

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

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ELISHA SUCCEEDS ELIJAH

Reading: 2 Kings 2:1-15

Today we are to see the end of the life of the prophet Elijah. He was a very faithful man and did God's work faithfully and well. The life of a prophet was a lonely one. Very often he was the lone voice amongst an evil nation, often mocked or persecuted because of the message he had to bring to the people. However God is always aware of the needs of his workers and Elijah was joined by Elisha as his servant and help. Open your Bible is to 1 Kings 19:19-21. If you get mixed up with the two names just remember J comes before S and that Elijah comes before Elisha. The two men worked together for seven years, Elisha became servant to Elijah say he was a disciple (this just means learner) learning of God to love serve and obey him.

This is the background to our lesson before us. Turn your Bibles back now to the reading before us today, 2 Kings 2:1 tells us that Elijah was told by God that his work was finished and he was to be taken away. Elijah had one thing which he wanted to do before he was taken away, he wanted to give a final message of instruction and help to those he had gathered around him. For that purpose he decided to visit Bethel and Jericho and then go over Jordan. He told Elisha to remain at Gilgal because he knew the whole thing would be painful for them both but he where she refused to do so, he wanted to be with his Lord to the end.

We read that as they walked together for the last time from Gilgal to the mountainous parts of central Palestine to the heights of Bethel they found a group of the sons of the prophets, or disciples of prophets as the original Hebrew indicates. These were groups of Israelites who studied and worshipped together and tried to get others to do likewise. They were a very valuable group within the nation particularly in evil times they kept wickedness in check through their teaching and influence. These people seem to know that Elijah was about to be taken away, it would be that he had told them himself.

As they moved on before them the River Jordan was an impassable barrier but it was no obstacle to Elijah, he just took off his mantle wrapped it together and struck the water with it, the water began to swirl like a whirlpool and then suddenly divided. A path spread before the two men where the river had been, across they went to witness the last dramatic event of Elijah's life.

On the other side Elijah asked Elisha what he could do for him before he was taken away. The answer was strange, Elijah asked for a "double portion of the spirit" (or God's power) to be given him. Do you think that Elijah was asking for twice as much power as Elijah had? No, in fact he was asking to be counted as the firstborn. Do you remember what the rights and privileges of the firstborn were? (Deuteronomy 21) why do you think Elijah said it was a hard thing to ask? It was because this was something God himself alone could give and it was beyond Elijah's power to grant it. However he said that if Elijah was with him when he was taken away, this would be granted him.

He was teaching Elijah that his eyes must be firmly fixed on the things Elijah stood for if he were to successfully follow his footsteps. Suddenly as they were talking their attention was drawn to a remarkable sight. They could see a whirlwind of fire driving towards them at tremendous speed, it

parted them then they saw as it were a chariot of fire drawn by speeding horses and Elijah was drawn up by a power into the sky above until it disappeared out of the sight of the watching Elisha. It was a great symbolic picture and he knew what it meant. The angels in heaven Palace chariots of Fire driven by God or used by God as his vehicles or messengers. These angels were used for the defence of Israel they were then seen to mortal eyes. God had also used Elijah in his work to help Israel, so startled by all that he had seen Elijah called out, my father and my father a chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof.

Elisha was gone and the sad lonely figure of Elisha turned to retrace the steps he had come. Elisha picked up the mantle which Elijah had dropped; he tore his own garment in two pieces and took the mantle of Elijah as his own as a symbol of him taking on the work for Israel. The flowing river was before him, did the spirit of Elijah truly rest upon him? He took Elijah's mantle, folded it as the prophet had done then smote the water of the river but nothing happened. Elisha cried out "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?" This was like a prayer and he was asking God to show His power, again he smote the waters and this time they parted as before. Elisha was taught that there is nothing miraculous in the mantle of Elijah, but the power was of God. In 2:14 the word *also* should read *again*, and this is how we know he struck the water twice.

Before we move on, go back to v11 where Elijah is taken by the whirlwind into "heaven". Where did Elijah really go and why did he depart in such a dramatic way? Well we know it was not where God dwells because we are told "no man hath ascended into heaven" John 3:13. The heaven means "that which is aloft" in other words Elijah was caught away in the air and taken to another place where his life would be ended.

There are several reasons why God did this. Firstly like Moses, Elijah had no tomb for the people to be tempted to worship. Secondly he was taken away in a dramatic way to show that his life of harsh fiery ministry was finished and his work had to be taken over by Elisha a man who was quiet and gentle and whom God was to use to give the word of instruction to His people. One more very important reason... In the prophets there is much told us about the work of Elijah when Jesus returns. He will appear to the Jewish people and tell them that Jesus is their Messiah and has returned to the earth to set up that glorious kingdom. He will bring the people back to their own land and continue to educate them in the reading and understanding of God's ways... this is why we do not see or know of his end. In God's eyes his work is to continue.

In the last few minutes let us look at the life and work of this man, even Elisha who was to take over the work of Elijah. It is strange that Elisha performed twice as many miracles as Elijah who only performed 8. He was not as much a bold prophet as Elijah, but he gave the firm message of quiet instruction to God's people, indeed as he preached he saw a growing number of the people turning to the Lord. Elisha was quite different in many ways he was a much younger man, he was obviously quite well off because he was plowing with twelve yolk of oxen when he was called, although a younger man he was still ready for the work of the Lord. God chooses His servants from all walks of life and Elisha proved a good choice to continue the work. Try and stop and think for a moment the tremendous responsibility this young man would feel. How would you feel if you had to take up this work? He no longer had his teacher to ask and guide him. However Elisha loved and knew his God and it was to Him that he turned for guidance and instruction.

There are too many miracles of Elisha for us to consider but in conclusion we will look at this one in 2 Kings 2:19

The Waters of Jericho Healed

Jericho was a large city and just below the city there is a well that supplies all the town's drinking water. This water has produced supplies for the city for hundreds of years. It is called the well of Elisha. After Elijah had left him, Elisha went over Jordan and lived in Jericho with the company of the prophets. However the city faced a serious problem. There was plenty of water but it was not good for drinking or watering the ground, in fact it was useless.

Elisha asked the people to bring him a new bowl and to put salt in it. The people did so and the prophet took the bowl of salt casting the salt into the water he told the people that they would now find that the waters were healed. The people found that it was as Elisha said and the water of the fountain now proved to be fresh and brought life instead of death to the land.

We know it was not the salt that worked this miracle of course, it was God. All the Israelites knew the significance of the salt. When God made a covenant with the people it is called the "Covenant of salt" (Numbers 18:19). Salt is a symbol of lasting nature of His covenant and of the righteousness and purity that it demands. Salt was always added to a sacrifice (Lev 2:13) and also speaks of healing and preserving.

Elisha threw the salt into the water because water represents teaching and as the salt healed the waters the doctrine of God's covenant gives value and life to doctrine and teaching.

As we can see the miracles and work of the prophets of old were very similar to the work of the Lord Jesus, nothing was done without reason, all had a significance to it. This is the wonderful way our Bibles are written so that we can have the joy of searching these things out, God is pleased with us when we take the time and effort to do so.

What of us? Are we prepared to do God's work? Are we prepared to follow the Lord Jesus and his ways as Elisha did to Elijah? Are we prepared to be a servant and help where needed?

Extra work

What can you find out about the privilege of the first born?

Either find out as many of the miracles of Elisha you can or give an account of one of the ones we haven't considered.