

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
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John Crosby  
Elijah to Elisha  
2 Kings 2**

We are delighted that you are with us here this morning to discover a hidden gem in the Bible. It won't rest on the surface and grab you by the ankle; it's something you will have to dig into, but my promise is that it can change your life. If you feel alone, if you feel like you believe in God, if you want to be a person who is like God but there is something missing, today could help you. It's a hidden gem that comes from the time of the kings, the part of the Bible that is called 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings. This is paralleled in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles, but it marks, appropriately, the time where Israel was led by kings, a whole series of them. We call it 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings because the book was so long, they split it in half.

Today we are going to talk about the time that Kings Ahab, Joram, and Jehu were accompanied by prophets Elijah and then Elisha. In the time of the kings, the prophets were the voices of credibility. You had good kings and more bad kings, but prophets were the ones who were there to tell the truth, whether it was popular or not. You might think of Walter Cronkite for a previous generation, a voice of credibility. Or Billy Graham, whose voice, even if disagreed with, could be trusted. Or today, perhaps you would think of Pope Francis. Whether you are a Catholic or not, you have the sense that there is something about this man's voice that we ought to listen to. Because the prophets not only had credibility but some power, there were many who were controversial, but more who were just cheap imitations, in it for the prophet's money. We are going to look at two who were not in it for the money.

2<sup>nd</sup> Kings, chapter 2, talks about Elisha. There is Elijah and then Elisha. I always remember that Elijah comes before Elisha because "j" comes before "s". This is about Elisha, Elijah's successor. It's at the end of his first week as a prophet. It's part of a story I did not understand. It says,

**23** From there Elisha went up to Bethel. As he was walking along the road, some boys came out of the town and jeered at him. "Get out of here, baldy!" they said. "Get out of here, baldy!" **24** He turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the LORD. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys.

As a bald person, I'm going, that's what I'm talking about, but as a reader of the Bible, I don't understand. A man of God turns and curses, and a crowd of boys is mauled. I picked out this part of the Bible because I had never understood it and it's always felt terrible to me. There are parts of the Bible that you avoid but that you ought to try to understand because God has something to say to you. For me, this little story, this quirky tale about the bears beating the boys, was a reminder that when you read a story in the Bible, the text without the context is just

a pretext. In other words, you can make the Bible say anything you want. It can be for something or against it. Just pick a verse. That's the text. But without the context, without what surrounds it and an understanding of where the story is going, the text becomes just a pretext for whatever you want to make it say. You are putting words in God's mouth and that's what has happened with this little story. The text is there but without the context, it just becomes a pretext where God doesn't really love us, does He? So, I went and read it again and tried to find the context. It's 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings, chapter 2 and it starts out by saying,

**1** When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind,

in other words, Elijah's time was over. It goes on,

**8** Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it.

That's the Jordan River.

The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground.

This is a deliberate reminder of how God saved the people under Moses' leadership.

**9** When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?" "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied. **10** "You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours

this promise will be fulfilled

--otherwise, it will not."

The context here where this quirky little tale takes place is about legacy. For those of you who are older, it is a story about what you want to bequeath. What do you want to leave behind you? What is most important to leave? For all of us, it's a story about inheritance. The older turns to the younger and says, "Let me give you a chance to make a wish, any wish you want. What would you like? What would you ask for if somebody asked you, "What wish could I fulfill for you?" What inheritance would you want to get? You have to be careful about what you wish for because a lot of times, what we wish for is not really what we want at the end. Look at the stories of the ancient world. King Midas asks to be the richest man in the world and his wish is granted, but his touch of gold turns to death and riches kill. In the same way, the story of Dorian Gray is about a man who fears growing old and wants to live forever. The painting hidden in his closet is the only sign of his aging. His body stays young on the outside while the painting becomes evil and awful and twisted inside. What if you could have anything you want? A woman said she wanted to marry the most handsome man in the world and instead of a husband who looked like George Clooney, she got someone who looked like John Crosby! You have to be careful about what you wish for.

This is a story about legacy. At the beginning of the Book of Kings, there is another transition. King David dies and Solomon becomes king and takes over. Solomon asks for a different gift. He says, "I would ask You, God, to give me wisdom so that I can lead Your people." Now Elisha

the prophet is saying, "If I could have anything, God, I would like a double-helping of Holy Spirit power. Elijah had it; I need more." Will he get his wish? The text goes on.

**11** As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. **12** Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two.

This is a sign of grieving, of mourning for the dead. Elijah is gone.

**13** He picked up the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. **14** Then he took the cloak that had fallen from him and struck the water with it. "Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over.

So Elisha now has the prophet's cloak and the prophet's power. When they first met back in 1<sup>st</sup> Kings, Elijah came up to this young man and put his cloak around him saying, "You're my boy!" Now the cloak is his. Elisha is his spiritual heir with a double-portion of the Holy Spirit. How will that change his week? How does that lead to the bears? How does the Holy Spirit change somebody's life? In the Old Testament, the Spirit would come to people and fall upon them just for a little while and wild things would happen. They would know the future. They would understand power. They would be given courage. The Spirit would come and then the Spirit would go. That apparently happened to Elijah in powerful ways throughout his life and now Elisha has asked for double that.

When Jesus comes and lives, He says at the end of His life, "I have to go now and you are going to be sorry that I am not with you, but if I don't leave you here in this place, then the Holy Spirit can't come to everybody. If I go, I will send My Spirit to all of you all the time." You and I are the spiritual descendants of Elisha. Being a Christian is not about saying, "I believe in Jesus," although that's part of it. It is not about saying, "I am going to keep the Ten Commandments" although that is also part of it. The primary witness of being a follower of Jesus is that you acknowledge that God is with you all the time. God's Spirit has come upon you and so just as I want us to look at what happened to Elisha, I want us to ask ourselves, what is the presence of the Spirit to you today, or is this just some religion you believe in?

In Elisha's story, he asks for a double-portion of the Spirit. It's already started. He already has the Spirit because the first sign of the Spirit coming to somebody is that they start to see things that other people do not see. They start to look at life through different lenses and it's no longer first about childhood, then school, then work, then maybe marriage, then retirement, then death. It's different. They look at the world differently. There was a group of hundreds of prophets on the other side of the Jordan River and they saw the two prophets go across, and then Elijah just disappears from their sight, but Elisha saw what other people did not. That's the work of the Spirit.

Last week my wife Laura talked about this. She talked about how the Spirit comes to people and shows them things they could never see. She told the story of how the prophet wakes up in the morning and how his assistant walks out of the tent and sees the enemy surrounding them and starts to freak out. Then the prophet comes out of the tent and says, "Don't worry about it."

“What do you mean ‘Don’t worry about it’? They are going to kill us!” The prophet goes, “Don’t worry about it. God, show him what I see.” And the assistant looks up and sees the enemy surrounding them, but surrounding the enemy are these huge angel armies. They have nothing to worry about. Does God give you the ability to see what other people do not? When everybody else is worried about their stock portfolios, do you see that God holds the future? When everybody else is on one side of an issue and you believe the truth is on the other, does God’s Spirit show you the truth to stand firm? That’s what happened to Elisha. It says,

**15** The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha." And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. **16** "Look," they said, "we your servants have fifty able men. Let them go and look for your master. Perhaps the Spirit of the LORD has picked him up and set him down on some mountain or in some valley."

They did not see what Elisha saw. They did not see Elijah going up to heaven.

"No," Elisha replied, "do not send them." **17** But they persisted until he was too embarrassed to refuse.

“Everybody else is doing it. How could you be so different?”

So he said, "Send them." And they sent fifty men, who searched for three days but did not find him. **18** When they returned to Elisha, who was staying in Jericho, he said to them, "Didn't I tell you not to go?"

The Spirit showed him something new, but Elisha, being new to it, didn’t trust it. Spiritual people still make mistakes. Sometimes you and I see what God wants us to do and we don’t do it, small things and large, but we learn. The second mark of the Spirit comes next.

**19** The people of the city said to Elisha, "Look, our lord, this town is well situated, as you can see, but the water is bad and the land is unproductive."

Apparently the water in the ancient city of Jericho has become polluted. Elisha says,

**20** "Bring me a new bowl," he said, "and put salt in it." So they brought it to him. **21** Then he went out to the spring and threw the salt into it, saying, "This is what the LORD says: 'I have healed this water. Never again will it cause death or make the land unproductive.'"

**22** And the water has remained pure to this day, according to the word Elisha had spoken.

The Spirit opens people’s eyes to see different things. I believe God’s Spirit opens our eyes to the needs of the world around us so that we see the same thing that other people walk by, but we cannot walk by. We are called to stop. We are called to act on behalf of God. We don’t do what God does; we show up and we start our part and then God does what God alone can do. If Elisha had said, “Watch what I can do” and had thrown the salt in and the water had changed, that would not have been trusting in God. That would not have been faith. That would have been magic. People who have the Spirit cannot do magic, but they can trust in the God who cares about the things they see around them.

This is 2014. It's been 20 years since the nation of Rwanda was ripped apart. In less than 60 days, a million people were killed, slaughtered in genocide. The United Nations sent a delegation to Rwanda, but too late for them to see what had happened. The Justice Department of the United States sent this young lawyer to count the bodies and, literally, to identify the dead people and see who remained for aid. It took months. This young, hotshot, Harvard lawyer who was a follower of Jesus had his guts ripped out as day after day, he had to go into building after building and count bodies. His name was Gary Haugen. He said, "Louder and louder every day, I started to hear a voice inside of me saying, 'Where was God when this happened? I believe in You, God; where were you when this happened?'" He said, "The last week I was in Rwanda, I woke up saying, 'God, where were You when this happened?' It was as if God stopped my day and God said to me, 'Gary, where were God's people when this happened? In this world, I work through My people. Where were My people, Gary?'"

For 20 years now Gary has felt that his call is to lead a movement of people who oppose evil when it oppresses the poor. Evil wants to pick on people, but it usually doesn't pick on the wealthy people. It doesn't pick on powerful people. It picks on the people it can bully, and so around the world, children are forced into slavery to make little cigarettes in India and young girls are, literally, kidnapped from their villages and forced into prostitution. And in Africa, widows who have lost their husbands to AIDS are kicked off their land and everything is taken from them because they are weak and helpless. Gary saw this and said, "Where are God's people when this happens?"

The International Justice Mission, which we proudly have the privilege of being part of, was set up to make the water clean. Gary says, "The more I do this, the more I see that God wants us to oppose evil and that this work is impossible without God." People who have God's Spirit in them see what other people do not. They also see when other people just walk by, and they want to do something about it to be faithful to the King of Heaven. How about you? What do you see? Your vision will not be the same as mine. Your calling won't be to where I am called to go, but I've got to tell you, if the Holy Spirit is with you, He is showing you things and God is saying, "This breaks My heart. Does it break your heart, too?" Elisha has that happen to him in Jericho. One more sign about the Holy Spirit at work. In that first week, Elisha discovered it.

**23** From there Elisha went up to Bethel. As he was walking along the road, some boys came out of the town and jeered at him. "Get out of here, baldy!" they said. "Get out of here, baldy!" **24** He turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the LORD. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys.

That is not a very mythological statement. It's as if it really happened, as if somebody had to count the bears and count the boys. When I put together the idea that someone given the Spirit sees what others do not see, and that the Spirit brings the needs of the world to people's faces, I also started to see that people who are given the Spirit of God will face repeated opposition. That opposition comes to those who follow the path of the Spirit. This is not just a group of 42 little Sunday school kids who are singing *Jesus Loves Me*. This is part of a mob of children and adolescents who have been spurred on by adults. You see these crowds, these gangs of kids with rocks in their hands, on the streets of Syria today and in the streets of the *favelas* of Brazil, throwing rocks, turning over trucks. Little kids doing it because they have seen big brothers do it. You see this in Palestine, but sometimes you see it in riots here in the States.

Elisha turned around and saw himself being opposed by people who were saying, "Get out of here, baldy. Take your God and go away." I think opposition is easier to see in history than it is in the present. When I look at somebody listening to the voice of the Spirit, I think of Martin Luther King and the opposition he endured. I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who believed that God wanted him to do something about the evils of Nazi Germany and was opposed to his death. I think about William Wilberforce, who gave up a life of luxury and of being a friend of the prime minister of England, so he could oppose the slave trade and be mocked for it every year of his service. But while I think it is easy to see opposition to the faithful in history, it's imperative to see it here and now.

Yesterday we had kids who were in junior high sitting here, and in high school sitting here, and in college sitting over here, and I looked at them and said, "You live in two worlds, don't you? You live in the world of the church. You're here. You love your youth group. You love these stories. You believe in Jesus. You go home and you guys pray at dinner, but then you live in the world of your school where it is not cool to be Christian, where it often calls you to make decisions where people oppose you, whether that is cheating on a test or going to a party or using drugs or being involved sexually. You often have the opposition of the crowd to the way of God."

Jesus promised us that He would give us the same Spirit that Elisha had. Will it have the same effect? The effect of the Spirit on Elisha was to send him into trouble. The effect of the Spirit upon Jesus was to send Him to the cross. The effect of the Spirit on you is what? To make you a Presbyterian? I don't think so. I think Jesus is calling you to go out and let the Spirit change your life today. Let's pray together.

Lord Jesus, I thank You for this weird little story about the bears that I never understood until I broadened my eyes. I ask You that You would send Your Spirit in a fresh way to my friends who have come in here this morning on this beautiful day that they might leave believing that Your Spirit's presence means You are with us all the time. Help those who feel alone to know they are not. I believe Your Spirit helps us see what others cannot, that we are meant to live forever and that there are forces of evil and good all around us that cannot be seen. I pray for that eyesight for my friends here. God, I believe Your Spirit gives us tasks that are so big and so important that only You can finish them. We cannot throw salt into the pond and make it turn out clean, but we can see the needs You put before us and try to be faithful, and we ask You to help with them. Lord, we want to follow You but we also want people to like us. Opposition in this community does not usually mean that our houses are burned or our churches are shut or people chase us, but we need bravery to oppose the forces that would draw us and others from You. I ask that You would help us this day and do much, much more, that life and light and joy might mark the children of the Spirit. In the Name of the Father and the Son and Spirit, we pray. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*