

7. God's Word Which Finishes the Task

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[0 : 00] And so to our last in the Elijah series and to 2 Kings 2, 1-14. One of the people I admire most in almost any standard is Winston Churchill.

Whatever some of you might think, I wasn't around during the Second World War to hear his great speeches, but I've often listened to recordings of them, particularly quite recently when I visited the Churchill Museum and heard that great voice with its tremendous oratory which challenged and inspired the nation, particularly during those years and those months when he virtually fought the war with words alone when there was nothing else to fight with.

Churchill lived on for 20 years after the end of the war, dying at the age of 90 in 1965. I do remember at that time talking to people of an older generation who suddenly felt that the nation was bereft.

For many years up to that point, of course, the great man had no longer trodden the public stage, but there was this sense that an era had come to an end, this sense that the country was left defenseless.

And recently reading a book, a new book of essays on Churchill, the historian makes exactly that point, that Britain suddenly felt defenseless.

[1 : 30] And that gives us some idea of what Elisha must have felt here in verse 12. Elisha saw Elijah go to heaven, my father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen.

See what Elisha is saying here, the defense of Israel was Elisha himself. He was the chariots and the horsemen of God. So that is the beginning of our consideration today as we come to the end, as I say, of this series in Elijah.

The first thing I want you to notice is the focus, however, is not on Elijah, but on the Lord. Verse 1, when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, then in verse 14, where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?

Now throughout this series, we've looked at how Elijah was the mouthpiece of God, how he was the channel through which the word of God came. And I've called this sermon today, the word which finishes the task.

God is authenticating Elijah. Elijah is finishing the task, finishing the task that he's been given. And indeed, this is a transition to the next stage.

[2 : 45] Of course, it's not at all inappropriate to the stage in which we find ourselves. The work, Elijah goes to heaven, but the work continues. And the second thing I want to say is to repeat a point I made in the very first of this series.

We are faced here with miracle, the unexpected, the unusual. And when we're faced with miracle, people tend to go for one of two extremes. There is the extreme of rationalism.

This, says one of the commentators, is a symbolic narrative. It's not about something that actually happened. Rather, it shows you how people admired Elijah and felt that his ministry was significant beyond his own time.

Now, when you read in a commentator's symbolic narrative, you know that's academic jargon for legend. What the commentator is saying is this did not happen.

On the other hand, we've got to avoid sensationalism, fueled by singing hymns like these are the days of Elijah and expecting all kinds of sensational happenings over and over again.

[3 : 53] What is this story saying to us? The bottom line, surely, is do we believe in a living God who made heaven and earth? Because if we do, who are we to say what he can and cannot do in heaven and in earth?

As the book of Daniel says, who can stay his hand or say to him, what are you doing? He doesn't do this often. There's another example in the Old Testament.

Isn't there right at the beginning? King Enoch walked with God and God took him. And now he does this again. But it also points forward to a much greater event that's still to happen when the Lord's people are all taken into his presence.

So let's start then with the belief that this is an event that actually happened. We can't understand all the details. But nevertheless, this is whether there is a living God.

As you were here last Sunday evening, remember the story of Ahaziah centered around that. Elijah says to him, is it because there is no God in Israel? You have gone after Baal's above, the useless, ineffective God of Ekron.

[5 : 02] Now here is the living God at work. The same God that we have. The historical God who is also the God of today and of tomorrow.

Now this story centers around a journey. Or rather a threefold journey. And that's the way we're going to look at it. First of all, there is a backwards journey. In verses, really in verses 1 to 10.

That's the first thing we look at. A backward journey. Then there is an upward journey. In verse 11 to the first part of verse 12. He saw him no more.

And then there is an onward journey. Verses 12b. That's when he took hold of his own clothes. To the end of verse 14.

So these three journeys. First of all, the backward journey. Now don't misunderstand me. This is not backward in the sense that C.S. Lewis talks about in his great book, *The Pilgrim's Regress*.

[6 : 03] Of turning back from God. And instead of progressing, going in the opposite direction. Rather, this is replaying an earlier and significant journey in scripture.

It's deliberately echoing, it seems to me, the story of Moses and Joshua. And we can see this by looking at the places that Elijah and Elisha visit.

See, when Moses died in Deuteronomy 34. When Joshua becomes leader in Joshua chapter 1. The question is raised. How are we going to go on without Moses?

How are we going to make it? How are we going to manage the great leader has gone? And now a similar question is being asked about Elijah. What will happen when Elijah goes?

Great for Elijah. But what about those who are left? And notice first how Elijah makes it clear that Elisha doesn't have to follow him.

[7 : 05] Three times. In verse 2, in verse 4 and verse 6. Elijah says to Elisha, please stay here. In other words, Elisha, you've got to be utterly convinced.

This is the journey you are going to take. There's no compulsion here. There is no sense of Elijah forcing Elisha to come with him. Elisha, stay here, he says.

But these places that they visit isn't just a nostalgic ramble around places that they had visited before. Gilgal, the base of Israel's advance after crossing the Jordan.

The place where stones were set up and the place where God's power was demonstrated. That's the first thing. There is a reminder of that earlier story.

And remember one of the points about that early story and the stones that were set up was, when your children ask you, tell them about this. Tell them about the mighty acts of God in the past.

[8 : 13] Then Bethel, verse 2. They went down to Bethel. You see, we're going back to an even earlier stage in the story then, because Bethel was the place where Abraham first built an altar in Genesis 12.

This is the place where he first, as he enters the land, builds an altar and calls on the name of the Lord. Famous is the place where Jacob met God, where a ladder set up reaching from heaven to earth and the angels ascending and descending.

So you see, as they visit these places, there's a reminder of the mighty acts of God, but more so, there's a reminder of God himself. Verse 4.

Elisha, please stay here. The Lord has sent me to Jericho. Jericho, the place where Joshua met the commander of the Lord's army in Joshua chapter 5.

Joshua, standing outside Jericho, rather nervous, probably missing Moses, and he meets a man who is the commander of the Lord's army.

[9 : 22] So you see what's happening. Elisha is showing that he is going to be the true follower of Elijah as he travels this pilgrimage with him. So I say it's not a regress.

It's not just a travelogue. It's a pilgrimage. So what's going to sustain Elisha once Elijah has gone? Surely the same Lord who sustained Elijah.

And going back still further, remember what the Lord says to Joshua, As I was with Moses, so I will be with you. And that really seems to me the point of this backward journey.

And you'll notice that another connection here between Elijah and Moses. We've noticed several connections before. Elijah goes to Horeb, the mountain of God, just as Moses withstood Pharaoh, so Elijah withstands Ahab.

Verse 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, so the two of them could go over on the dry ground, like Moses at the Red Sea.

[10 : 35] But Elisha isn't simply satisfied with that. And in verse 9, when they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, What shall I ask for you before I am taken from you?

And Elisha said, Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me. It's important to realize what Elisha is saying here. He's not saying, I want to be twice as great as you, Elijah.

You had the spirit. I want to have twice as much of the spirit. Once again, he is echoing the words of Moses in Deuteronomy. The inheritance of the eldest son of the heir was a double portion of all that the father had.

And this is what Elisha is saying. Elisha is saying, Elijah, I want to be your true son in the faith. I want to be your true follower. I want to carry on the work that you've done.

Just as Paul is going to address Timothy as his true son in the faith. And notice what Elijah says. You have asked a hard thing.

[11 : 39] Of course it's hard. It's hard in all senses, isn't it? It's hard to take over from somebody outstanding like Elijah. It's always actually easier to follow somebody that's made a mess of it because then you can only go upwards.

If you follow someone who is widely perceived to have been very good, it's awfully difficult. And people always make helpful remarks like, oh, so-and-so didn't do it that way and so on.

We all know this kind of situation. Many of us will have experienced that. So it's hard. But it is also hard in the sense that the task for Elisha is going to be just as difficult as it was for Elijah.

And notice what Elijah says. If you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you. If you do not see me, it shall not be so.

And once again it's important to realize what the word see means here. It's not just if you happen to be present and observe the events when I go. It's if you actually discern the significance of these events.

[12 : 49] If you see what is happening when I'm taken from you. See, the sons of the prophets also saw something, but they didn't discern. They didn't understand the significance.

So you see how as the minister of Elijah is drawing to a close, the torch is going to be taken up by someone who is going to see, not just in the sense of observe, but in the sense of understand and carry on the work.

So the backward journey is not just a space filler, not just a travelogue. It's a deliberate playing, echoing of tunes from the earlier part of the story.

Back to the days of Moses and Joshua, back to the days of Abraham and Jacob. This is part of the big story, the true story. As we'll see, that's going to continue on beyond even Elisha's time.

So we come then to the upward journey. Verse 11, and as they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses separated the two of them.

[13 : 58] Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. Now this is a great mystery. And the Bible never explains the mechanics of miracle.

This is one of the places, if you like, where the veil between this world and the world to come is very thin. It's very important to realize the Bible never speaks about the natural world and the supernatural world.

It talks about the seen and the unseen world. They are both real. They are both concrete. They both have substance and so on.

But one world is normally hidden from us. And living the life of faith is being in touch with that world. Read Hebrews 11. Read the words about Moses.

Moses saw him who is invisible. A wonderful little detail. How did Moses continue? Because he saw him who is invisible. The same God is at work in both.

[15 : 03] The same reality is present. Now there's no difficulty at all about us seeing and observing the seen world in which we live. No difficulty about that at all. The great difficulty is being aware of the unseen world.

This is one of the places where the veil is thrown aside for a little bit. Now what's happening here? First of all, this is the authentication of Elijah's ministry.

After all, Elijah might have seemed a failure. He had not driven out Baal worship. In spite of the great contest at Carmel, in spite of the fire from heaven, we know from the incidents, we know from Nabal's vineyard and Ahaziah that we looked at last week, that Baal worship was still prevalent.

Ahab's sons, Ahaziah and Jehoram, are no improvement on their dad. Indeed, Ahaziah is worse than his father. So Elijah might look at his ministry and think, well, I have made no real impact.

There have been one or two high points. I haven't really achieved all that much. And then, of course, there's this group called the Sons of the Prophets, who are going to appear quite often throughout the Elisha stories.

[16 : 23] Some later stage, I hope we'll take up these stories of Elisha and look at how the story continues. They're not a desperately impressive lot. And my own view is that they are probably people who had come out of, from the woodwork, so to speak, inspired by Elijah's ministry, but not really standing with him in any significant extent.

See what God is saying? God is saying, this is my servant. He has done a magnificent task for me. His words have been my words. His actions have been what I told him to do.

And I'm publicly acknowledging that by taking him to heaven. Now, what's that got to do with us? We are not Elijah, of course. And I say, these are not the days of Elijah.

And we can't expect this kind of thing. But one important thing to remember is this. And 2 Peter makes this very clear. Peter talks about the apostles.

And then he talks to, if you like, the ordinary Christians and says, you have obtained a faith that is as precious as ours, if you continue in that faith, you will receive an abundant welcome into the heavenly kingdom.

[17 : 37] It's not just Elijah, if you like. All of God's children will receive that welcome. One of the Lord's children is called home to heaven.

The red carpet is rolled out. They are welcomed. It's glorious. It's wonderful. What we have here is a particularly public, particularly dramatic vindicating of a particular servant who might well feel that his ministry had been a failure.

And that's why the second thing is this is a trailer for something much bigger, isn't it? This is a glimpse of what is yet to happen. I mean, Jesus' own ministry by human standards didn't seem much of success.

Wonderful miracles. And then the cross. And the tomb. Murdered by the establishment. But then God vindicates him by raising him from the dead.

And he ascends into heaven and sends the spirit and begins that great irreversible movement that is going to culminate when he comes again.

[18 : 46] So as Elijah goes to heaven, as this wonderful story unfolds, we see a picture of something greater, something which is still future to us.

Elijah's ministry in this world is finished, but the word he spoke lives on. That's the important thing. John Wesley said, God buries his workers but carries on his work.

I think that's another lesson this story is telling us. So the backward journey reminds us of Elijah's place in the big story and Elisha's place.

The upward journey reminds us of the vindication, the authentication of his ministry, but also reminds us of our place in that story. And so we come to the final section, an onward journey.

He took hold of his own clothes, that's Elisha, and tore them in pieces. Now this continues to stay into the later part of the chapter, which I hope at some stage we'll pick up.

[19 : 47] There's far too much in the later part of the chapter with the she-bears and all the rest of it to be dealing with this morning. What we are concerned here is with the overlap between Elijah and Elisha and what we can learn from this.

And notice once again the Jordan parts, whereas verse 14, when he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.

Just as the Jordan had parted when the Ark of the Covenant was carried through it, echoing what had happened at the Red Sea. So now what's happening here is echoing both these events.

Moses, if you like, has gone to heaven. The new Joshua is carrying on. And God is showing he is not simply the God of Moses and the God of Joshua.

He is the God of Elijah and the God of Elisha. And the cloak, rather, in the way that Moses had stretched out his staff over the Red Sea.

[20 : 49] This cloak is not magic, but it is a sign that the mantle has indeed fallen on him. So Elisha is the true successor.

But the other point is this, that God is not limited to certain people and certain times. Notice verse 14.

He took the cloak of Elijah. That's the continuity part of it, isn't it? But notice what he says. He doesn't say, where's Elijah? What are we going to do without Elijah? We'll never make it.

We're in a mess. Where is the Lord? Where is Yahweh, the God of Elijah? That's the question to ask. Leaders change.

Circumstances move on. And we always must ask the question, where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? Nostalgia is delicious, but it leads nowhere.

[21 : 45] Great fun. Great fun ambling through the past in our imagination, but it leads nowhere. God, as I say, is the contemporary God.

When we rely on old customs that we are unwilling to change, when we hanker after past leaders, we're not asking the right question.

The right question is, where is the Lord, the God of those people, the God who made them what they were, allowed them to do what they did in their time? We mustn't rely on the past, however wonderful it may have been.

Nor, of course, must we rely on the latest gimmick, which is going to solve everything, because both of these are versions of the same thing, relying on ourselves, aren't they? Whether on our past selves or on our future selves.

The question is, where is the Lord? Now, that is why the message that Elijah preaches, the message that Elisha takes up, the message that's going to continue down the generations to our own time, that is at the very heart of what we do.

[22 : 57] We're about to move back into the new building, which will be a very different building, and there'll be different things which are possible now, which weren't possible in past generations.

We thank God for what was done in past generations, don't we? We thank God for his historical work. But we look to God to be continually leading us on.

Styles change, circumstances change, people change, but the Lord, the Lord of the Word, the Lord of Prayer, remains, and he will continue to lead us on into new things.

Notice this, Elisha went over. Remember, Elisha, and remember the words at the beginning of Acts, you men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing into heaven?

This same Jesus who was taken from you shall come again as you have seen him go. Elijah is not standing gazing into heaven here, because Elijah realizes there is work to be done.

[23 : 57] And Elijah has that same word which is at the heart of Elisha's ministry. This is another thing where the commentators get it so wrong. They try to build up a stern, gloomy Elijah, and a gracious and far more friendly Elisha.

Well, after all, it was Elisha, not Elijah, who sent for the Shebaers and so on. But the point is this. It's not the personality of the leader, either the past or present.

It is the Word of God, the Spirit of God, which is at the heart of Elijah's ministry, is now to be taken forward. And the message for us today surely is this.

As we look to the Father who sent his Son and gave us his Spirit, he's not going to leave us. He's not going to leave us at this transition in our own fellowship.

He's going to lead us on. But he's also going to continue leading on. He's going to continue leading his people in every generation until the work, not just in this particular place, but until the work on earth is done.

[25 : 07] Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? The Lord, the God of Elijah, is with us, calling us into the future, calling us to trust him, to believe in him, to live for him, and to be thankful to him.

Let's pray. God our Father, we are unprofitable and limited servants.

We so often fail in our aspirations, and we so often fail to obey your word and to seek your face in prayer.

And so help us now and bless us. Strengthen us as we go forward. Strengthen us as the task continues. And give to us that energy and perseverance that will enable us to be faithful in our day, knowing that however long or however short it may be until the Lord returns, that he will complete the work.

And we praise you for this. In his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.