

1. God's Powerful Word

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[0 : 00] Let's pray for a moment. Fathers, we turn now from the praising of your name to the preaching of your word. We ask that that gracious Holy Spirit, whom we have asked to clear our hearts and minds, to give to us fresh vision and to remove the vagueness that impedes us, we ask that he who inspired the scriptures will now shed a flood of light upon them and will lead us to the living Christ, the Lord of whom the scripture speaks and points to so faithfully and so fully.

We ask this in his name. Amen. Now if we could have our Bibles open please at page 301, that's 1 Kings 19, and then we'll also be looking at page 308, 2 Kings 2.

John Wesley said, God buries his workers but carries on his work. That's really our starting point today.

Elijah, of course, is not buried, strictly speaking. He's taken to heaven, his work completed, and God honouring him for that work he had done. But the point of this sermon, and indeed the point of this series, is that God carries on his work.

Whatever changes may be of personnel, whatever the circumstances may be, in times of triumph and of disaster, God is working his purpose out.

[1 : 31] God is carrying on his work. And God sends his word through his servants as the main means by which he does it. So this particular part today I'm calling God's Powerful Word.

That's what these passages we read is about. God carries on his powerful work. God carries on his powerful word. And just a couple of things to fit these passages into context.

In chapter 19 of 1 Kings, and in chapter 2 of 2 Kings, it's a time of transition. God is already calling the new prophet Elisha.

He's already lined up. God's never taken by surprise. God never has to react to a situation and say, Oh goodness, I don't have anyone to cope with this. God always is lining up his people to carry on his work.

But as we saw when we looked at Elijah, there is still work for Elijah to do. And the two of them carry on together for some time. We don't know exactly how long it would be.

[2 : 36] But in these next chapters, that's what's happening. Now, we are not Elijah. And we are not Elisha. But we are called to the same work.

We are given the same word. And we can see the same power of God in that word to change, to save, and to judge. That's the first thing.

And the second thing is this. Coming now directly to verse 15 of chapter 1 Kings 19. Many commentators, and I've said this already, take great pleasure in doing Elijah down.

It's almost as if they're embarrassed by his dynamism, by his total commitment, by his uncompromising words. And basically they say in verses 15 to 17, Elijah is ordered to do certain things, none of which he does, or rather only one he does, which is the calling of Elijah.

But that's totally to misunderstand the flow of this story. These stories are not primarily about Elijah and Elisha. These are stories about God and about his words.

[3 : 49] And the important thing is that these things Elijah is commended to do, these are actually carried out by the word of God. Whether it comes through Elijah or Elisha or someone else, in many ways, is irrelevant.

It's not primarily about people. It's primarily about God. It is about the powerful word of God. And these incidents we read tell us three things about that word.

In the gracious providence of the Holy Spirit, what these passages say seems to me to be particularly relevant to the situation we find ourselves in this morning, situation Willie's already outlined to us.

First thing is, in chapter 19, the word of God is more powerful than any establishment. More powerful than any worldly power.

Higher than any earthly court. Because these verses are telling us what Elisha's ministry is going to be about. Now, from 2 Kings 2 to 2 Kings 13, Elisha is there, sometimes in the foreground, sometimes in the background.

[5 : 02] And one of the things the commentators say is there's no system, there's no plan for the Elisha stories. Once again, that's misunderstanding the nature of Elisha's ministry. He is there, at the center of the life of the nation, having a powerful impact on its kings, on its rulers, on its policies, sometimes in the foreground, but more often in the background.

And carrying on, not so much the work of Elijah, but the work of Elijah's God. The word is more powerful than worldly power. First of all, Elijah is told to anoint kings.

When you arrive, verse 15, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria, and Jeshu, the son of Nimshi, you shall anoint to be king over Israel.

Now, anointing is a symbolic action. Back in 1 Samuel 16, the prophet Samuel anoints David as the king. And it's a sign that God has called to a particular task of leadership here.

We know that God is behind the rise and fall of nations. So God is not saying to Elijah, you've got to go to the Syrian capital, and there you have to anoint the king.

[6 : 16] What God is saying is that it is his word by which kings will come to power, and by which they will fall. And then in 2 Kings 8 and 9, which we'll touch on later on in the summer, we have Jehu being anointed as well.

Jehu was the king, the warlord, who came to power and destroyed the idolatrous house of Ahab. Now, he is anointed by another prophet at Elisha's order.

And the point of all this is that it is God who is behind every decision that's made. The text which greatly comforted me over these last two days is the text in Proverbs 16, verse 16.

The lot falls where it will, but every decision is in the hand of the Lord. There is a higher power at work, higher than votes, higher than majorities.

The lot is every decision is in the hands of the Lord. This is what Daniel says in chapter 2. The Lord changes times and seasons. He removes kings and he sets up kings.

[7 : 25] The gospel word, in other words, outlasts any human words, including those words that were spoken at the General Assembly, including those decisions that were made, and including all the stuff that's been in the media over the last few weeks.

So, the word is more powerful than the establishment, shown first of all in the anointing of the king, but then even more so in verses 19 to 21, in the anointing of the prophet.

So, Elijah departed from there, that's verse 19, and found Elisha, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelve. The important thing here is the passing on of the word through the generations.

Remember what Paul says to Timothy, teach this to faithful men who will teach others also. That's what the Fellowship of Confessing Churches is about, teaching faithful ones who will teach others also.

Making sure that those who are trained to stand in the pulpits, those who lead house groups, those who lead studies of all kinds, those who do one-to-ones, are totally trained and totally ready to preach this living word passing on through the generations.

[8 : 41] Now, there are various hints that Elisha comes from a wealthy background. Twelve yoke of oxen is a very, very considerable amount of oxen. Elisha comes from what we would call the top drawer.

This was no easy decision to make. And later on, in the well-known story of Naaman, which we'll look at later in the summer, he obviously is living in a house in some kind of luxury, I suppose, in Samaria.

God calls people from all walks of life and from all circumstances. And so it is a break with all this. Now, we mustn't actually try to, once again, the commentators, having had their go at Elijah, feel they've got to have it at Elisha just now.

And they talk, I think, wrongly about that incident in Luke 9, where Jesus says, let the dead bury their dead and come follow me. The point is that Elisha is not trying to evade following the call.

He simply wants to honour his parents by making a decent break with his old life. You see, Israel's faith, Israel's faith, sorry, in human terms here, hangs on Elisha's response.

[9 : 58] We've got to remember that. I've said already, I've said several times, that it is the Word of God rather than the individuals who are important. That doesn't mean that what individuals do doesn't matter at all.

And had Elisha not responded to this call, then things would have gone very differently. God is always asking us for decisions. God is always asking us, as we'll be singing at the end of the service, who is on the Lord's side?

That's what's being asked here. So that's the first thing then. This Word comes, this Word is more powerful than the establishment. Kings may decree, bodies may decree, councils may decree, but the Word of our God stands forever.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but the words of the Lord will not pass away. Now the second thing, and this comes over to 2 Kings chapter 2 now, this Word comes in the power of the Spirit. This is this incident, chapter 2 verse 11. Back in verse 9 first of all, Elisha said, please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me.

[11 : 10] And Elisha is being authenticated as Elijah's true successor. Now when Elisha says, a double portion of your spirit, he doesn't mean Elijah's own human spirit.

He means the Spirit of God who had energized Elijah and had spoken in his words. When he says a double portion, he's not saying, I want twice the Holy Spirit that you had, Elijah.

This is echoing the passage in Deuteronomy which says that the eldest son is entitled to a double portion of his father's inheritance. In other words, he is being authenticated as the true successor. Now, first of all, notice the symbolic action of the mantle. Verse 13, he took up the cloak of Elijah. Now this is not magic.

This is deliberately placing himself in the, if you like, in the great tradition of those who had brought the Word of God under the Spirit of God. This is deliberate echoing of the crossing of the Red Sea and of the crossing of the Jordan.

[12 : 21] There are many connections between Elijah and Moses. There are many connections between Elisha and Joshua. What's being replayed here for this later age is the same power that brought God's people out of Egypt and then led them into the promised land.

In other words, he's not just Elijah's successor, he is Moses' successor. No one in the Old Testament has greater authority than Moses.

There is no authority in the Old Testament that bypasses or supersedes that of Moses. The words of Moses are the words of God. And so here, it is the power of the Holy Spirit himself to remove barriers.

This is in a much later generation. The Lord says to Zechariah, not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts.

Not by might, not whether you win the majority, nor by power if you sit in the seats of influence, but by my spirit. You see what I mean when I say we are not Elijah, we are not Elisha, but we are inheritors of that same gospel.

[13 : 32] We've been given that same word and that same spirit. It is not the mantle, in other words, it's the living God. It's not methods, but the living spirit. And notice as well the question that Elisha asks, verse 14.

He doesn't say, where is Elijah? But where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? This saves us from any dependence on gurus.

Because it is not people, it is the living God. It is the living God who divides the waters. It is the living God who removes mountains. But it is the word of God itself which has that power.

The word of God is not something which the power of God accompanies. The word of God is the power of God because it is the word of the living spirit of God.

Why is it that we got to the situation we got to yesterday evening? As has been said by many people, the tragedy is not that we lost the boat, but that we were discussing it at all.

[14 : 43] That we had come to that situation. Only a wholesale departure from confidence in the word of God, a wholesale abandoning of the preaching of the word of God, a wholesale relying on worldly methods and on other things brought us to that situation we were in.

How are we going to get out of it? We're only going to get out of it by that word that comes in the power of the spirit. Not by might nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts.

And when he had struck the water, verse 14, the water was parted to the one side and to the other and Elisha went over. A new exodus almost, if you like.

And this exodus theme plays right away through the scriptures. This salvation itself is the exodus. When Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus on the holy mountain, they spoke of his exodus. That's the word which he would carry out in Jerusalem. So that word, we need not tremble at the establishment and their dictates because this word is more powerful and will overturn them. [15:54] We need not look to increasing our influence in the courts and in the councils, but rather to depend on that word that comes in the power of the spirit.

And thirdly, in these verses, 19 to 25, this is a word of salvation and of judgment. How do we recognize this authentic word?

And this authentic word always has two elements. And these incidents with which Elijah begins his public ministry illustrates the twin nature. He brings a word of salvation and he brings a word of judgment.

And it's interesting the places where both these words come to. First of all, verses 19 to 22. The men of the city, that's Jericho, says to Elisha, Behold, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my Lord sees, but the water is bad and the land is unfruitful.

In other words, we have life where there is a curse. Jericho was under the curse of God. Joshua had pronounced it to be under a curse.

[17:08] At the beginning of the reign of Ahab and his godlessness, Jericho was rebuilt and that curse was carried out by the loss of the builder's family.

It was defiantly rebuilt with Ahab's connivance. But, just as long before, Jericho had been visited by grace. Remember, Rahab, who found grace, who found favor in the midst of this godless city. So, once again, salvation comes to this city that's under a curse. Now, we don't need to get too tied up with the details.

I said when we were speaking about Elijah, that there are two mistakes you can make with miracles. One is to sensationalize them and say, why are we having miracles every day? The other is to rationalize them and simply say they are a primitive way of explaining things people didn't understand.

But I think we can probably say the new bowl probably represents a new start, purity, and the salt represents preservative.

[18:15] The point is, though, whether that's true or not, God's grace visits a place that is totally graceless. The vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

That's the gospel, isn't it? The gospel that takes the last, the least, the lowest, the cursed, the outcast, and turns them into children of God. It is a word of salvation.

We have a gospel which is totally generous, totally, totally all-embracing in its scope. No one is excluded. No one is too vile or too low or too far gone.

But the second incident, which is never proved to be a universally popular story and seen as one of those Old Testament nasties, as Ralph Davis calls them, judgment comes to the idolatrous city. He went out from there to Bethel. Now Bethel in scripture first of all occurs in Genesis and it's the place where Jacob meets God.

[19:26] Jacob, running away, meets the living God and so it becomes a place of a genuine encounter with the living God who made heaven and earth. But if you read back in 1 Kings 13, Bethel becomes a city of idols.

Jeroboam, the first king of the northern kingdom of Israel, sets up golden calves in Bethel. When you read the prophet Amos later on, you find that Bethel is seen as one of the shrines of idolatry. And it is there that judgment comes. And what about, let's turn now to the boys and the she-bears. Some youths, small boys, is so misleading and instantly colors your mind to see this in the wrong way. Came out of the city and jeered at him.

Now, the details are important. They deliberately sought out Elisha to mock him. It wasn't just he happened to be passing and one or two small boys made a silly joke and the grumpy man overreacted.

[20:37] These are youths. These are not small boys. These are the kind of people who hang around city centres mugging people and breaking into cars and so on. This is the kind of situation we have here.

Go up. I think this is, there is something deeper here than just simply an insult. This is the word that is used about Elijah going up to heaven.

This is blasphemous. No old guy has gone off to heaven. You're just as well to go after him because you're pretty useless here. You see the contempt, the ridicule. And that is what true gospel life often evokes. If you have read this coverage in the media the last few days you will find that. Those who hold the view that prevailed yesterday evening are called moderates.

Those who hold the gospel view are called bigots. There is no fairness. No true reporting there. Simply tendentious language that is meant to influence people in a particular way.

[21 : 48] What about the she bears? Well, first of all it wasn't Elijah who sent the bears. It was the Lord. Elisha is obvious being vindicated by the Lord.

As Ralph Davis says, here we do not have an irritable prophet, we have a judging God. Now, this message of salvation and judgment which is at the very heart of the Elisha stories, this is the message that badly needs to be heard today.

We heard much yesterday evening about the message of salvation, the message of affirmation, the message of inclusiveness. How do we recognise that is not biblical?

We recognise that's not biblical because there is no message of judgment. Jesus, take me as I am. I can come no other way. That's true.

I can come no other way. But I don't come in order to have my sins affirmed, in order to have my weaknesses glossed over. I come to Jesus to be changed, that the sin in me may be judged now, so that it will not be judged then.

[23 : 08] That is the point. It is either judgment now or judgment then, isn't it? So, what a false prophet and a false teacher will never do is tell people they need to change.

And here is the message of salvation and judgment, the radical message to the vilest offender who truly believes, the message of judgment to the proud, to those who set themselves above the word of God.

See, how do I know about the love of God? It's the same Bible which tells me about the judgment of God. When Jesus loves me, this I know.

But how do I know it? Because the Bible tells me so. And if it's wrong on one, how do I know that it's right on the other? Now, Elisha is called here at a defining moment in the history of Israel.

He's given a living word. We're probably at another such defining moment in the history of our church. church. And as his mentor Elijah said, we are once again faced with the issue, aren't we?

[24 : 28] If the Lord is God, follow him. But if Baal is God, then follow him. Amen. Let's pray.

Amen. God, our Father, as we listen again to the gospel word, as it pierces to the very dividing of joints and marrow, as it exposes our innermost secrets, comes with that power to cleanse and heal and minister its grace.

And yet that judgment that will come if that grace is rejected. We pray you'll have mercy on us. We pray that you will strengthen us in the ministry of the gospel and in our walk with God.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.