

The Mantle of Elijah



David Wilkerson January 17, 2000

Second Kings 2 contains one of the most spectacular passages in all of the Old Testament. This chapter tells the miraculous story of the aging prophet Elijah and his servant Elisha. When we pick up the tale, God has informed Elijah that his ministry on earth is over. Now he is to cross the Jordan River and go to a certain place, where a heavenly chariot will pick him up and translate him to glory.

As the old prophet pondered his last day on earth, he decided to visit the towns of Bethel and Jericho. He invited his servant, Elisha, to go along with him, and the pair set off for what I see as a "teaching journey." After visiting both towns, they arrived at the bank of the Jordan River. Elijah took off his mantle - a wide, loose-fitting garment or gown - and he smote the water with it. Supernaturally, the waters parted, and the two men crossed over on dry ground (see 2 Kings 2:8).

When they reached the other side, Elijah turned to his servant and said: "Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee" (verse 9). Without hesitation, the younger man answered, "I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me" (same verse).

At first glance, Elijah appeared surprised by Elisha's response. He said, "Thou hast asked a hard thing..." (verse 10). Then he answered, "...nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so" (same verse). He was saying, "If you see me as the Lord is taking me away, your desire will be fulfilled. But if you miss the action, you'll have to go home disappointed."

As they walked along, suddenly a chariot appeared out of heaven and separated the men. In a flash, Elijah was taken up in the chariot - and Elisha witnessed the whole scene. He cried out, "My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof. And he saw him no more: and he took hold of his own clothes, and rent them in two pieces" (verse 12).

Elijah was gone - but his mantle had dropped to the ground. When Elisha saw it, he ripped off his own clothes, tore them into pieces and placed Elijah's mantle on his back. Then he returned to the Jordan and did just as his master had done: He took off the mantle and struck the water with it. Immediately the waters parted, and Elisha walked over on dry ground. Thus began the young prophet's own remarkable ministry.

The events in this chapter are absolutely incredible. Yet what does this passage have to say to us today? I believe God has given us an unmistakable lesson here, with a clear, simple meaning: God wants to do greater things with each succeeding generation. And each new generation must seek the Lord for its own experience of the Holy Spirit and its own enduement of power from him.

It is wonderful to read about God opening the Red Sea for Moses and parting the Jordan for Joshua. But it's another thing for us to ask God to perform wonders for us. Yet that is exactly what our Lord desires for us. He wants to perform miracles and provide more of his Spirit for his people beyond anything seen in the past. He longs to increase and enlarge our faith - so that, like Elisha, we ask for a double portion of his Spirit, for his glory.

In this Old Testament scene, Elijah is a type of Christ ascending to the father. And Jesus promises us, "You're

going to do greater works than even I have done, because I go to my father" (see John 14:12). He's saying, in essence, "You're going to need more of my anointing, power and authority than any past generation has had. And my Spirit is going to endue you with all you need to overcome."

1. My First Question in Rereading This Story Was, Why Did Elijah Take Elisha On This Whirlwind Trip?"

Why did the older prophet want his servant to accompany him to Bethel and Jericho? Surely it wasn't just a sentimental journey for Elijah, one last trip down memory lane. No - this wise, old man wanted to teach Elisha - as well as us today - our need for more of God's power and anointing.

The two men first came to Bethel, whose name means "house of God." Indeed, Bethel had a great spiritual heritage. Jacob himself had offered his sacrifice there. Yet, over the years, something had happened to the city. Jeroboam had set up a golden calf there, and soon the people were given over to idolatry. As a result, an entire generation had been lost to skepticism, scoffing and mockery, robbing their children of any trace of Bethel's spiritual roots.

Things were so bad, these people probably mocked Elijah and Elisha as the two arrived. How do we know this? Just a day or so later, when Elisha came back to Bethel, the young men of the town ran out to mock him.

Now, as they walked through the streets, Elijah probably noticed his servant's horror and indignation at the totally backslidden society. Elijah himself had faced mockers and scoffers in his own day, on Mount Carmel. But he knew it would take even greater supernatural strength to face this new generation. These young people were far more hardened and godless than the idolatrous priests he had battled.

I believe it was at this point that Elijah decided to test his servant. He most likely suggested, "Elisha, why don't you settle here and pastor these people? You have a sure calling, and you've been well-trained. You could help restore Bethel's great heritage."

I'm sure Elisha listened, because he knew his master had powerful discernment. Yet I believe the young man quickly recalled the story of another prophet. God had sent a certain unnamed spokesman to Bethel to prophesy against Jeroboam's idolatry. This prophet had cried, "Jeroboam, your golden calf is coming down" - and immediately the idol fell from the altar, spilling ashes. When Jeroboam saw this, he reached out to strike the prophet - but suddenly his hand was paralyzed.

God affirmed the unnamed prophet's ministry with other supernatural works. Yet this same holy prophet was later seduced and compromised by a lack of spiritual power.

As Elisha surveyed the situation in Bethel, he knew he wasn't ready to stand up against the wicked spirits there. He realized what Elijah had known all along - the need for the Holy Spirit to do a greater, more powerful work in him before he could face down the evil in such a wicked city. So he told his master, "As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee..." (2 Kings 2:6). Then, scripture says, "...they two went on" (same verse).

I believe Bethel represents the kind of evil society our own nation has become in just a generation's time. We too live among scoffers and mockers - sensual people given over to lust, idolatry, homosexuality. And this present generation is worse than any Elijah or Elisha ever faced. Those holy prophets saw children mocking, scoffing and blaspheming - but America's children are murdering one another. Ten-year-old boys are raping five-year-old girls. Young children are killing without any guilt or sorrow - cutting down parents, classmates, innocent strangers.

I don't wish to make a broad, sweeping judgment against all youth. I know there are many godly teenagers in this society who are on fire for Jesus. I thank God for every young person who takes a stand for Christ in these wicked times.

Yet, this evil day demands that God's people obtain a double portion of his power and authority, to be able to reach this lost generation. It's going to require a measure of anointing such as we have never seen in all of history. It demands that a holy remnant rise up like Elisha and cry, "Oh, Lord - more is needed."

2. We Know This Trip Is Not for Elisha's Sake Alone, But to Instruct Every Succeeding Generation.

Elijah and Elisha proceeded to Jericho, which means "a place called pleasant." Yet this city was now barren, dry, utterly lifeless. There were no trees, no pastures, no fruit. Everything had withered because a stream of poison had infiltrated Jericho's water supply.

This city represents dead, dry Christianity - a church Jesus describes in Revelation this way: "...thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead" (Revelation 3:1).

Elijah had established a school of prophets in Jericho, and apparently he and Elisha visited the school. Some of the young, upstart prophets approached Elisha, asking, "Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head today?" (2 Kings 2:5). Elisha quickly cut them off, telling them, "Be silent."

Now, these strong young men of God were students of the scriptures. They even had some prophetic vision, because they knew Elijah was going to be taken up that day. This was the generation of ministers who would be sent out across Judah and Israel to minister to society - building schools, feeding the poor, preaching the word.

But something was clearly missing in them: the power, anointing and authority of the Holy Spirit. The next day, these same ministers would be begging Elisha to let them go look for Elijah's body, in case the Holy Spirit dropped him off some mountain or into some valley. They were totally ignorant of the ways and workings of the Holy Spirit. They could witness, preach, speak of miracles - but they hadn't experienced God's power for themselves.

Elijah probably overheard their conversation with Elisha. And he must have wondered if his servant discerned where this fleshly ministry was headed. So, once again, the old prophet tested his young protegee. It appears he suggested, "Elisha, you're looking at the next generation of ministry. Yet you can obviously see the lack of the Spirit's work in them. Why don't you settle here and teach these ministers the ways of the Spirit? You're just the man to awaken this dead, dry, intellectual church."

But Elisha knew what would happen if he pastored these ministers. They would remain enamored of Elijah's powerful ministry - and they would constantly barrage him with questions about it: "How many hours a day did your master pray? How much time did he spend in the books of the law? What methods did he use? What doctrines did he preach?"

Elisha would end up spending all his time recounting revivals and miracles of the past. And these young ministers would spend all their energies trying to be little Elijahs, hoping to recreate his miracles - yet without the power and authority of the Holy Spirit.

The church today has fallen into the same snare. We study past movements and revivals, looking for keys, trying to discover methods to bring down fire from heaven. Since I can remember, the church has been crying for an old-fashioned, Holy Ghost revival. Yet this all stems from a desire to see God recreate something he did in the past.

Elisha now answered his mentor, "I will not tarry here. I will not leave you" (see verses 2, 4, 6). He knew he couldn't impact anyone in this dead, dry church until he received his own touch from God. He couldn't rely on Elijah's great works. And he wasn't going to settle for anything less than more of the Spirit than his mentor had.

He was telling Elijah, "I respect the faith of my forefathers, the spiritual giants of the past. But I know the Lord wants to do a new thing. And I have to have a greater touch from him than anything seen before."

I want to go back now to the scene at the Jordan River. Why did Elijah insist on miraculously passing through? The Jordan wasn't a deep, wide river, and scripture gives no evidence that it was swollen. Besides, there were fifty strong, young prophets on the other side who could have built a raft for them in a matter of a few hours.

I believe Elijah sought to teach his successor that the miracle crossings of the past - from Moses, to Joshua, to the present day - were all ancient history. He wanted to challenge Elisha, as if to say: "When you start your own ministry, and you preach that God is a God of miracles, you have to testify of what he has done for you personally. I'm going to be gone soon, Elisha. And tomorrow, when you return to this river, I want you to go back across the way you came. Believe God for the miraculous in your own life."

Most of us don't have faith to believe God for our own miracles today. We spend our time poring over the incredible wonders in scripture - yet all along God wants to tell us, "I have something even better for you. I want to do miracles in your life - to change your home, fix your marriage, save your unsaved loved ones. You're going to face your own Red Sea, your own Jordan River - and I want to part those waters for you."

3. Now Over the Jordan, Elijah Said to Elisha, "Ask of Me What I Shall Do for You Before I Go."

The old prophet didn't offer this as if, like a genie, he could pop out of a lamp and grant three wishes. He offered it to Elisha as a godly teacher in the faith. It was one last test, and he wanted to see how his young charge would respond.

I believe most Christians today would have answered, "Society is warped, and things are getting more chaotic all the time. I'm tired of the battle, weary of the devil's harassment. It is now dangerous just to be alive. Elijah, take me with you. I want to go home. Surely there's room for two in that chariot."

Indeed, our cry as God's people should be, "Come, Lord Jesus." Yet Jesus also tells us, "Occupy till I come." As he was ascending to heaven, he commanded his disciples, "Why do you stand here gazing? Go, tarry until I come again."

Elisha knew his place wasn't with the Lord at that time. He knew that God still wept over the rebellious children of Bethel and the barren church in Jericho. And he knew what was needed: He had to remain and take on the responsibility of facing an evil society and a dead religious system.

I'm sure he told Elijah, "You've shown me the condition of this society and this church. And you know I'm going to need more power, anointing and authority than anyone before me has ever had. So, I'm asking for a double portion of the Spirit that God gave to you." "I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me" (2 Kings 2:9).

When Elijah heard this, he answered, "Thou hast asked a hard thing..." (verse 10). Yet, who exactly would this task be hard for? Would it be hard for God? Would it be hard for Elijah, a man who had raised the dead and called down fire from heaven?

No - it was going to be hard for Elisha. This was something he would have to obtain for himself. Elijah didn't have the ability to empower his servant with a portion of the Spirit residing within himself. Only God can impart his Spirit to man.

But, Elijah replied, "...nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so" (verse 10). It is important to note that the words "when" and "am" in this verse do not appear in the original Hebrew. They were inserted later into the text of the King James. Thus, I believe Elijah is saying to Elisha, "If you see me as being taken from you."

Elijah was saying, "The Holy Spirit can't do a special work in you as long as you're still leaning on my memory. You have to consider me gone. You don't need me, Elisha. Turn to the Lord, whose Spirit also worked in me. He will answer your cry."

The moment he saw his master whisked away in the heavenly chariot, Elisha assumed his responsibility to carry on God's work to his generation. And as he stood at the Jordan and struck the water, the words he cried out were, "Where is the God of Elijah?" The young prophet was saying, "Lord, all of my spiritual forefathers are dead and gone. And this awful hour requires even more than you have given so far. Work again, Lord - this time through me. I have to be empowered with more of your Spirit."

4. Elisha Went Back to the Same Two Cities, Retracing His Steps With Elijah.

Now, after receiving a touch from God, Elisha went forward with his own faith. And his first stop was Jericho. The college of fifty prophets immediately recognized God's touch on him, saying, "The same spirit that was on Elijah is now on Elisha." It was obvious to all that this hidden servant was moving in a deeper power and authority of the Spirit.

The young prophets told Elisha, "...the situation of this city is pleasant, as my lord seeth: but the water is naught, and the ground barren" (2 Kings 2:19). They were saying, "There's poison in the water, and it's killing everything." Yet, apparently, these fifty men of God were powerless to stop the poison from bringing death to Jericho.

According to Isaiah, this "pleasant place" represents the ministry: "The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant..." (Isaiah 5:7). Also, water here represents the word of God.

Do you see the picture? The poisoned waters of Jericho signify the polluted word being preached from the town's pulpits. These men of God had never dealt with their own sins, so their sermons were full of poison from corrupted hearts. And their lifeless, flesh-oriented sermons were causing spiritual death among the people.

Show me a preacher in the pulpit who no longer believes God's word is infallible - who has rejected the virgin birth, who is hooked to a secret sin, who no longer weeps over the sin he sees in God's house - and I'll show you a church that's dying because of the poison spewing out of his heart.

What was the cure for the poison in Jericho? It was to purify the water supply. And that's just what Elisha did. He took a clean vessel, filled it full of salt and poured it into the fountainhead of the city's water. Soon all the waters were cleansed, and life sprang up all around.

Of course, the salt Elisha used represents the gospel of purity and holiness. And the clean vessel he used represents ministers who have been cleansed by Christ's blood and sanctified by the Spirit's purifying fire, prepared to preach a pure gospel. Beloved, only these things can stem the evil tide in God's house: clean, pure vessels who walk in holiness and preach a pure word with fresh anointing.

Now Elisha went back to Bethel - the corrupted society with a lost generation of youth. And as soon as he arrived, he was mocked:

"He went up from thence unto Bethel: and as he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out of the city, and mocked him, and said unto him, Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head. And he turned back, and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the Lord. And there came forth two she bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two children of them" (2 Kings 2:23-24).

What an awful scene. You may think, "How cruel that God would allow little children to be attacked by bears." But the words "little children" here are a poor translation. In the original Hebrew this phrase reads "young men" (Spurrell, Hebrew).

Did Elisha cause their deaths in a selfish fit of anger for being taunted? No. This godly man was moving under the power and authority of the Holy Spirit. The fact is, those mocking young men had committed an unspeakable sin. Let me explain.

Undoubtedly, the boys had heard about Elijah's translation into heaven. Yet now, by taunting Elisha with the cry, "Go up, baldy," they were ridiculing the work of the Spirit. They heard the truth about the Spirit's holy work, but they didn't accept it. Their actions toward Elisha were an act of mockery against the ministry of the Holy Spirit - an unpardonable sin.

Young Preachers Today Are Doing the Same Things the Ministers in Bethel Did.

For many years God was patient with the fallen church in Bethel. Multitudes flocked there to worship at an altar of accommodation. And the Lord sent many prophets, including Elijah himself, to speak warnings. But a time came when God no longer tolerated the city's idolatry and wickedness. So he called for judgment, sending onto this wicked scene a man with a double portion of the Holy Ghost. Elisha moved with authority in Bethel, preaching judgment against their sin.

Too many young ministers today are relying on the same fleshly methods that the fallen church in Bethel did. They are bringing into God's house the very music that first incited rebellion and sensuality in this nation. They are polling a sin-saturated society to learn how they can lure non-believers into a church building. And instead of offering worship, they are staging skits, parties and rock concerts. They are attempting to entertain the youth rather than confront their sins and emptiness with the simple, pure gospel.

Likewise today, the church faces the same spirit of mockery Elisha faced. Militant homosexuals scoff at God's word. Prestigious museums in New York City proudly display blasphemous art: the cross of Christ submerged in a vat of urine; a portrait of the virgin Mary smeared with elephant dung. Such blatant, arrogant wickedness was once inconceivable.

As sin has abounded in these last days, I have been in contact with many godly seekers. I call these people "the Elisha Company." They are going on with the Lord - interceding, grieving over the wickedness in society and the church, pursuing a greater anointing of the Spirit. And they are all hearing the same message from the Lord: Judgment is at the door. As they consider the awful catastrophes taking place - floods, hurricanes, deadly mosquito plagues - they know God is speaking.

Personally, I am not satisfied to sit around studying past revivals. I want to see the Holy Ghost work the greater wonders Jesus promised. I will continue to preach mercy and grace to all who have an ear to hear - but I will not be a wimp who covers before scoffers. The time has come to warn all Christ haters: Their time is up. God is going to bankrupt them with awesome judgments. And when that happens, even the most hardened will say, "This is God's doing."

The Elisha Company will not be satisfied with the status quo, or with recreating some past revival. Right now they are shut in with the Lord, continually praying for more of the Holy Spirit's power. And they are preparing their hearts to see the Lord do a new thing in these last days.

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