problems still current in Israel, it is imperative that the prophetic movement remain vibrant . . . without such ongoing opposition to idolatry and oppression, the nation has *no* chance of survival.” — Paul R. House, *in loc.*

“There appears to be a deliberate link between the fact that Ahaziah dies without progeny, and the original state of the land which Elisha heals.” — T.R. Hobbs, *in loc.*

**Proposition:** Eras pass and God takes His servants home, but He remains the same God to and for the next generation.

- I. Introduction: Succession in the Kingdom of God, v. 1
- II. Elijah Tests his Successor, vv. 1-6
- III. Elijah Is Taken: A Death vs. a Non-Death, vv. 8-11 & ch. 1
- IV. Elisha’s Status as God’s Prophet Confirmed, vv. 7, 15-24
  - A. By Witnesses, vv. 7, 15
  - B. Elisha Reveals God’s Power, vv. 12-14
  - C. Elisha Reveals God’s Wisdom, vv. 16-18
  - D. Elisha Reveals God’s Grace, vv. 19-21

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<sup>1</sup> Pointed out by J.R. Lundbom, “Elijah’s Chariot Ride,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 24 (1973): 39-50

<sup>2</sup> Marvin Sweeney, *1 & 2 Kings*, 268.

- E. Elisha Reveals God’s Judgment, vv. 23-24
- V. Elisha’s Status as Elijah’s Successor Highlighted, chs. 1-2
  - A. A Barren Man Killed vs. Barren Land Healed, 1:17 & 2:21
  - B. Judgment on Men and Judgment on Boys, 1:9-12 & 2:23-24
  - C. A Mirror-Image Itinerary
- VI. Conclusion: God Is the Same God to and for the Next Generation!

## **Introduction**

Brothers and sisters, were I a different kind of preacher than I am, I would begin this sermon by sketching for you the black day on which Charles Spurgeon died. I would detail the agonies of our sister congregation, Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, as they suffered with Dr. James Montgomery Boice through his terminal cancer almost 20 years ago. I would tell you about the funeral of John Calvin, and the mourning that must have filled the streets of Ephesus when the Apostle John was laid to rest. But as you doubtless know, I don’t enjoy beginning sermons with long illustrations. I generally desire to simply introduce the text and topic and move straight into the meat of the passage. Tonight, of course, our topic is the topic of succession in the kingdom of God. When a great leader dies, when a man of God departs this world, what comes next? How do we, as hurting and scattered sheep, respond? This chapter deals with precisely this question. It faces it head-on, and declares to us across the centuries that eras pass in the life of the church, that leaders come and go, but that God remains Himself in all His grace and power. We don’t need to worry how the next generation will cope without a Sinclair Ferguson, a Charles Stanley, or a Ligon Duncan. Our God is the same God that Elijah served, and He will continue the same forever.

### **I. Introduction: Succession in the Kingdom of God, v. 1**

The first verse of our chapter tells us that this chapter is going to be about transition. Elijah and Elisha start out together in Gilgal, and the narrator tells us up front what’s going to happen in the rest of the chapter. Elijah is about to go to Heaven, and the place he’s going to start from is called Gilgal. What’s the significance? Gilgal is the first place where Israel camped upon crossing the Jordan River. Gilgal was the first city Joshua came to after the death of Moses. Gilgal was the place where Israel was circumcised; its name means “rolling” because it was there that the reproach of Egypt was finally and definitively rolled away from the Israelites. Gilgal, in other words, is a transitional place. It is associated with entrance to the Promised Land — and as our text shows us, it is also therefore associated with entrance to the real Promised Land of Heaven.

So we have a significant place, at a significant time. The time is one of transition, when a great leader dies and his successor takes over, or at least tries to do so. This, in turn, gives us the hint to read this chapter not just as an amazing story about what God did for His prophet long ago, but also as a story of what we ought to do and look for as we negotiate the leadership transitions that will inevitably take place in our lives, our families, our churches, and even our “secular” organizations. That lesson is not “do everything like Elijah and Elisha did.” No. That

lesson is “Trust the same God who was with the old leader. The new leader might fail you, but God never will. The new leader might be way better than the old leader, but God is the same God. Trust Him forever, for everything.”

## **II. Elijah Tests his Successor, vv. 1-6**

Well, what particular things do we see in this chapter? First of all, we see this odd request, thrice-repeated, for Elisha to stay behind while Elijah goes to meet his God. What in the world is that about? Some say that it manifests Elijah’s humility and modesty. He knew that an almost unbelievable favor from God was going to be given to him, and he wasn’t at all sure that he wanted to show it off, even to his closest associate. In other words, this could be something like the same impulse that led Jesus to raise the dead in private. That suggestion has some merit, and those who follow it might preach from this text the need for humility when you are experiencing some signal instance of God’s favor. But I think a better explanation ties in with the behavior of Elijah that we already saw in ch. 19 towards Elisha. There Elijah threw his mantle to the younger man, who promptly caught it. When we looked at that text, we observed that Elijah almost seemed to be testing his successor’s reflexes. Would he think fast and catch the “ball” or ministry that Elijah had so casually tossed to him? He did; he understood at once what Elijah was saying. The same testing seems to be going on again in these verses. Everything is hush-hush as the church undergoes a leadership transition. Everyone knows it’s happening, but those involved don’t want to talk about it. Even Elijah and Elisha seem disinclined to discuss it with each other. So it seems that once again Elijah is testing Elisha, probing him, trying to see if he can withstand the stress and trial of this time and whether he is truly committed to being the next great prophet of Yahweh. In short, he’s giving Elisha every opportunity and even every temptation to back out. The young man is not going to be pressured into a role he doesn’t desire. On the contrary! He will be exhorted to go back to the farm rather than enter the ministry without a genuine commitment to the work.

Can we take a “principle of leadership in transition” from this? Maybe. But I don’t think the writer of Kings told us about this triple test in order to let modern leaders know to make sure that their successors really want the job. Rather, he’s pointing us more broadly to the painful realities that attend the end of any era in God’s kingdom. The fact is that Elijah’s successor would need to be a fearless, committed, utterly stubborn man. The condition of God’s people was hardly very good. And so Elijah, leaving his work half-done, tests the mettle of his successor.

Paul tells us in the New Testament to test men before ordaining them as deacons. And, looking at this from the other side, an obvious application is that if you want to serve in God’s Kingdom, then you need to be dedicated enough to press on despite discouragement.

## **III. Elijah Is Taken: A Death vs. a Non-Death, vv. 8-11 & ch. 1**

Elisha persists and accompanies his mentor all the way to the Jordan. There, Elijah parts the water much in the manner of Moses at the Red Sea and the Ark of the Covenant at this very spot in the Jordan. We should see, then, the obvious comparison between the great prophet Moses and his successor Joshua and the great prophet Elijah and his successor Elisha. The two men cross

the Jordan and walk on on the other side. Suddenly Elijah makes clear that he was indeed testing his companion, because he asks what parting gift he can give. If he truly did not want Elisha present, how could he have asked this question? Elisha asks for a double portion of Elijah's spirit — seemingly a request to be counted as a firstborn who receives twice as much inheritance as anyone else. But of course, whether Elijah had any other heirs is an open question. Nothing says that the “sons of the prophets” got single portions of Elijah's spirit. Regardless, clearly what Elisha desires is more of the Holy Spirit, more of the Spirit of Christ. And then he reveals why Elisha was so insistent on following him. Elisha wanted to be with him at his ascension because he wanted this double portion. His persistence in the previous section is a sign of his overwhelming desire to receive the Holy Spirit.

Do you have this kind of desire? Do you want the Spirit enough to put up with opposition, even from within the church? Elisha did. He wasn't interested in ministering under his own power. He wanted to minister by the power of God's Almighty Spirit. And according to some counts, Elisha's ministry lasted twice as long as Elijah's. Elisha also reportedly did twice as many recorded miracles as his predecessor.

The two men continue talking, and suddenly chariots and horses of fire appear. A whirlwind or storm from God snatches Elijah right into Heaven — and that is that.

We are meant to see the contrast with the previous chapter. There a wicked man died. Here a godly man doesn't die, but is translated directly into Heaven. There a man was killed by the word of the Lord; here a man was given eternal life by the word of the Lord. We are supposed to see the two fates of the two men, and to think carefully about which one we prefer.

#### **IV. Elisha's Status as God's Prophet Confirmed, vv. 7, 12-24**

Elijah went up to Heaven, and Elisha was left behind as God's man. The transition has been made. What happens next? Well, in five ways Elisha's new status as God's man is confirmed.

##### **A. By Witnesses, vv. 7, 15**

The first way is witnesses. This is a special group, the “sons of the prophets.” Who were they? Some kind of support group for Elijah and Elisha. They may have all been prophets themselves, or have been arranged as a school. They may have worn distinctive clothing or hairstyles. But the bottom line is that we know about them only what is stated here in Kings, and that amounts to this: the sons of the prophets were supporters and encouragers and helpers of the great prophets Elijah and Elisha. They saw the parting of the Jordan, but they did not see Elijah's ascent. Nonetheless, when Elisha comes back across the Jordan to them, they recognize and say outright that he has the same Spirit Elijah had.

What about these men bowing down? Were they worshipping Elisha? I believe not. Rather, they were demonstrating their respect for and commitment to the word of God. Elisha, like Elijah, is the living representative of that word.

##### **B. Elisha Reveals God's Power, vv. 12-14**

Elisha further confirms his status as the successor of Elijah by splitting the Jordan and walking across dryshod. By doing exactly what Elijah had done moments before, he was clearly claiming

to follow in the man's footsteps, to be a leader like Elijah. He tore his clothes in mourning over the loss of his leader, but he also inherited the mantle that so providentially fell off as Elijah was being carried into Heaven. Indeed, Elisha's question drives this chapter and the previous one: Where is Yahweh, God of Elijah? Is He in Ekron with Beelzebub? Is He so closely tied to Elijah that when Elijah goes, Yahweh goes? Not at all. The God who was with Elijah, whose power makes a way through the river and carries His chosen servant directly to Heaven, is still with us. That, ultimately, is the message of this chapter. That is what encourages you and me as we together endure times of leadership transition, as we perhaps individually seek to become leaders or to nourish leaders. The point is not that Martin Luther did amazing things, and without him the church is destined to flounder a bit. The point is that the God of Elijah, the God of Luther, the God of John Piper, the God of John MacArthur, is present right here in little old Gillette, Wyoming, and that He is with everyone whom He calls. His power amazes us — but His power is His, not Elisha's or Luther's. Do you want the power? Then don't look to the man. Look to the God. God could split the stream without Elijah; He can bless a church without a highly gifted mega-pastor.

### **C. Elisha Reveals God's Wisdom, vv. 16-18**

But in addition to the flashy gift of power, God gives the subtle gift of wisdom. Elisha demonstrates that wisdom in saying that it's unnecessary to look for Elijah because the Spirit took him straight to Heaven. He had the wisdom to buck the trend, to insist that Elijah was not to be found on Earth and did not need the assistance of the sons of the prophets any more. Also, notice the link with the previous chapter. There a group of fifty men found Elijah three times; here the group of fifty men cannot find him at all. He has been taken up. Also notice Elisha's wisdom led him to utter one of the Bible's "I-told-you-so" statements. The point is that Elisha has more of God's Spirit, more access to the counsels and plans of God, than these sons of the prophets do. Why? Because he is Elijah's successor. He is the one God has picked to be a leader in Israel.

Do you give God thanks for the gifts of wisdom? Do you seek them? Or do you want the power? Wisdom isn't exciting the way power is — but wisdom blesses every aspect of human flourishing.

### **D. Elisha Reveals God's Grace, vv. 19-21**

Next Elisha returns to Jericho, where the land is under judgment. This should be traced back to Joshua's curse in Joshua 6, and Hiel's suffering the curse when he rebuilt Jericho in 1 Kings 16. Here we see that the present inhabitants continue to suffer from barrenness. (Some commentators believe that seismic shifts were releasing radioactive material into the city's water supply.) Elisha throws salt into the water, symbolizing a new beginning, and the land and water are healed.

Jericho didn't deserve God's blessing. It was a place under His curse. But through Elisha, He manifested His amazing grace. God saves! God forgives! God blesses even those who are under His curse when they seek Him.

Do you feel sometimes that you are experiencing God's disfavor? Do you think that you have committed some sin that makes Him displeased with you? If so, child of God, listen to this text. Trust in the God of amazing grace, who blessed even Jericho. If He can bless Jericho, a city that openly defied Him, then He can bless you too.

#### **E. Elisha Reveals God's Judgment, vv. 23-24**

But at the same time, Elisha shows us that God has not changed. He still judges those who mock and despise his prophets. We recently heard in the morning service that Babylon conquered Judah because the Judeans mocked and despised God's prophets. Here, too, the youths mock Elisha, probably by telling him to get out of town or perhaps by telling him to go up into Heaven like Elijah had. Either way, God does not take such mockery lightly. If directed at His prophet, then it is ultimately directed at Him and His word.

God's judgment seems harsh to us. But again, this is only because we so often forget the greatest commandment. The most important thing we can do is to love our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. If you aren't doing that, then nothing else you're doing is acceptable. Just as we could say it is positively offensive for a husband to keep providing for his wife and acting like everything's fine between him and her while he's actually having an affair on the side, so it is positively offensive to God to act like everything's okay between you and Him while you are worshipping some idol on the side.

Don't mock God. Don't mock God's servants! God will curse and harm those who turn against His servants.

#### **V. Elisha's Status as Elijah's Successor Highlighted, chs. 1-2**

Finally, we need to see the deep connections between these two first chapters of 2 Kings. The most obvious one, of course, is that chapter 1 deals with a death while chapter 2 describes a non-death. But three other features stand out as strongly tying these narratives together.

##### **A. A Barren Man Killed vs. Barren Land Healed, 1:17 & 2:21**

First of all, Ahaziah dies without any son. He was a barren man because God's curse fell on him. When he was sick, he tried to inquire of Baal-zebub rather than of the living God of Israel. But in ch. 2, sick people appeal to God for healing, and they receive it! God is both merciful and just, faithful and wrathful. Why didn't Ahaziah turn and live? But on the other hand, why did the men of Jericho do so? Ultimately, the answer lies in God who shows mercy. He sent death to a king, but He spared a whole city.

##### **B. Judgment on Men and Judgment on Boys, 1:9-12 & 2:23-24**

The judgment by fire mirrors Elijah's ascension in fire, and the judgment on the 102 men who were burned up prepares us for the judgment on the forty-two boys who received the wrath of God. God's judgment through Elijah is akin to His judgment through Elisha. We may think it harsh and unnecessary; if so, we do not recognize the sanctity of God. He is not to be trifled with!

### C. A Mirror-Image Itinerary

Finally, a mirror-image itinerary holds these chapters together. If you look with me, you'll see that the book begins with Elijah in or near Samaria, and v. 25 goes out of its way to bring Elisha back to Samaria. In between, Elijah proceeded to a mountain, then to Bethel, Jericho, and the Jordan. He was taken up in the Transjordan area; then Elisha returned to the Jordan, then on to Jericho, then to Bethel, then to Mount Carmel, and back to Samaria. By retracing Elijah's footsteps, he is claiming to be like Elijah — Elijah's worthy successor.

Samaria, 1:2

Unidentified mountain, 1:9

Bethel, 2:2

Jericho, 2:4

The Jordan, 2:6

The Transjordan, 2:9

The Jordan, 2:13

Jericho, 2:15

Bethel, 2:23

Mount Carmel, 2:25a

Samaria, 2:25b

### VI. Conclusion: God Is the Same God to and for the Next Generation!

Thus, in so many ways the text shows us both that a new era has come, that a new leader has arisen in God's kingdom, and that this leader will continue to serve and manifest the same God Elijah served. So when you think about leaving your kids to the mercies of this old world; when you think about hiring a new pastor, or transitioning to enter church leadership yourself, what is your comfort and joy? Simply this: that the God of Elijah is still alive, still omnipotent, still gracious, and still holy. He will be your God, and He will be God of your children after you. Can you trust Him? Do you live in awe of His grace and power? Do you fear His judgment? And do you trust that Jesus Christ will be the same yesterday, today, and forever?

Where is the God of Elijah? He is with us. He is among us. His name is Immanuel. If you don't know Him, don't mock this message. Rather, listen to His invitation. Accept it. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Whether the name of His servant is Elijah or Elisha, Luther or Calvin, Toby or Caleb, He remains the same. Blessed is everyone who takes refuge in Him!