

The Whirlwind into Heaven  
2 Kings 2:1-15  
November 8, 2020  
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CenterPoint Church

Read 2 Kings 2:1-15

*"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."* (Isaiah 40:8)

## Introduction

One of the huge things that we missed this summer that hardly anyone has talked about because it was just, apparently, easily rescheduled was the Olympics. It's too bad because with all the people quarantined inside, the ratings would have been through the roof. I love watching a good share of the Olympics, but definitely max out easily. But I always find it fascinating that athletes can train for most of their lives, and very intensely for the few years leading up to the Olympics but have all the work be for nothing when they lose or don't qualify. It's not for nothing, obviously, but most people want to win. I remember hearing Michael Johnson, a great sprinter from Baylor (you might remember his gold shoes), went to his first Olympics in 1992, but did not qualify for his race because he got food poisoning from eating out the night before a heat. How terrible is that? Thankfully, he came back and shattered the world record in the 200M in the 1996 Olympics. Another really disappointing moment: In the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the US Women's 4x100 relay team was so favored to win that it wasn't a matter of whether they would win, but by how much. But the interesting thing about a relay is that sometimes you can be the fastest team, but if you don't hand the baton off well, you might lose. And in the semi-final race, that's exactly what happened—they dropped the baton and lost, never even got to the finals. Then the same thing happened to the US men's relay team! <sup>1</sup>

Races are won and lost in the transfer of the baton. That's a picture that I want us to have as we start into today's passage as we see Elijah handing the baton of his prophetic office to his young protégé, Elisha. We'll see that there were many prophets who could have taken Elijah's place, but God had prepared one. And that one will follow Elijah to the end of his life and get a blessing to propel him into his ministry. And we'll see the human side of these things, as the prophets share deep friendship, and there is grieving when they part. But ultimately, there is obedience to God's call. And we'll see how that picture of handing off the baton applies to us today.

In the first six verses, we get a real sense for

### **I. Elisha's Devotion (vv. 1-6)**

<sup>1</sup> Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. <sup>2</sup> And Elijah said to Elisha, "Please stay here, 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. <sup>3</sup> And the sons of the prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, "Do you know that today the Lord will take away your master from over you?" And he said, "Yes, I know it; keep quiet." <sup>4</sup> Elijah 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. <sup>5</sup> The sons of the prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha and said to him, "Do you know that today the Lord will take away your master from over you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Bryan Guinness' sermon "The Investment of Elijah" from November 30, 2014, found at [onwardgospelchurch.com](http://onwardgospelchurch.com).

it; keep quiet.”<sup>6</sup> Then Elijah said to him, “Please stay here, for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan.” But he said, “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So the two of them went on.

I have a friend named Doug who was a pastor in Minnesota when he was very young. It was his first pastorate and a local, older pastor reached out to him and they got together. At the end of their time, the older pastor offered to pray often with him and talk about ministry together; he was gently suggesting his willingness to mentor Doug. But Doug was young and was in the PCA, and this guy was a Reformed Baptist, and so in his arrogance (he called it arrogance when he told the story), he didn't feel like he could learn much from this guy and so he politely declined. And he missed a chance to be mentored by one of the true pastoral giants of the past 30 years, John Piper.

Elisha did not forego his chance to be mentored by an older pastor. He followed Elijah and learned everything he could from him. Some commentators estimate that they were together in an apprenticeship relationship for 18 years – that's a long time to grow close to someone and be influenced by them. If you don't like some of the ways that I pastor this church, the way I approach things or conduct business, you have someone conveniently to blame – Dr. Dave Silvernail, the pastor in Virginia that I spent 18 years as his Associate. But you also have to give him credit for the things that I do well; I am highly influenced, consciously and subconsciously, by his ministry and his life. I owe him a huge debt of gratitude for teaching me and shaping me as a pastor.

We find out in verse 3 that everybody who was “in the know” has had it revealed to them that God was taking Elijah from the earth that day. Elijah apparently wanted it to be a private moment between him and his Lord. But Elisha was so loyal, he didn't want to leave him. They had this back and forth three times where Elijah told him to stay put but Elisha swore an oath to stay with him. Let's just stop right there and forget about the fact that these guys are prophets and this is Scripture and all the formality and spirituality of the moment. Can we just look at these two men who encouraged one another? There's a scene in *The Fellowship of the Ring* when Frodo leaves the main group, the Fellowship, after a chaotic battle with Orcs and tries to go to Mordor by himself. He even tries to ditch his best friend and protector, Sam, because he's trying to spare him, because he knows his path will involve pain and difficulty. So Frodo is rowing a boat away from the shore when Sam runs up. “Go back, Sam. I'm going to Mordor alone.” “Of course you are, and I'm coming with you.” Then Sam starts swimming for the boat, but he can't swim so he starts to drown but Frodo pulls him into the boat. And Sam says, “I made a promise, Mr. Frodo, a promise: ‘Don't you leave him, Samwise Gamgee.’ And I don't mean to.” And then they embrace and start rowing.

Do you have a friend like that who will see you through thick and thin, who will refuse to leave you even during your dark moments? Hopefully those of us who are married have that in our spouse, many of us have that in family (parents, kids, siblings), but we need that in our friends as well. And even more than having a friend like that, are you a friend like that?

What was Elijah doing stopping through Gilgal, Bethel, and Jericho if he knew God wanted him to get to the Jordan? I think he was saying his last goodbyes. Chuck Swindoll summarized that, “Historians tell us that the schools of the prophets were located at Gilgal, Bethel, and Jericho. These were the early ‘seminaries’... where young men were trained to undertake the sacred calling and the disciplined lifestyle of a prophet... one reason for Elijah's unusual journey to the Jordan was his desire to meet one last time with the young prophets-in-training... and offer final words of encouragement to those who would carry the torch of truth after his departure.”<sup>2</sup> It's funny that at

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<sup>2</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Elijah: A Man of Heroism and Humility* (Nashville: Word, 2000), p. 164.

each stop, the prophets wanted to make sure that Elisha knew what was happening. And he said, “Yes, I know, shut up.” But they were there to support both men and carry on the ministry as well.

In this last moments shared between the two men, Elijah hands his protégé a blank check of sorts.

## **II. Elisha’s Double Portion (vv. 7-10)**

*7 Fifty men of the sons of the prophets also went and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. 8 Then Elijah took his cloak and rolled it up and struck the water, and the water was parted to the one side and to the other, till the two of them could go over on dry ground. 9 When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken from you.” And Elisha said, “Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me.” 10 And he said, “You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you, but if you do not see me, it shall not be so.”*

Elijah parted the Jordan River with his cloak and the two men walked over on dry ground. What does this remind you of? There is a mini reenactment of Moses’ parting the Red Sea here. The two men who appeared to Jesus on the Mountain during the Transfiguration account told in the Gospels – they are linked here with this parallel that they both made a body of water part. There are many more parallels that I have not spent much time on: both men confronted the kings of their day; both took on false prophets; both went to Mt. Sinai to talk to God and had to hide their face. (Keep all that in mind, we’ll come back to it.)

Elijah gave Elisha a chance to ask anything of him, very similar to when God gave King Solomon a chance to ask for something from Him in 1 Kings chapter 3. And Solomon very famously answered how? “Wisdom.” Actually, he asked for an “understanding mind.” Elisha asked for something a little different, but maybe it’s connected – a double portion of Elijah’s spirit. Is Elisha asking to be twice as great as Elijah? No. A “double portion” of the inheritance is what they called the eldest son’s share. It signified that he would be taking responsibility of the whole family and the family’s land after his father died. Elisha was asking for the inner resources to be Elijah’s successor. Is Elisha being improper, asking for too much here? Should he have been more modest? No, it’s the exact opposite! He was admitting, “I need God to strengthen me for this task because I can’t do it without His power.” It would have been arrogant of him to tell Elijah, “No, I’m good, I’m ready; go ahead and die, I’ll do a great job without you. I don’t need anything.” James 1:5 says, *“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.”* It’s always good to remind ourselves that we also have all of God’s resources and gifts available to us if we will humble ourselves and ask!

Elijah was not totally sure if the double portion of the spirit could be given, but if God allowed Elisha to witness his departure, then it must be meant to happen. And the opposite was true: if Elisha was not able to see what happened in the spirit world when Elijah was taken away in the whirlwind, then maybe he didn’t have much of a future as a prophet. In the next 5 verses, the moment arrived when the Lord was to take the elder prophet away -

## **III. Elijah’s Departure (vv. 11-15)**

*11 And as they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. 12 And Elisha saw it and he cried, “My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” And he saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. 13 And he took up the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. 14 Then he took the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him and struck the water, saying, “Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?” And when he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over. 15 Now when the*

*sons of the prophets who were at Jericho saw him opposite them, they said, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha." And they came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him.*

"Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home." That's the song that usually comes to mind with this story, though if you read the text closely, it doesn't say that Elijah actually got in a chariot, right? Verse 11 says that the chariots and horses "separated" the two men and Elijah went up in a whirlwind. Why are Elijah and Enoch (back in Genesis 5) the only two people who never experienced a natural death, but were just taken up into heaven? I have no idea, good question to ask God when you get to heaven. I do know that Elijah's being taken in glory through the clouds is quite the contrast to the deaths of Ahab and Jezebel whose bodies were fed to the dogs.

Elisha was so grieved by Elijah's departure that he cried out and tore his clothes. And then he took up Elijah's cloak and parted the water as well. It was kind of a test or a sign that God was with him that both he and the other prophets witnessed. This is a fascinating parallel to Moses and Joshua. We all remember that Moses parted the Red Sea, but Joshua, Moses' successor, also parted the waters of the Jordan in Joshua chapter 3. So here, Elijah had parted the waters on the way there and now Elisha shows he is a successor in the mold of Joshua by parting the waters on the way back. And since he had seen the heavenly vision of Elijah's ascension, he was given the double portion of Elijah's spirit. All the other prophets recognized that the spirit rested on him now. A.W. Pink made the claim that Elisha's ministry lasted twice as long as Elijah's, and he performed nearly twice as many miracles.<sup>3</sup> I would encourage you to read about his life in the next 11 chapters even though we're not going to preach through it.

## **Conclusion**

Jesus' ascension to heaven is clearly foreshadowed here in Elijah's departure. Turn to Luke 24:50-53 - after Jesus' resurrection and appearing to over 500 people and, *"Then He led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up His hands He blessed them. While He blessed them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped Him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God."* Yes, Jesus died once, but He defeated death and rose again. And then, He did not experience death a second time. All the other people who were raised in the Bible like Lazarus eventually died for good. But, like Elijah, Jesus was carried up into heaven. He returned to His glorious Kingdom and, as the Apostles Creed states, "was seated at the right hand of the Father." He sat down because He had done His work: He had lived a perfect life of obedience in His human body, He had taught the world the ways of God's Kingdom, He had healed who He was supposed to heal and trained who He was supposed to train. And then He had endured a painful death on the cross, He had died as a substitute in place of every Christian who would come to faith in Him, and had taken their punishment for them. And then God raised Him from the dead and brought Him into heaven.

And now it was time for His people to carry out their work. The people that He had trained to do ministry were standing there when He ascended. Jesus was handing everything to His apostles, His followers. Before Jesus ascended, He had promised His disciples that He would leave the Spirit with them to help them accomplish their tasks in ministry: John 14:16 - *"And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth... He dwells with you and will be in you."* And that after He had gone, they would do greater things than He had done: John 14:12 - *"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father."*

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<sup>3</sup> A.W. Pink, *The Life of Elijah* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1963), p. 311.

In 1945, when Harry Truman was the Vice President under Franklin D. Roosevelt, he was summoned to the White House where he learned that the President had died. He asked Mrs. Roosevelt if there was anything he could do for her, but she replied, "Is there anything we can do for you? You're the one in trouble now." The Presidency was now his, he had inherited it upon Roosevelt's death and would now have a lot of work to do.<sup>4</sup> That was Elisha's situation after Elijah's departure, and that was the disciples' situation after Jesus' departure. And it should give us a picture of how we should feel about our lives – not that we're the President, but that we are the ones doing the work of representing God on earth. We do it in the strength that He gives us, guided by His Spirit and empowered by being united to Christ. But we are the ones who are running our leg of the race. We have been handed the baton from the generation that came before us, who took it from the generation before them, all the way back to Jesus' handing it to His followers.

You can see a little bit of a picture of handing off the baton in this church. James Chesnutt was a pastor for 29 years before he retired and has been dealing with some health issues. He still participates in ministry and worship, but I'm in my mid-40s (OK, late 40s) in the prime of my ministry calling. And then we have two people in seminary, Phil Niceforo and Besty Chesnutt. They're training, like those schools of prophets in 2 Kings, to run ministry later in life, Phil to be a pastor and Betsy to do women's ministry, Lord willing. And, as I stress all the time, it's not just pastors who do the work of the ministry – all of you should be thinking through your lives, your vocations, and your free time and how you can be doing the ministering to those around you. Even kids, students, it's not too early to be thinking about how the Lord will use you – now and in the future – to impact the world for His Kingdom.

It's been said that Christianity is one generation away from extinction: I don't really agree with that – there's way too much emphasis on us and too little on God's sovereignty - because Elijah's life and the book of Romans show that God always leaves a remnant of His people and guides the growth of His Kingdom. But we are still His hands and feet on the earth: we must grab the baton, and we must also pass it on! Our lives as Christians are not individual races, and we have to see how we rely on our teammates if we're to accomplish the work that God has given us.

Three Questions:

- 1) Are we grabbing the baton and running our leg of the race?
- 2) Will we be ready to hand off the baton?
- 3) Do we long for heaven?

I love a song that refers to this story by Rich Mullins, the guy who wrote "Awesome God," appropriately named "Elijah." The chorus says: "When I leave, I want to go out like Elijah with a whirlwind to fuel my chariot of fire. And when I look back on the stars it'll be like a candlelight in Central Park, and it won't break my heart to say goodbye." Well, Rich died when he was thrown from a Jeep and then was run over by another car. I don't think any of us can expect to leave this world like Elijah did unless we are around at the second coming of Christ: 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 tells us that "*For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.*" You may love your life, you may love being here on earth. But when the Lord calls you home, will you be ready? We have treasures and pleasures in

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<sup>4</sup> Gary Inrig, *I & II Kings* (Nashville: Holman, 2003), p. 203.

heaven that we can't even imagine. It will put to shame the greatest vacation and earthly experience that we could ever have. I can't wait to go. Like Paul, I realize that I have work here to do and God is not calling me home yet. But when He does, take me, Lord! I'll be ready!

#### Benediction

1 Peter 5:10-11

*"And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To Him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen."*