

11. God is Faithful

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[0 : 00] He's at page 319 and we'll have a moment of prayer. God our Father, as we come once again to your living and holy word, we so much need the help of your Spirit.

He himself, the living author, wakes to life the sacred word, reads with us its holy pages, and reveals the living Lord. And that is what we ask this evening.

Lead us to Christ Jesus, the living word himself, in whose name we pray. Amen. On June the 8th, 1924, two mountaineers, George Mallory and Andrew Irvin, left their base camp well up the slopes of Everest and headed towards the summit.

They were only a few minutes within sight when a blizzard hid them from the eyes of their companions, and they were never seen again. But one of those who was there, a man called Noel O'Dell, said this, When they were last seen, they were going strongly for the top.

When they were last seen, they were going strongly for the top. Wouldn't that be a wonderful epitaph to have for each of us at the end of our Christian lives? When last seen, going strongly for the top.

[1 : 30] And that, I think, applies to the prophet Elisha here. He is near the end of his story, and yet he is going strongly for the top. Some 50 years, perhaps even 60 years, have passed since the young man had been called from following the plough to following the Lord.

And the end has now come. Now, I call this series, Elisha, God Carries On His Work. When Elijah is taken to heaven, the work continues, the ministry goes on, the preaching doesn't come to an end, because this new prophet is carrying it on.

But as we'll see, when Elisha also comes to his end, the work still carries on. And the work still carries on, because God is faithful.

This is our title for tonight, God is Faithful. Now, I want you to look at the passage and see the art of the writer. When you read this passage casually and hastily, you might well think the author had got mixed up.

After all, we have the reign of Jehoahaz, verses 1 to 9. Then we have a summary of the reign of Joash in verses 10 to 13. He sleeps with his fathers, and Jeroboam sits on his throne.

[2 : 47] And then suddenly we find in verse 14 that Jehoash is still alive, and Elisha is coming to see him. And then in verses 24 and 25, Jehoash is not only still alive, but he's acting in a militarily effective way against Syria.

You see, the point is this. The meat of this passage lies in verses 10 to 21. And concerns neither Jehoahaz, nor Joash, nor the king of Syria, but it concerns the prophet Elisha.

And what we've got here in verses 10 to 13 is a short summary of Joash's reign. Almost as if the author is saying, look, this guy, he lived, he died. There wasn't really much to him.

But here is the important thing that's happening. Elisha the prophet is still active. And the reign of both his father Jehoahaz and Joash himself is marked by two things.

Some military success. They are quite effective. After all, they were the son and grandson of Jehu, that powerful and terrifying warlord. But there is the continuing sin of idolatry.

[3 : 59] And we'll come back to that. Yahweh, God of Israel, is just one of the gods. A godlet. Along with Baal and Asherah and so on. So that's the situation then.

It is the end of an era. But the important thing is this. It's the ministry of Elisha, but even more important, the faithfulness of God.

I want to talk about three ways in which this story shows us that God is faithful. First of all, God is faithful when humans are faithless.

That's the first thing. Because, as I've already said, the continuing failure of the kings, both Jehoahaz and Jehoash, is to get rid of idolatry.

Verse 2. Jehoaz did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and followed the sins of Jeroboam, the son of Nebet, which made Israel to sin. He did not depart from them.

[5 : 00] Now, remember, Jehu, his father, had got rid of pagan idolatry. He had got rid of the idolatrous house of Ahab, the raw paganism that was rampant in Israel.

But that raw paganism had not been replaced by a godly faith in the Lord. It had been replaced by a pick-and-mix supermarket of religions. Yahweh God of Israel.

Oh yes, worship him if you want. But don't get too excited. Don't get too exclusive. Don't be fundamentalist. Don't say there is only one way to salvation.

Don't be bigoted. It's very bigoted to say that, isn't it? That's what we hear nowadays, isn't it? I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.

Do you see the wriggles with which modern scholars try to get out of that? I've heard people saying, well, that means no one can come to God as Father except by Jesus. We come to God in other ways. In other words, the plain meaning of the text is simply ignored.

[5 : 59] This is not an old problem of ancient history. This is a problem of today. And then again in verse 6. Nevertheless, they did not depart from the sins of the house of Jeroboam, but walked in them.

And the Asherah also remained in Samaria. We met the Asherah long ago in the beginning of Elijah's ministry. This was the fertility goddess, a kind of sacred pole.

A worship, essentially, of sex and self-indulgence. And that's flourishing in Jehoahaz and in Joash's Israel. You'll notice it's negative.

Verse 9. They did not depart. But also it's positive. They walked in them. And you see, that is the problem. If people don't get rid of idolatry, they're soon going to become practicing idolaters.

That is the point. He, in contrast, what's said about the Thessalonians, they turned to God from idols. The initial conversion, if you like.

[7 : 03] They didn't stop there. To serve the living and the true God and to wait for his Son from heaven. So you see how the story continues through Scripture. It continues right up to our own day.

The words that long ago spoken by Elisha's master Elijah, if Yahweh is God, follow him. If Baal is God, then follow him.

You can't have both. You can have the one or you can have the other. But you can't have both. But as human beings, we love to have both, don't we? We want to have both. And that is the root of our problems in the church today, isn't it?

We want to have Yahweh and we want to have Baal. We want to obey the Scriptures, but we also want to obey the dictates of our own passions. And yet in spite of this, they say God is faithful when humans are faithless.

Notice that back in verse 4, the Lord listened to him for he saw the oppression of Israel and the Lord gave Israel a saviour. Now the identity of that saviour is never given to us.

[8 : 10] Because it may actually be, and this is a curious thing, but some scholars believe this may actually be the king of Assyria himself, who at this time is causing trouble on the northern borders of Syria and taking Syria's attention away from Jerusalem.

But in verse 17, we're left in no doubt who the ultimate saviour is. Verse 17, Elisha said, shoot, and he shot, and he said, the Lord's arrow of victory.

The ultimate saviour is the Lord. But, God's faith and the people's faithfulness, there's one together, don't they?

God is faithful, but the kings are faithless. There's also the half-heartedness of Jehoash's obedience. And this gets us now into the story itself, beginning in verse 14.

Jehoash is, or Joash, goes to Elisha as he's lying ill. And Elisha is faithful in death as he's been in life. And there are deliberate parallels being drawn here between the going of Elisha and the going of Elijah.

[9 : 25] Look at verse 14. Joash, my father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen, the very words that Elisha himself had spoken all those years before when Elisha was taken from him into heaven.

And the point surely is this, that the king realizes that the prophet has far greater protection against Syria or against any other enemy than all the chariots and horses.

Well, you've been here the last few weeks. Remember that incident back in chapter 6, where the prophet opens the young man's eyes. The armies of Syria are still there, but there's a greater

reality, the chariots and horsemen of God.

So you see, we have the armies of God. Now, it's very important not to misunderstand this story. This is not magic. What's happening here is not a trick.

It's not a conjuring trick. It's an acted parable. Prophets often do this. Read the book of Ezekiel, for example, particularly. Ezekiel is often asked by the Lord to dramatize something.

[10:33] For example, to build a model of the city of Jerusalem and set siege to it to show that this was what the Lord was going to do. Way back in the earlier days, Moses had stretched his rod out over the Red Sea.

It wasn't the rod that parted the Red Sea. It was the Lord. But Moses stretching out his rod was a sign of faith on the part of Moses and a demonstration to the people that God was able to do this. And he says, shoot the arrow, then strike the ground, probably shoot it again, and the arrow striking on the ground. Now, I want you to notice the careful detail here.

In these Old Testament stories, what we've been trying to do all the way through is to get the broad sweep of the story, see how it fits into the big picture. We also looked at the details. I want you to look at verse 18.

Elisha said, take the arrows, and he took them. Elisha said to the king of Israel, strike the ground with them, and he struck three times, and he stopped. Now, you see the point that's being made there.

[11:36] This is not just mere padding. He struck the ground, that was a deliberate action, and then he stopped another deliberate action. You can almost sense the scene, can't you?

Jehoash, a worldly, cynical man, with no great love for the Torah, or for the God of Israel. So, I think the old man's a bit past it, but I better humor him.

So, he goes through what he sees as a shirad. He strikes the ground three times, but fails to strike the ground with every arrow he had.

You see the point that's being made. Elisha said, you should have struck down Syria, you should have struck five or six times. Almost certainly, the quiver of arrows would contain something like six arrows.

Elisha is saying, you should have struck the ground with every arrow you have. See what Jehoash wants to do. He wants to contain God rather than to trust him. This isn't an old story, is it?

[12:36] That's exactly what we do, isn't it, as well. We say, my help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. We don't really believe it, do we? When we run up against the difficulty, we can't see any solution to.

We forget that the Lord made heaven and earth. We forget that because we can't see the answer, the problem, he can't see it. Let me put it this way. It's just as easy for God to give us a million pounds as to give us 50 pounds.

Now, don't misunderstand me. I've not gone daft. I'm not saying, if we feel we should have a million pounds, or that God should give me a villa in the Caribbean, I've got to ask for it, and that will happen.

That's not what I'm saying at all. What I am saying is this, that when we come to God, there are no limits to his power. If the Lord sees we need a million pounds, really need it, for his glory, and for his kingdom, then he's capable of giving it, just as he's capable of giving 50 pounds.

Poet Cooper said, You are coming to a king. Large petitions with you bring. Since his grace and power are such, none can ever ask too much.

[13:47] We don't ask too much, do we? We ask, I certainly ask far too little. I don't know if you're like me, but so often I come against the difficulty. I pray about it, nothing happens, and then I begin to panic, because none of the solutions I propose to the Lord does he seem disposed to take.

You know, sometimes the praise of him, Lord, I've got this problem, and if I were you, I would handle it in this way. Rather like Emperor Frederick of Prussia, who once said, Had I been present at the creation of the world, I'd have given some very useful advice.

And so often our prayers are that. We limit God. We strike the ground three times. We don't trust God for everything. You are coming to a king.

Large petitions with you bring. So, God is faithful when his people are not faithful. But secondly, God is faithful to his faithful servant. This is the end of an era.

But, as I quoted Wesley when we were looking at Elijah's home call, Wesley said, God buries his workers and carries on his work.

[14:59] This is what's happening here, as we'll see in a moment. As we've seen, there are clear parallels between Elisha's death and the taking of Elijah to heaven. We've already noticed the chariots and horses.

But let's look now at verses 20 to 21. This little incident which causes the commentators so much trouble. And it's very easy to ridicule. Elisha dies, body is buried, and they throw a guy into the grave, and he suddenly leaps up.

And people say, oh, we can't possibly believe this. Never happens anywhere else. I would have thought that was a sign of authenticity. If this kind of incident happened on every page of the Bible, we might well feel it was over-gilding the lily or over-egging the pudding, so to speak.

But I want you to notice, first of all, the sign of authenticity here. What was this guy's name? We don't know, do we? Of course we don't.

What has so much of Elisha's ministry been concerned with? He's been concerned with nameless, humble people. The story of Elisha tells you don't have to be a superstar to experience the grace of God.

[16:09] You don't have to be somebody with a big name in the lights in order to experience this. This is a piece with Elisha's story. And of course, this rounds off the story.

We know nothing about this guy. You see, if the author had been wanting to make a sensation of this, this guy would have done a lecture to her, wouldn't he? He would have told this story. I was thrown into Elisha's grave.

Look, I jumped up. And look, I'm well. Do you know what happened to Jairus' daughter after she was raised from the dead? Or what happened to the son of the widow of Nain, who was also raised from the dead?

Or indeed, what happened to Lazarus? He's mentioned briefly again, he's only mentioned us sitting at table with Jesus. You see the point I'm making? The point surely is that God's grace comes into this situation of death.

After all, this is the God who made heaven and earth. This is the God who raises the dead. And there is an incident, a curious little incident, in Matthew chapter 27.

[17:15] Matthew is the only gospel that mentions this. Look it up later. Matthew 27, 51 to 53. When Jesus dies, the curtain of the temple is torn from top to bottom, showing the way into God's presence is open.

But also, it says some of the tombs were opened. And after Jesus had risen from the dead, some of the saints came out. We don't know what happened to them afterwards. This is a little glimpse, isn't it, into the power of the world to come.

This is the God who raises the dead. We're not told anything about it, as Tennyson says in his poem on the raising of Lazarus.

Behold, a man raised up by Christ, the rest remaineth unrevealed. Well, this is true here. Because this man, make no mistake, was not a man raised up because of the magical qualities of the bones of Elijah.

This is a man raised up because of the power of the living God. Now, and one other thing about this little episode, though, this story is true, but it also points beyond itself.

[18:20] Bible stories are not just true in themselves, but they're a mirror, a window into a greater reality. The people who first read this story would be people in exile.

After all, if you read to the end of the second book of Kings, it's the middle of the exile. And they would see, they would read a story like this, remind them, in the death and in the darkness of exile, that their God could raise the dead.

Now, you see the importance of that. I'm not, you see, some commentators say the story isn't true, it's just a parable to point to that. I don't actually find the idea of fiction very helpful here.

What's the point to say, oh, I know guys, you're in a mess, but I've got a fictitious tale that will help you. It's not going to happen in your day, of course, but it will help you, it will inspire you.

The only reason a tale like this can be helpful is if it actually happened. God can raise the dead.

And surely, the main message is that the life-giving word did not die with Elijah.

[19:25] The ministry continues even more powerfully. And so often this happens. I'm sure there is nobody here, at least if there is, it's not my fault, who has not heard of C.S. Lewis.

No. When C.S. Lewis died on November the 22nd, 1963, the event was scarcely noticed.

This was the same day, incidentally, that President Kennedy was assassinated, and that, of course, took the whole airway attention. And I know, of course, publicity wasn't then what it is now. When his funeral took place a few days later, a mere 12 or 13 people attended.

And think of his enormous influence now, over 40 years later. And, of course, today with technology, living voices of those who are now in glory can still be heard and still inspire.

We're not reliant on technology, are we? It's not just the fact that we can listen to, with great profit and great benefit and great help, the voices of those who are no longer with us.

[20 : 35] It's the fact that what they preached, how they lived, has been built into changed hearts and lives that will last into eternity. See, in many ways, Elisha appeared to die of failure.

After all, if the Asherah pole is still standing in Samaria, if the kings are still unbelieving, what's his ministry of failure? Of course not, says the Lord. It's still life-giving.

No Christian's life, no Christian ministry can ever be finally assessed on earth. As William Still used to say, the prize-giving is upstairs.

And this is an example of it here. God is faithful to his faithless people. God is faithful to his faithful servant. But above all, in this curious verse 23, God is faithful to his covenant.

Now this is an unexpected verse, the Lord was gracious to them because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And until now, obviously these words, when they were first written, were written before the exile.

[21 : 43] Now nevertheless, the point is that grace is still available because of the covenant. You see, the prophets never accepted the division of the kingdom.

They never accepted the kingdom split into north and south. They regard them as one people of God. If you look at Ezekiel 37, the first part is reasonably well known, the Valley of Dry Bones.

It's usually taken out of context. But go on to read the second part of that chapter and find what that's really about. The Lord says to Ezekiel, take two twigs and join them together.

These two twigs are my people, Judah and Israel. They will be joined, and David my servant will be their prince forever. In other words, there is a future because of the covenant.

Because God is faithful. So God is faithful to his covenant. And that means two things. First of all, there is a further call for repentance.

[22 : 44] Now, the dates are quite difficult here, but the prophetic word is not about to be silenced. In a few years' time, Amos and Hosea are going to be active in the northern kingdom, bringing their message of repentance.

Perhaps the prophet Joel is already active. We don't know his dates, but he may well already have been active. And when the northern kingdoms fall, the great southern prophets, Isaiah and Micah, are active.

Then we go on to the exilic prophets just before the exile, Jeremiah, Nahum, and Habakkuk, and Obadiah. And then through the exile, Daniel and Ezekiel, and beyond that, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

God buries his workers, but carries on his work. The prophetic voice is not going to be silenced.

And indeed, when the prophetic word falls silent at the end of Malachi, and Edward pointed this out a few weeks ago, the point is they still have the word of Moses, the great Old Testament word, until the Baptist stands on the banks of Jordan and says, he's come.

He is here. The Messiah has come. So there's further calls for repentance. But there is also the reassurance that the kingdom will come. Elisha's ministry began with Elijah removed.

[24 : 11] Elijah himself is now removed. When Elijah is taken to heaven, as Enoch was taken to heaven, it shows that death reigns, but its reign is not absolute.

Only twice. Only two people in the whole of the Old Testament period, Enoch and Elijah. But two is surely enough to show that the reign of death is not absolute.

And the raising of this man, this unknown man, also makes exactly the same point. Elisha's ministry is carrying on. And so the work on earth goes on.

And that's the point, it seems to me, of these verses 24 and 25. They seem a terrible anticlimax, a little piece of historical antiquarian information.

But surely the point is being made that Elisha's last words about the destruction of Syria three times, these are being fulfilled. And of course, if these are going to be fulfilled, as all his words have been fulfilled, then we can surely have confidence that the work will carry on.

[25 : 18] Victory over death will come in a fuller and eternal way. And it's a message to us, isn't it, as we come to the end of this study. The work on earth will continue until the kingdom comes.

Let me finish some words from C.H. Spurgeon. Spurgeon says this, the gospel will succeed. The gospel must succeed.

It cannot be prevented from succeeding. And these words have a foreshadowing in this apparently obscure little chapter in the Old Testament.

That's why we're going to sing in a moment or two that, thank God that the work on earth will be done. Amen. Let's pray. Father, how we praise you for your prophet Elisha, for the fact that though he is dead, he still speaks.

That he is part of the great cloud of witnesses, the ones who have ran the race before us and who encourage us in that race to look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

[26 : 29] And so help us, Father, to be faithful in our day and to continue to pass on that message until the Lord returns. Amen.