

A DOUBLE PORTION

Gaining Spiritual Influence | Book of Kings (Pt 8) | 2 Kings 2:1-12

We come today to the last installment in an eight-part series on the BOOK OF KINGS. To set in context what we're about to read, I want you to think of one of those scenes you've probably watched on TV. It's the last day of the administration of a President of the United States. The president is saying goodbye to all the White House staff and making his way toward the chopper that will take him away into history. His successor is walking alongside smiling, but secretly thinking, "Boy, I sure hope I am up to this job."

The story we're about to read is a little like that. It is the LAST DAY of the prophet Elijah's administration upon this earth. He is in the company of his apprentice and successor, Elisha – about whom Tara Beth, Steve and Charlie gave fabulous messages last week. Seriously, I hope you'll go to our website and listen to all three of their messages. They are that powerful and helpful. But back to THIS story. We open the Book of Kings at a moment of transition not quite as significant as the day when JESUS ascended into heaven but, considering that Elijah is the top one or two of the Old Testament prophets, a VERY BIG day indeed. The text reads:

¹ When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Now, permit me to pause here for a moment. I'm not sure what I'm about to say is the INTENT of this verse, but it does strike me as offering one more of those Life Lessons we've often found in the Book of Kings. Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal, the Bible says. To the ancient Jews, Gilgal was a very significant place. It was the spot where the Israelites first placed their feet when they finally crossed over the Jordan River from the Wilderness and found themselves in the Promised Land. In a deeply important sense, Gilgal was the Place of Beginning Anew. It was the spot from which God's people would go forth on their next hopeful adventure of life with him.

Have you ever stood in Gilgal? This past week, I've talked with three different people I love who have. After a long a challenging journey, each of them had gotten to a point when the good times were going to open up – when the full fruit of their labors would be enjoyed and their influence and experiences were going to expand. Each could see a good path out in front of them. Like Elijah and Elisha they were intently on their way from Gilgal into a land of promise. And, then, each received a medical diagnosis that took them on a dramatically different journey than they'd planned.

It's not just illness that does this. It can be a divorce or the death of your spouse. It may be a crisis with one of your children or a grown family member. The whirlwind can come in the form of a vocational calamity or a financial collapse. The truth is: When we are intently going on OUR way, God sometimes takes us HIS Way. By saying "His Way" I don't necessarily mean that God purposely pulls us off our path. I'm not smart enough

to know in each circumstance whether the disruption I'm seeing is part of God's active plan or his permissive will but, either way, what happens in this life is always under sovereignty of God.

I've met the whirlwind a lot in my life. I meet it weekly in the lives of others. I know that when the whirlwind strikes, we can do one of two things: First, we can abandon all hope, spit into the wind, or just try to anaesthetize ourselves. OR, we can humbly exercise greater faith. We can say: "OK, God, I wouldn't have chosen this, but do your THING. Use this to draw me closer to you... to make my heart more like yours... to send out ripples for good that my well-laid plans would not have accomplished. When the whirlwind comes, you are invited to exercise a bolder and more beautiful faith.

Could you do that? Could you dare to believe that there is nothing that can or will happen to you that God will not weave into his very good plans for you and for a matrix of people and purposes so vast that when we one day know as we have been fully known, all we will say is: "WOW! Now I SEE." As a pastor for nearly forty years, I've seen so many of the ripples of good that flow from the whirlwinds of life. I have some questions still to ask God. But I have learned to trust God's heart and power, and I encourage you to trust HIM, even amidst tragedy and confusion and loss.

So here's how the story continues. ² **Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the Lord has sent me to Bethel." But Elisha said, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel.** ³ **The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, "Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?" "Yes, I know," Elisha replied, "so be quiet."**

The next three verses repeat this same conversation, as Elijah states his intent to go on from Bethel to Jericho and then on to Jordan. In each case, Elijah essentially says to Elisha: "*Hey, I'm good. You can rest up here. I'm going to go to the next place and continue to live out my calling.*" And in each instance, Elisha responds with the vow, **"As surely as the Lord lives... I will not leave you."** I find it interesting that we hear a similar vow on the lips of Gideon, Ruth, and David – three of the most courageous figures of the Old Testament -- when they are expressing their deepest commitments. The vow basically means: "Because God IS and because of the character he has... I will do this."

There's a Life Lesson in this for you and me: God's greatest servants are driven by his presence and character above all else. They are not driven by polls or focus groups or what others in their personal cohort or on social media say. They are centered on God. Does that describe your orientation to life? Does it describe mine? I think there is a reason that Elisha vows three times to Elijah: **I will not leave you.** I think Elisha sees that Elijah is THAT singularly devoted kind of servant. He wants to soak up everything he can from him.

And he knows that the hours he has to absorb Elijah's character are fleeting. The text suggests that God has revealed to Elisha and all of the other prophets that Elijah will soon be gone. So, in three separate cities, Elisha says, in effect: "Let's stop talking about losing Elijah. Let's be quiet. Let's just pay attention to his life."

The next verses suggest that the other prophets took Elisha's counsel. We read that: **⁷ Fifty men from the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. ⁸ Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground.**

It's worth noting that God does through Elijah a similar miracle here as he did through Moses when he made a way for the people of God to escape bondage in Egypt through the Red Sea or cross the River Jordan into the Promised Land. All of these stories foreshadow the day when Jesus will lay down his very life to open up a path for you and me and every who trusts in Him to have their sins forgiven and come home to God.

It feels important and urgent to me that we think about this image of Way-Making. We've just been through a hotly contested election season. We will have much more of this in the years to come. But the way to a better future doesn't lie, first and foremost, in the hope of getting everyone to agree on the best policies. Human sin will always confound that. Our best way forward is to align ourselves to the best Person. Our greatest need and opportunity is to surrender ourselves in ever-deepening ways to the person and priorities of the Great God who has revealed himself in Jesus. Nine-hundred years before the historical Jesus arrived on the scene, Elijah apparently already understood his character. Perhaps this is why – at the time Jesus revealed his glory to his disciples at his Transfiguration – Elijah appeared there too (Mark 9:2-13).

At the root of every culture is a cult – which is to say, a system of belief and devotion. Ahab and Jezebel promoted a cult of individualism, materialism and sensual pleasure. Elijah championed a cult of devotion to God and his vision of flourishing for all people. So, let me ask some deeply personal and important questions: *Who or what has taken the throne of your life? Is it your political party or your personal preferences? Who are the mentors and models that you are passionately pursuing that reflect your devotion? **As surely as the Lord lives**, could you invest more of yourself in becoming like Jesus and seeking first the kingdom of God?*

Elisha and Elijah illuminate the path for us in this. **⁹ When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?" Elisha replied, "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit."** ¹⁰ **"You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you..."** In other words, if you keep a relentless focus on learning from me all the way till the end... **"it will be yours—otherwise, it will not."**

I know how easy it is to get distracted and fragmented today. I oftentimes find my focus drawn to the shrillest voices, the most popular players, the people I want to please. But here is the most important question of this series: ***Of whose spirit would you like to inherit a double-portion?*** Last week we focused on figuring out who our Elisha's might be – the next generation we could invest in? My question at the close of this series is: *Who are the mentor and models -- the people most like like Elijah or like Jesus -- that YOU are so relentlessly focused on learning from that some younger person might choose YOU as their focus – the person they would like to be like?*

I have learned and continue to be shaped by so many remarkable disciples. The list of models in this church and beyond it is huge. To make the subject concrete, however, I will call out just a FEW among many of the people of whose spirit I would like to inherit.

I would like to have a double-portion of my wife, Amy's, SELF-DISCIPLINE. I watch her getting up in the morning early and working out, when I am still in bed. In the 34 years we've been together, I don't think she's missed a single day of flossing! She's run multiple marathons and done an Iron Man and reads religiously and devotes herself with staggering discipline to getting better in every pursuit she takes on.

I would love to have a double-portion of my friend, Carl's, COURAGE. I've seen him dare to stand up for kingdom values in the face of the worldly values of the multinational corporations he's served. I've been in awe of the way he speaks loving truth to people in order to help them grow to their God-given potential. He suffered a paralyzing stroke a few years ago, yet continues to live with hope in a manner that inspires everyone who watches him.

I'd be such a better person if I could inherit a double-portion of the HUMILITY I meet in my brother, Jeff. He's a summa cum laude graduate from Yale, a Fulbright Scholar, a Supreme Court Clerk, and now a presidentially-appointed Federal Judge. But you'd never know it if you met him at a cocktail party. He'd only be interested in talking about YOU – in discovering what motivates and matters to you.

I pray to be given a double-portion of the LOVE I meet in our mission partner, Maggie Gobran. She is the most amazing person in every room she enters. She's been three-times nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Every month, she literally washes the feet of hundreds of impoverished children. She spends hours at the feet of Jesus in prayer every morning, so that when you are with her, you feel like you are sitting with Jesus.

I wish I had a double-portion of the GRACE I've met in my trustee colleague, Riccardo. He's absorbed the cost of being a black man in a world that undervalues his remarkable gifts. He's a brilliant chemist and a stunning problem-solver and a thoughtful Bible scholar that few people have the wit to recognize. Yet he shows quiet kindness and persevering patience with people of far less ability. He reminds me of Jesus too.

Let me repeat the question in closing today: ***Who are your models and mentors – the people who define the cult you are seeking to build a culture upon?*** *Who are the Elijah's in your life that, like Elisha, you are studying so closely that the thought of leaving them is unimaginable? How are you parsing the particulars of the principles and practices that fill their days? What have you learned from them that you are applying in your daily life?*

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!" And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two.

One day, I pray, people will grieve MY departure and YOUR departure from this earth like that. If so, it will be because you and I were determined to seek and inherit a DOUBLE-PORTION of a spirit like Elijah, which is to say, like Jesus, and his most faithful disciples. At the end of the day, our lives and our society depends on the choices we make. We still live in the era of Ahab and Jezebel; but by the models and mentors we choose, you and I get to decide ***WHO will take the throne.***