

A Whirlwind Finish (2 Kings 2:1-18)

We've got a great chapter today that's going to encourage you. You know, usually, when a storyteller tells a great story, he builds tension, as you wonder how the story is going to conclude, and you don't know how it's going to finish until you get to the end.

But every now and then, and story tell will reverse that, and he will tell you the END at the START.

Because sometimes, stories are even better when you know how it finishes at the beginning.

This is one of those stories. Look at the first verse.

¹When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal.

Now – we've not spent much time here, but earlier in his ministry Elijah threw his cloak over Elisha, his young protégé, and said, "you're going to be my successor." Elisha left everything to follow him, and for 10 years Elijah mentored him. And so now, Elisha is going to go with Elijah on his goodbye tour.

And the story tells us that the first place they go is to Gilgal. Gilgal was significant in the history of Israel. It was the first place the Israelites camped before entering the Promised land after their time in Egypt. (That's stop one – Bethel. The – stop two . . .)

But ²Elijah 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.

Each time, Elijah is going to tell Elisha to stay behind, and most believe this is to test Elisha's loyalty.

I'm interested – how many of you have can remember a moment when someone you cared about was about to move on, and you didn't want to leave their side? I remember when I was young, and I just adored my granddad – spent countless hours together, and sometimes when we would go hunting he would say when we were making a climb or something, "Go on son, and I'll catch up with you." And I was like, "Nope – I'm staying right here with YOU!" Elisha said, "I'm not about to leave your side."

And so – they went over to Bethel. (Bethel was famous for a number of reasons. Abraham worshipped there; it's where we have the story of Jacob's Ladder, where he saw angels ascending and descending to and from heaven).

³The 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?" (Here are these prophets, and most believe that in these cities there was something akin to preacher training schools.

So here are these preaching students, and it seems it was becoming common knowledge now that the lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven and his ministry coming to an end. And so Elisha says . . .

"Yes, I know," Elisha replied, "so be quiet." (Elisha's like, "He's my mentor, he's my friend, yes I know it, but I don't want to hear about it – so ZIP IT! I don't want to hear about it!")

A lot of you know that feeling. This is someone you love being deployed to the military; someone taking a job transfer and moving away. This is sending your child off to college, or losing someone you love. We know the emotion of that!

⁴Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here, Elisha; the LORD has sent me to Jericho.” And he replied, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So they went to Jericho. (One of the most famous cities in the OT is Jericho. You know the story – the place where the Israelites marched seven days around the city and on the seventh day the walls came tumbling down.)

So they go to these three important cities rich with history. But sadly, in Elijah’s day, Bethel and Jericho had become centers of idolatry. And so we see that preaching schools were set up in the most wicked places, because of all places that’s where the Gospel needed to be preached).

⁵The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, “Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?” “Yes, I know,” he replied, “so be quiet.” (yes I know – so quit brining it up! You ever had annoying friends that just keep saying the same thing?)

⁶Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here; the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.” And he replied, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So the two of them walked on. (Step by step, he tests Elisha’s loyalty along the way).

⁷Fifty 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. ⁸Elijah 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. (This is his final miracle before he goes – kind of like a great athlete in his final game. This is the basketball player who takes his final shot, or the baseball player’s final at bat).

And so, notice – Elijah rolls up his cloak like a stick, strikes the water, and it divides, and the two cross over.

Does this remind you of anyone else? Sure! Moses – who stretched out his rod and parted the Red Sea.

(And it’s so interesting when you compare their ministries. Both:

- Opened bodies of water (Ex. 14:16,21,26)
- Called down fire from heaven (Ex. 9:24; Lev. 9:24; Num. 11:1; 16:35)
- Prayed for an altering of the weather (Moses in Egypt)
- Were associated with mountains and with fire (Carmel and Sinai)
- Had unique endings to their lives/mysterious departures (God buried Moses in a grave nobody could find).
- Were privileged to be present with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt. 17:4)

So we see here – how the ministry of Elijah points back to Moses, but then it points forward to John the Baptist, who would anoint and baptize his successor at the Jordan River (who was – Jesus Christ the Savior).

Verse 9

⁹When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?” (He’s

like, “I’m about to be gone; any final requests? Is there anything you need?) And Elisha says,

“Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha replied.

And every Hebrew knew exactly what he was saying. Because under the law of Moses, if a man had two sons, the first son would get a double share of the inheritance, because it was his duty to take care of aging parents.

So, what he’s saying is, “I want to be your spiritual heir. I want to be your son in the faith. I want to be the one that takes up the mantle and continues your life’s work.”

(Which is similar to the promise Jesus made to his disciples. He said, “Do you see the work that I have done? Greater works shall you do because I go to the Father.”

Now, does that mean they were going to have more miracles and more shows of power? No. The idea is not GREATER POWER, but a GREATER EXTENT of influence. Jesus was in ONE PLACE at ONE TIME. He said, “I’m going to the Father. And when I go to the Father, the Holy Spirit is going to empower all of you to go to the ends of the earth.” (Think of the 3,000 that were saved when Peter preached at Pentecost . . .)

And it’s so interesting, what happens here is just that. Elisha said, “I want a double portion of your ministry.” And the rest of the story is just this – Elijah did 8 miracles, Elisha did 16. Elijah served 10 years in public ministry; Elisha served 20.

He asked for the desires of his heart – and he got it. But before that – Elijah showed incredible humility -

¹⁰ “You have asked a difficult thing,” Elijah said, “yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not.”

Elijah’s like, “I don’t get to make that choice. God makes that decision. He’s the one that determines spiritual leaders, not me! Jesus said in John 3, “The wind blows wherever it pleases . . . So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

And so here’s what I know – going into the ministry is not something to be taken lightly.

I’m reminded of what Charles Haddon Spurgeon would say to young men interested in ministry (something that was also said to me early on). He would say to them, “If you can be content doing anything else but ministry, do it!” (Does that sound like more of a discouragement? But there is a calling involved in ministry.

And here’s why that’s important – ministry is a hard thing. In fact, some recent statistics indicate that the average pastor’s tenure in a church is between 4 and 5 years. It’s about all they last. For a number of reasons, they just get discouraged and quit. So Elijah says, “You’re asking a tough thing. But if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be so. God will decide.”

And so, then, something amazing happens:

Verse 11

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.

What a moment - one that captivates the imagination. The fire and horses symbolizing God's presence, which provided the protection of Israel.

Here's what's interesting - In ancient Canaan, Baal was known as 'the Rider of the Clouds.' He was a warlike weather deity. The billowing dark clouds of a storm were viewed as the battle chariot in which Baal rode, thundering forth his voice and carrying lightening as his spear . . .

But we've seen it time and again - it's not Baal who rides on the clouds - it's the God of heaven! And so Elijah going up to heaven in a chariot of fire served as a witness against Baal.

And we see this all through Scripture!

*He makes the clouds his chariot
and rides on the wings of the wind* (Psalm 104:3).

The Lord God of Israel rides the heavens in his storm chariot at the head of the heavenly armies (Pss. 68:17; 104:3; Ezek. 1; Joel 2:5; Hab. 3:8; Zech. 6:1-2; 1 Chron 28:18; 2 Kings 7:6). God's chariot is in the whirlwind (Isa. 66:15; Jer. 4:13).

*See, the LORD is coming with fire,
and his chariots are like a whirlwind;
he will bring down his anger with fury,
and his rebuke with flames of fire* (Isa. 66:15). (Does this sound like fluffy clouds? No - this is a war chariot!)

*Look! He advances like the clouds,
his chariots come like a whirlwind,
his horses are swifter than eagles* (Jer. 4:13).

¹²Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!"

And here's what I love - when you look at that verse closely, what is Elisha affirming? That the chariots and horsemen of Israel - God's weapon in the moment - was none other than Elijah himself.

And here's why that's important - Elijah - endowed with the presence of God, was the true horseman of Israel. Because the power of God was in the prophets.

In his day, Elijah was the true defense of Israel, because God was with him and worked through him.

Back in 1854, Henry Blunt stated this fact best of all - that Elijah was better than a huge number of earthly chariots and horses as the defender of Israel. And he makes this observation that I believe is so powerful:

"Elisha, therefore, knew . . . that [it's] the devout . . . followers of God, [that] are the support and safeguard of their country . . .

LISTEN TO WHAT HE SAYS:

The real strength of our . . . country exists not in her fleets, her armies, her wealth, or even in her free and invaluable institutions . . . [or] the high intellectual endowments of her senators, but simply and entirely in the blessings of her God! . . . These are the "chariots and the horsemen thereof" (Henry Blunt. *Lectures on the History of Abraham, Jacob and Elisha*. Philadelphia, H. Hooker, 1854, 217).

And accordingly, we may say the same for all faithful Christian men and women who dare to stand in the gap

between the living God and a senseless culture. Their worth and value exceed that of all the latest weaponry that a country can create. Sin is a disgrace to any people, but *Righteousness exalts a nation.*

(I think we need to remember that today – the darker the times, the more our light shines. HELPING WITH STUDENTS _ WE’VE RELIED ON THE WRONG SOURCEWS TOO LONG _ THIS IS OUR DAY).

Verse 12 says - **And Elisha saw him no more.** (He literally rode off into the sunset).

Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two. (He’s mourning. He’s saying goodbye).

¹³Elisha then picked up Elijah’s cloak that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan.

¹⁴He took the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and struck the water with it. “Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?” he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over. (So this is a great day for Elisha! He’s like, “I got the coat! I got the Spirit! I’m good!”)

¹⁵The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, “The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha.” And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. ¹⁶“Look,” they said, “we your servants have fifty able men. Let them go and look for your master. Perhaps the Spirit of the LORD has picked him up and set him down on some mountain or in some valley.” “No,” Elisha replied, “do not send them.”

Elisha knew he had gone to heaven, but they thought God had dropped him off somewhere. “Maybe God just

relocated him.” So they want to send out a search party, and Elisha’s like, “No need.”

¹⁷But they persisted until he was too embarrassed to refuse. (Elisha’s like, “All right, go look.”)

So he said, “Send them.” And they sent fifty men, who searched for three days but did not find him. ¹⁸When they returned to Elisha, who was staying in Jericho, he said to them, “Didn’t I tell you not to go?”

Two things:

1. When it comes to leadership, we have to focus on passing the baton.

In the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the US Women’s 4x100 relay team was so favored to win that it wasn’t a matter of whether they would win, but by how much.

But the interesting thing about a relay is that sometimes you can be the fastest team, but if you don’t hand the baton off well, you might lose.

And in the semi-final race, that’s exactly what happened- they dropped the baton and lost, never even got to the finals.

Then the same thing happened to the US men’s relay team!

Listen - races are won and lost in the transfer of the baton. So it’s imperative that we hand the baton to the right people, and at the right time (just like a relay – and pray for God to give us the courage and discernment).

One generation runs the race, and then they must pass the baton off to the next generation.

As leaders at Gracepoint, we're thinking and talking about that. If you're younger, are YOU thinking about that? Do you want your church to continue? What are your hopes for the future if Gracepoint will be around for you and your children?

Here's the sobering reality (and it's not sad, but true) – in just a short time, you'll be saying goodbye to some leaders in this church who have led us so far. (I'm not trying to be morbid, but it's life).

Are you thinking about that?

Is God calling you to lead? (You'll never be encouraged to lead any more than right here). Pray about that. Because the Elijah's of this church are looking for some Elisha's!

When it comes to leadership, we have to focus on passing the baton well.

Here's the second thing –

2. Elijah teaches us – we want to finish strong.

Karl conversation.

MUSIC

And so we come to the last moment of Elijah's life on earth – and he goes out strong!

He parts the river, and walks across to the other side.

So here's what I want to tell you –

God knows our last day. (I don't know about you, but I don't like to think about that. I've got a beautiful wife – great kids – grandchildren I want to spend time with.

I like my life, I like my job – I've got a Troy Built Tiller to till my garden, a pretty gray rooster and 6 chickens in the back yard that lay me some pretty good eggs.

I've got lots of good friends.

I've watched a lot of people go out sad and weak. (in later years, there's a pull toward selfishness, irritability, and bitterness). I don't want to go that way.

I want to go strong! Like Elijah.

You see – the most important decisions you'll ever make – is whether you are ready to meet Jesus face to face.

Elijah was ready. Are you ready today?

Your departure isn't something you should dread – it's something you should anticipate with joy.

Paul said, "To live is Christ, to die is gain!"

Are you ready for your last day?

Do you want to leave a legacy?

(Remember last week – how Ahaziah died? Fell through a lattice, nobody missed him. And here's Elijah – what's he doing? He's got schools of prophets – he's got Elijah – he's going up in a whirlwind – the angels carry him away – he's leaving a legacy).

I think this explains the calmness of his last day – he knew that he had a faith legacy secure! You want to live your life so that nothing has to change if you find out it's your last day. You want to live your life so that you find out it's your last day, you don't have to panic, you don't have to fret.

Because your legacy's secure.

And so - one may dies -and he's not missed at all. And another dies – and generations are blessed through him.

So – are you ready for the last day?

End with prayer.