

II Kings 2:1-18 Do you want the blessing?

Introduction

There are some people who are larger than life characters whose presence ‘fills the room’ and every other conversation naturally stops as it seems almost magnetic to be attracted to listen to these individuals speaking. Former American President Theodore Roosevelt was one of these kinds of individuals. People flocked to hear him speak. On 14 October 1912 an unemployed bartender called John Flammang Schrank tried to assassinate him on the road to deliver a speech, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to his supporters in an election campaign, with a single gunshot to the chest. How did Roosevelt not only survive the shot and still carry on with his public engagement that day? He was wearing a thick army overcoat that contained in an inside pocket his fifty page speech folded double to fit inside his pocket alongside a metal spectacles case. He arrived at the venue and got up to the lectern and after announcing to the assembled audience that he had been shot he asked for quiet and apologised that he might have to reduce his speech in length. He proceeded to pull out of his pocket a blood-soaked manuscript. The audience heard him deliver an extraordinary speech of ninety minutes duration! In a later letter to an English friend Sir Edward Gray, he remarked that he had always expected an assassination attempt would be made on his life. However, he continued: ‘In the very unlikely event of the wound being mortal. I wished to die with my boots on.’ Roosevelt died in 1919. The telegram from his son Archibald to his brothers Kermit and Ted then in Koblenz, Germany, with the Allied Occupation Force, read simply: The old Lion is dead!’ [various on-line sources]. Elijah was most certainly a larger than life character, both in his lifetime and beyond, his life and work thrilled or awed generations of Israelites. There had been indications for a time that he was coming to the end of his earthly life but Elisha had no clear information on which he could prepare himself to step into the shoes of someone who was as close to ‘irreplaceable’ as anyone else we might care to mention.

Life so often can take us by surprise. We can be lulled into a false sense of security thinking that things will continue as they have always done, when suddenly something happens and everything has changed for us and we struggle to adjust to the new situation. For Elisha and the younger men training to be the pastors and teachers of the faith, to the Israelite community recovering from the trauma of Ahab and Jezebel’s onslaught against the Jewish faith, a new day was dawning, but one they would have to face without the man who was the figurehead and anchor of their witness for a generation. Yet the work of God would go on as others would step up the plate and take responsibility for the work that needed to be undertaken. In each generation the baton is passed on to new men and women, young and older alike, to be faithful witnesses to the God who has called us into a living relationship with Himself. In this generation it is you and me- will we fulfil our calling and honour the Lord today?

1. A strange request (II Kings 2:1-8)

When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. 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. 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?’ ‘Yes, I know,’ Elisha replied, ‘so be quiet.’ 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. 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.’ 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. 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. There is a pattern here in II Kings 2 that we can sometimes miss. The account in II Kings 2 begins and ends in Bethel. In the first place involving Elijah – Bethel to Jericho to the River Jordan; then involving Elisha from the River Jordan to Jericho and then finally back to Bethel. The message in simple terms is this: the extraordinary power of the Holy Spirit that rested on Elijah has been transferred to his successor Elisha. The passage under consideration here only involves part of this journey and transfer of spiritual anointing, but it is helpful to see it in context. God does not change. *Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and for ever* (Hebrews 13:8). Sometimes we can be shaken by things that happen, but God is on the throne and He will be with us in the times of uncertainty and difficulty.

(a) **The testing of Elisha** What is going on in this passage? It appears as if Elijah is testing the young man to see how serious he is about his calling as his successor. At such a distance in time there is probably aspects of the story we will never know, but the perseverance of Elisha to stay close to his older colleague shines through the narrative. He made a commitment to undertake a work some years earlier when Elijah called him to be his servant and successor. Elisha had honoured his word and done exactly what he had promised. Praise God for the people who keep their word and who are loyal and dedicated in their service for Him. I thank God for the people in this church who can be relied upon year after year to undertake work for the Lord whatever it may be, and to do it to the best of their ability. Bethel and Jericho are the locations of the 'Bible Colleges' where the trainee future leaders of the people of God in Israel were based. Elijah would have had oversight of these institutions, but with living life on the run to ensure his survival in recent years, other unknown individuals would have overseen whatever kind of training and ministry took place there. It appears that everyone concerned knew that Elijah's time on earth was nearly over, but as he was in robust health, despite getting older, it was a most unusual situation. Only the departure of Enoch (recorded in Genesis 5:24: *Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.*) comes close to it. In effect it was a final good-bye to the people with whom Elijah had worked. We all know that there are contexts where we too find it difficult to find adequate words to say what we want to communicate. The two men had begun in Gilgal and walked for nearly fourteen miles to Bethel. After a relatively short time with his colleagues there Elijah indicated that he was moving on to Jericho around twelve and a half miles further on. Then, depending on where they went to cross the River Jordan, a minimum of a further six miles was covered. It is not difficult to imagine Elijah striding out at a terrific pace right to the end of his life as he travelled around the country.

(b) **The extraordinary life of Elijah** In His sovereignty God had allowed Elijah's life to be preserved when many other faithful leaders were caught and executed. It was not because he was more or less spiritual than they were. It was not that he was more important than they were, because each had a calling from God to fulfil. Likewise, over church history there have been men and women in ministries at home and overseas who have lived and served faithfully to a great age and others equally devout who lost their lives by martyrdom or illness after only a very short time. I seriously doubt that Elijah believed he would avoid capture and execution for his faith, but amazingly he was preserved to have this amazing departure. If I understand the passage correctly then I think this strange request to Elisha was to test the determination of his servant one last time and if correct I believe he was delighted at the response received from his ideal successor. The work that Elisha would do in more peaceful and settled times was different to that of Elijah in his day. The work you and I have to do is

different to those of a previous generation. We are all called to live at this time in history with the gifts we need to accomplish the work God has planned for you and me to do. The challenge is to keep our focus and keep our eyes Jesus. Hebrews 12 reminds of our privilege and responsibility to follow in the footsteps of *Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*³ Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart (Hebrews 12:2-3). Will you and I be faithful to our calling as Elisha here was to his?

2. A suitable reward (II Kings 2:9-10)

⁹ When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, 'Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?' 'Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,' Elisha replied.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.' (a) **What has just taken place?** We need to stop for a moment and reflect on what has happened here. An extraordinary miracle has taken place almost as if it was as normal as catching a bus might be for you and me today. Elijah has by the Spirit of God parted the waters of the River Jordan and crossed over on dry ground. There is no doubt that the young theological students had only one passage of the Bible in their minds at that moment from the book of Joshua. These extraordinary words from Joshua 3:1-20 state: *Joshua told the people, 'Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you.'*⁶ *Joshua said to the priests, 'Take up the ark of the covenant and pass on ahead of the people.'* So they took it up and went ahead of them.⁷ *And the Lord said to Joshua, 'Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so that they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses.'*⁸ *Tell the priests who carry the ark of the covenant: "When you reach the edge of the Jordan's waters, go and stand in the river."*⁹ *Joshua said to the Israelites, 'Come here and listen to the words of the Lord your God.'*¹⁰ *This is how you will know that the living God is among you and that He will certainly drive out before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites.*¹¹ *See, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth will go into the Jordan ahead of you.*¹² *Now then, choose twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe.*¹³ *And as soon as the priests who carry the ark of the Lord – the Lord of all the earth – set foot in the Jordan, its waters flowing downstream will be cut off and stand up in a heap.'*¹⁴ *So when the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carrying the ark of the covenant went ahead of them.*¹⁵ *Now the Jordan is in flood all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge,*¹⁶ *the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan, while the water flowing down to the Sea of the Arabah (that is, the Dead Sea) was completely cut off. So the people crossed over opposite Jericho.*¹⁷ **The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stopped in the middle of the Jordan and stood on dry ground, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground.** There was a test of faith, of obedience, to do what God had called them to do and to be prepared for God to work in their midst in ways they had not seen before. To see God at work in a more amazing way than they had believed was possible. To trust that God who makes promises in the time of Abraham will keep them centuries later; the added challenge then was that the River Jordan was in flood at that time so it was humanly-speaking impossible to get across safely with all their elderly people and young children; their goods and equipment. However, God wanted to show them that He reigns. He wants His people to see in each generation that He is who He claims to be and even if we are disappointed when particular prayers are not answered in the way we desire, we retain our trust in the amazing Almighty Lord of heaven and earth. Not only did the Israelites cross a riverbed without drowning or getting soaked they passed through on **dry** ground. Fast forward many centuries to the time of Elijah and Elisha in a similar location not far from Jericho, possibly in the same

location as in the days of Joshua God makes a clear statement of His power and His presence with them. The way God works in your life might be very different to that in the life of another Christian. Some may live their entire lives and never see what we tend to describe as ‘miracles’; others in a different setting may see a number of extraordinary acts of God. It is God who determines these things not us. For Christians in the last 2,000 years our anchor point is the greatest miracle of all, the death and resurrection of our great God and Saviour the Lord Jesus Christ. All other miraculous or extraordinary answers to prayer are a wonderful and welcome bonus! Our God reigns! Our God reigns! It is in the light of such a revelation that we can have confidence in God’s hand upon our lives. Elijah is now back in the rugged hills of the TransJordan countryside where Jezebel’s tyranny was viewed with little sympathy and where probably the majority of the faithful believers in the God of Israel were living at this time. It was a hard life for many people with small plots of land as they engaged in subsistence farming. It was from this kind of rural setting from which his successor Elisha had been called a few years earlier.

(b) **A pointed question and response** (II Kings 2:9) Now Elijah seems to relax and stops and asks Elisha a question in III Kings 2:9a: *When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, ‘Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?’* The moment of Elijah’s departure was imminent and although unspoken was surely known to both the older and younger men standing together, just in the distant view of their young colleagues across the river. On Christianity Explored guests are asked a question –if God was guaranteed to answer one question that you asked Him- what would it be? We might alter the question to the following: If God was to grant you one request that He would carry out – what would you request from Him? The expectation here is that whatever Elisha requests will be granted. The response I imagine was given quietly and quickly, because this answer was ready to be offered from the moment Elisha accepted the call from Elijah to be his servant and successor. What did he say? *‘Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,’ Elisha replied* (II Kings 2:9b). What did he mean by these words? Was he wanting double the power and double the supernatural success of Elijah? No! This is to misunderstand what he said. We need to turn to Deuteronomy 21:17 and the laws concerning inheritance to grasp what he meant here. In the context, Moses’ words are about the inheritance rights of the eldest son in a family, in particular of a man who has more than one wife. The eldest son of the family is the successor of the father and he receives a double portion of the inheritance compared to any younger sons. The reason for this was simple. The older son had to care for his mother and any other younger children at home who were left when the father had died. In some cases the costs incurred would undoubtedly have meant that the eldest son actually got less of an inheritance personally compared to his brothers, so Deuteronomy 21:17 was an attempt to try and ensure fair shares of the estate. It states acknowledging the firstborn son meant: *...giving him a double share of all he has. That son is the first sign of his father’s strength. The right of the firstborn belongs to him.* Elisha’s reply was simply saying can I please have the honour and responsibility of taking over your role and ministry when you have gone.

This answer would please Elijah so much. These years of training were now about to be put into effect. Remember how many years Joshua was Moses’ assistant preparing for the time when the leadership of the nation would be handed over to him. Remember Paul’s training at Jerusalem University under the greatest teacher of his day Gamaliel, alongside the three years he spent in solitary study in Arabia, prior to his commencement of Christian service. It is important to take opportunities to study and better equip ourselves in Christian service. We would not think of doing otherwise in the workplace, but sometimes we are slow to do so in Christian work and service. When God calls you and I into His service, He gives us gifts and abilities so that we can accomplish the tasks He has entrusted to us. However,

sometimes the talents need to be polished or strengthened by training and resourcing or by simply practising doing the activity concerned! Remember the goodness of our heavenly Father who wants the best for His children. Luke 11:13 states: *If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!* Never forget that your heavenly Father loves you and wants the best for you.

3. **A supernatural removal** (II Kings 2:11-12)

¹¹As 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. ¹²Elisha saw this and cried out, 'My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!' And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two. (a) **The God of Surprises** On that first Easter Sunday evening a group of desperately sad people tried to pick their way through dinner. Their appetites were so lacking as they struggled to get through the days since their Lord and Master had been crucified. However, late on that Sunday afternoon or early evening, they had a visit from Cleopas and his wife Mary from Emmaus claiming that Jesus had met with them on the road home from Jerusalem and that He had been recognised when He was praying over the food they were planning to share in their modest home (Luke 24:30-35). It was in the midst of this discussion that Luke declares their greatest surprise took place. *While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'* (Luke 24:36). The sense of shock must have been memorable for the rest of their earthly lives. It was not simply one of those 'remember when...' moments – it was 'THE Remember when' moment in Early Church history. They still had to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit and the launch of the Christian Church, but this event was the most special day of their lives. God had broken into history in the most remarkable way!

(b) **The significance of Elijah** (Luke 9:28-36) How do we describe what happened next to Elijah? To our knowledge it is a unique event. There is no biblical account of a departure to heaven quite like this one. In terms of the condition of the blessing Elisha was both there and he saw Elijah ascend into heaven. It was a most extraordinary end to the life and ministry of one of the most extraordinary servants of God in the Old Testament era. The significance of this man is seen in the account in Luke 9:28-36 on the Mount of Transfiguration where Jesus' disciples caught a glimpse of Jesus in His glorified state. Who was there with Jesus conversing about His forthcoming sacrifice on the cross in Jerusalem that year? Luke stated: *Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendour, talking with Jesus.* ³¹*They spoke about His departure, which He was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem.* Elijah and Moses were the two most revered figures in the Old Testament.

(c) **God's reassurance** (Isaiah 43:1b) We might see this extraordinary event as God honouring His faithful servant in an unexpected way. Our relationship with God is personal, as well as corporate through belonging to His Church. He deals with us personally and what happens in your life and mine can be quite different. We will never be 'numbers on a page' to Him! Therefore, we must not envy the blessing of a brother or sister or fear the discipline of another person as if God would necessarily treat you in exactly the same way. Isaiah 43:1b contains this wonderful assurance: *Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are Mine.* God that day honoured Elijah and reassured his successor concerning his own calling.

There is a little detail that we might easily forget here at the end of II Kings 2:12b: *Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two.* It was not that Elisha's cloak was old or particularly new that counted, but that its destruction was a second declaration this young man made to visually demonstrate that there was no going back from the work to which he had been

called. His focus on what lay ahead was absolute. He had been born for that day and the ministry years that would follow. When we come to Jesus we need to be sure that He is getting the whole of us – each area of our lives – so that we can be the best witnesses we can be for Him. Does He have whole of you? Is your primary focus on Him and His calling on your life? May the Lord help us to give Jesus’ the first place in our lives.

4. **A solemn recognition** (II Kings 2:13-18)

¹³ Elisha then picked up Elijah’s cloak that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. ¹⁴ He 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. ¹⁵ The 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.’ ¹⁷ But they persisted until he was too embarrassed to refuse. So he said, ‘Send them.’ And they sent fifty men, who searched for three days but did not find him. ¹⁸ When they returned to Elisha, who was staying in Jericho, he said to them, ‘Didn’t I tell you not to go?’

(a) **An unforgettable induction to office** The cloak was the equivalent of a clerical vestment that conveyed the authority of the one possessing it as the successor of Elijah. If there was any doubt at all in the minds of those witnessing this scene that Elisha was the anointed leader of God’s people in Israel at that time then the parting of the waters across the River Jordan as Elijah had done eliminated any room for doubt. This was an exceptional event for a particular spiritual reason not his or Elijah’s regular habit when attempting to cross bodies of water. Miracles are exceptional events by their very nature to glorify God. Christians over the centuries have been guilty of two extremes, some denying any supernatural element to their faith at all, because they hadn’t witnessed a miracle; on the other hand some believers give the impression that this is an everyday event as part of the ‘normal’ Christian life. God delights to work through ordinary means in and through His people –you and me- day by day. There are exceptional circumstances when this is not possible and a divine extraordinary intervention sometimes takes place.

(b) **A call to see God at work** (Isaiah 55:8-9) Our calling is to be open to God working in us and through us in His service, but not presuming how or when this might take place. We do well to remember Isaiah 55:8-9 where God declares: ‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord. ⁹ ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts. We do not want to miss out on God’s blessings for us, because we had placed God ‘in a box’ and presumed that He was restricted to working in a particular way in our midst. These young men in II Kings 2:13-18 had to accept that what had taken place that day was outside their comfort zone, but that God was in control. May we trust the Lord to take care of our future and receive His blessings as we go forward with Him, for Jesus’ sake, Amen.