

2ND KINGS

Week 3, chapter 2

Last week's lesson in 2nd Kings chapter 2 led us up to the famous and mysterious account of Elijah's translation into heaven. And we'll look at that event closely today. But much more is going on in this chapter than only that. For one thing, we see that the end of an era is approaching. **Eliyahu's** time as the preeminent prophet to perhaps ever live (and certainly Elijah is regarded as the epitome of all Old Testament prophets) is coming to a close, and the transition to **Elisha** as his replacement is underway. Elisha will do many miracles and have a great effect in Israel during his lifetime; but the loss of Elijah means that the end of the era of the Spirit of Prophecy has arrived, and only a tiny handful of men will be given the spiritual gift of prophecy in the centuries to come. The many prophet guilds that we have been reading about will diminish, and so more and more of whatever becomes known of God's Word among the people of Israel will be transmitted more like it is now in our time: through God's already written Word. That is to say, as we move along in the Bible, and especially as we arrive at the New Testament, the term

"to prophesy" will be linked to a great measure to **teachers** of God's Word rather than to men (prophets) who receive visions, dreams, and new oracles or revelation from above.

And yet we do know from these same prophets that as the end times approaches the Spirit of Prophecy is not gone forever but will revive, and as the prophet Joel says, "Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions....." Are we there yet? I don't believe so, as I see no evidence of true Biblical-style prophets announcing God's oracles wherein humanly unknowable events are predicted with great detail and then they happen exactly as foretold.

As we pick up with our story today, Eliyahu and Elisha have left the prophet colony in Jericho and passed through the Jordan to the east bank by means of a miraculous parting of the waters as Elijah smacks the flowing river with his rolled-up prophet's cloak. As they walk, Elisha asks for a parting gift of a double-portion of the same spirit of prophecy as Elijah possessed. Elijah says that he can't promise such a thing to him because he doesn't control it; but that if Elisha is able to see the actual event of Elijah being taken away, then his request has been granted by God.

Let's re-read 2nd Kings 2 starting at verse 11.

RE-READ 2ND KINGS 2:11 to end

As they were walking and conversing, suddenly the apparition of a fiery chariot and horses appears and it serves at first to separate Elisha from **Eliyahu**, as though Elisha was being told, “this far and no farther”. And then in typical Biblical fashion, we are told in abrupt terms that **Eliyahu** ascended to heaven in the whirlwind. That’s it; that’s all there is to the description of this event that took almost a chapter to set up. Therefore it’s easy to understand why, over the centuries, there has been so much speculation written and preached over exactly what DID happen and what it means. But let’s see if we can look at this event for what it was and glean all that we can from it.

First of all, notice that unlike practically every painting that some of history’s greatest artists have rendered about this story, Elijah is NOT said to have ridden off skyward in a fiery chariot. Rather it is that a whirlwind took him up. But to peel that onion back another layer, the English term whirlwind itself is a stretch. The Hebrew word is **searah** and it means storm wind or strong wind. I think to obtain what we were meant to understand from this strange event (that for God’s good reasons He wanted recorded and handed down to all of His followers), we need to see if we can find a pattern present in it that presents us with this same kind of imagery. And I believe there is one that stands out.

In Genesis 15 we have the story of God speaking to Abraham. First the Lord tells him that his descendants will become oppressed foreigners in a land that is not theirs. Next that God will judge that oppressive nation and rescue Abraham’s descendents, and they will leave with many of that nation’s possessions. And finally that they will go to a territory that God is setting aside just for them, the Land of Canaan. The seal of guaranty of this covenant was that an animal was slaughtered (a blood sacrifice), and we’re told that its meat was divided into two piles. And then we read this:

^{CJB} **Genesis 15:17** *After the sun had set and there was thick darkness, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch appeared, which passed between these animal parts.*

The smoking fire pot and a flaming torch are meant to describe a theophany, an appearance of God (much like the Burning Bush). And here we not only see the typical characteristics of a God appearance, which is centers around fire, but we also see a division and separation being effected (in this case of a pile of sacrificed animal meat) and it is the Lord who is doing the dividing. The division of the sacrificed meat pile is an illustration of God dividing Abraham and his descendants away from everyone else to form a new people set apart for Himself.

So, in our Elijah story the chariot of fire drawn by horses of fire are a theophany of Yehoveh

(which we can equate to the smoking fire pot and the flaming torch) and we're told that the fiery horses and chariot divided and separated Elijah and Elisha from one another. Elijah and Elisha were both special men; but Elisha was not on Elijah's level. **Eliyahu** was as special for his time as Moses was for his, and that Yeshua would be for his time. Moses, Elijah, and Yeshua were divided and separated from all other humans; set apart for unique service to God.

We see this same symbolism of fire for God's presence used in a number of other places in the Bible, and some also include the element of wind as we see in the Elijah story.

CJB Psalm 104:3-4

You make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind.

⁴ *You make winds your messengers, fiery flames your servants.*

CJB Isaiah 66:15

For- look!- ADONAI will come in fire, and his chariots will be like the whirlwind, to render his anger furiously, his rebuke with blazing fire.

CJB Habakkuk 3:8

ADONAI, is it against the rivers, against the rivers that your anger is inflamed? Is your fury directed at the sea? Is that why you ride on your horses, and drive your chariots to victory?

So in these various passages that speak of God and actions taken by Him, we see the standard symbolisms of war chariots, horses, fire, and storm wind. And that is what we get in the story of Elijah being taken up by God.

Now, did **Eliyahu** ascend into Heaven (where God lives) or into the heavens (where the stars hang suspended) or into the heavens of our atmosphere (where the clouds float)? After all, the

vehicle that took him wherever it was, was a storm wind that is only present in the same realm that the clouds float, our atmosphere. The same Hebrew word, **shamayim**, is used to indicate all 3 of these places because in the ancient mind they were all inter-related. Exactly where one of these 3 places ended and the next began was unclear. In Medieval times and still in relatively modern times we have religious paintings of angels and of God Himself floating on clouds that are meant to indicate Heaven, the place where God lives. So it's difficult to know just what the author of 2nd Kings had in mind.

Even the most ancient of Hebrew Sages had problems with trying to understand this Scripture passage. While they had little insight into what Heaven might have looked like, they certainly understood that it was a spiritual place and so Elijah could not have ascended bodily into God's dwelling place. So some Sages say his body was consumed by the fire of the chariot and his soul continued on to Heaven. Other prominent Hebrew Sages say that Elijah was transported to a special place that God had prepared for Him. I tend to agree with the latter and believe that Elijah was taken away to Abraham's Bosom, where the righteous dead were safely housed until Messiah came to atone for their corrupted condition and then set free to be in Heaven with God. Yet, Elijah apparently didn't suffer death as we think of death; rather there was some kind of miraculous separation of his body from his soul (or spirit) that didn't involve the typical dying process of our vital organs ceasing to function or sudden violent body destruction. I think Elijah's experience might be very akin to what the separation of soul from body will be like in the coming Rapture, an equally mysterious and rationally unexplainable event.

What might not have struck Elisha immediately as he observed this miraculous "taking away" of **Eliyahu** was that the mere fact that he COULD observe it meant that the Lord had granted to Elisha the double portion of the Spirit of Prophecy that he had asked Elijah for. What happened was a spiritual event, not a physical event. What the Lord allowed Elisha to witness was a vision of sorts, and Elisha was overcome with awe at what his spirit "saw". As it was happening Elisha shouted out **Abba, Abba**; my father, my father. I agree with most Rabbis who say that he meant that in the sense of "master" or "teacher". It was a common epithet in that era that a teacher called his students "his sons", and that the students called their teacher "father". It was a sign of respect, and it made it clear who was senior and who was junior in authority. In the Middle East to this day, the position of the father in a family is as the unquestioned authority that holds sway over his entire household. It doesn't matter if the son is fully adult, even middle aged; in the Middle Eastern hierarchy, he is subject to his father. So the issue is as much or more about authority than it is about family intimacy or affection.

Suddenly the vision ended as quickly as it had begun; and yet it was very real. Elijah, Elisha's long time master, was gone. Showing grief Elisha rips his clothing as a customary mourning ritual.

Verse 13 explains that as much as this was a spiritual event, it wasn't only Elijah's soul that

was departed, so was his body (again reminding us of the scant Biblical passages about the Rapture whereby two were in the field, working, and suddenly one is gone and the other was left behind). Even his clothing went with *Eliyahu*, all except for his prophet's mantle. And seeing it lying on the ground, Elisha picked it up and put it upon his own shoulders. This rightfully acknowledged Elisha as *Eliyahu's* successor.

It is important for us to realize that the term prophet speaks of an office; it's not about the person. The prophet's cloak or mantle is the symbol of the office of prophet. A person can get plugged into an office that has much power and authority; that person can succeed or fail, or behave in a variety of ways that either is appropriate or inappropriate for his or her office. For instance President of the United States is an office, and every few years a new person is given temporary hold of that office. And we have had office holders who did well and others not so well. Elijah was merely a man; but he was divinely given the office of prophet, and at times he did well and at other times he did poorly. Now Elisha was the office holder.

It is here that I'd like to take a brief detour to the New Testament, as I promised you last week that I would. I think this is a good time to make a couple of connections that also answers some difficult questions. Turn your Bibles to Matthew 17.

READ MATTHEW 17:1 – 13

I wanted to get the entire context for his passage, even though we won't discuss every aspect of it. The part I wanted to highlight was this famous section that describes Yeshua's mysterious meeting on a mountain top with two people from the ancient past of Israel: Moses and Elijah in their spirits, and Yeshua (who of course is still alive) in some kind of equally glorified form. The New Testament doesn't seem to directly give us the significance of this awesome happening. Yet there were eye witnesses to pass it along, and here the writer of Matthew thought it important enough to record it for posterity, without seeming to understand its significance.

Interestingly other parts of the event are also reported and the significance is either explained or self evident. For instance, we have the Father, from heaven, stating that Yeshua is His son and that people should pay attention to him. Therefore Yeshua's authority and divinity is established and made clear. We also have the matter of equating Elijah with John the Baptist, in the sense that John the Baptist was a prophet who announced the appearance of the Messiah.

But back to the basic challenge: why did Elijah and Moses appear together with Christ, semi-publically, and then it was recorded for us to be able to know about it, but without explanation for their appearance? Obviously the Lord God arranging for the visible spirits of *Eliyahu* and

Moshe to appear as physical beings alongside Jesus was something of extreme importance; but what did it mean? Well I think I have a solution for this that will stand some scrutiny. And it's because it relates so closely to Yeshua's Sermon on the Mount and a particular passage that is spoken often in Torah Class that I want to remind you of it by quoting it from Matthew 5:17 – 19.

CJB **Matt. 5:17-19**

17 "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete.

18 Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened.

19 So whoever disobeys the least of these mitzvot and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

“Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets,” is the portion of the verse that I want to focus on. Here in Matthew 5 Yeshua explains that He didn't come to do away with the Torah (the Law) and/or the Prophets. Far from it he held a symbiotic relationship to them and so rather than do away with them He came to fulfill the principles they established. While Yeshua, the Law and the Prophets can all be talked about individually, in fact they all work together as a unity to bring about God's saving plan. And, says Messiah Yeshua, until the present heavens and earth are replaced with a future and new heavens and earth, all 3 elements (the Law, the Prophets, and the Messiah) shall remain and continue to work together symbiotically. In fact, even this future advent of a new heavens and new earth (when that symbiotic relationship of Law, Prophets, and Messiah is finally changed or perhaps broken) is prophesied in Isaiah:

CJB **Isaiah 65:17 *"For, look! I create new heavens and a new earth; past things will not be remembered, they will no more come to mind.***

Later in the New Testament, this prophecy is repeated by John the Revelator in the Book of Revelation:

CJB **Revelation 21:1 *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had passed away, and the sea was no longer there.***

It is at this point that the old heavens and earth are gone and replaced with new ones, that it can no longer be said that the Torah (the Law) and the Prophets are to remain unchanged. So what has this to do with the story that is commonly known in Christendom as Christ's Transfiguration when Yeshua began to radiate light, and at the same time Moses and Elijah mysteriously, and without explanation, appeared? It is actually quite straightforward; Moses is the ultimate symbol and Mediator of the Law, the Torah. And Elijah is the supreme symbol and possessor of the Spirit of Prophecy in the Old Testament, if not the entire Bible. And then we have Yeshua as the divine Messiah who will bring together all the purposes to which the Law and the Prophets pointed; and those purpose are to bring about redemption. So in Matthew 17, on an un-named mountain top in the Holy Land, we have the supreme symbols of the Law (Moses) and of the Prophets (Elijah), and of the Divine Redeemer (Yeshua) standing together in a further symbolic gesture of their intimate, inseparable, and inalienable bond. I have no doubt that this is what all followers of the God of Israel are to understand from that amazing meeting. And while in Matthew 17 this principle is explained symbolically, Yeshua had already explained it verbally in Matthew 5.

Let's get back on track. With Elijah's mantle now his own, Elisha heads back towards Jericho and approaches the Jordan River. He takes his mantle, and as Elijah did but hours earlier he rolls it up to mimic a staff and smites the water. It parts so that he can cross on dry land, back to the west bank.

But as he does this he looks heavenward and asks: "Where is Adonai the God of **Eliyahu**?" Now, I find that an extremely odd question. Elisha, a great prophet asks Yehoveh where He is? In fact, for me, it makes no sense. It was common knowledge even among the simplest country folks that Yehoveh dwells in Heaven. The issue can be better addressed when we look at the Hebrew, and it seems that for some reason most English translations have chosen to leave out two key words: **ap hu**. And in the ancient Biblical Hebrew it is well known that these words mean, "also he". Therefore, adding back in what has been dropped, we get, "Where is Adonai the God of Eliyahu, also he?" In other words, God has obviously taken Elijah someplace and they've gone together. So where is that place? Elisha's knee jerk reaction is NOT to think that God took Elijah to Heaven, God's dwelling place, but to some unknown location here on earth.

Then in verse 15 we are reminded of these 50 younger Guild Prophets who snuck along just out of sight, following **Eliyahu** and Elisha from a distance, to try and see what was going to happen. It never occurred to them that even if they had been standing right beside Elisha, they STILL would have not been able to observe this event because it was in-the-spirit and the Lord only enabled those that He wanted to see it, to see it. When they saw that Elisha was returning alone their immediate thought was quite noble and loyal, but misplaced. They asked for Elisha's permission to go search for his master, Elijah. They feared that for some unknown reason Yehoveh might have taken him up only to deposit him someplace else out there in the wilderness and thus he might need rescuing. Or that perhaps Elijah had decided to wander off into the desolate desert to meet God and is in a bad way.

Elisha told them they that they shouldn't go, but since they were headstrong enough not to stay back in Jericho as originally instructed by **Eliyahu**, their passions would not allow them to take "no" for an answer. So after being begged sufficiently and likely figuring that the Prophet Guild might suspect foul play if they didn't go and see for themselves, he relented. After all, while it might not have meant much to the community at large, among the hundreds, or more likely thousands, of prophets that formed the several Prophet's Guilds and colonies, Elisha would have become their de facto leader, so one could imagine a reason for doing away with one's rival.

They went and searched high and low for 3 days but (of course) without any luck. Finally they gave up and returned to Elisha, who was staying with the other prophets in Jericho. He had little sympathy for them and simply said, "I told you not to go".

This chapter now turns to several miracles that Elisha performed that establishes him among the people as the preeminent prophet of Yehoveh in Israel. Just as Solomon was challenged to demonstrate his wisdom almost immediately after assuming David's throne, so now Elisha would be put to the test to see if the Lord had given him an extra measure of the Spirit of Prophecy, thus making him the appropriate replacement for Elijah. And the first test naturally occurs at Jericho, where he was staying.

The people of the city come to Elisha and explain how beautiful their location is, how conducive to growing crops and vineyards it was, but for some reason the water was "bad". And "bad" is defined as causing miscarriages of human women and of female animals. The words, in English especially, can be confusing because of a dubious translation. The passage then seems to say that the "ground" is causing miscarriages.

^{CJB} **2 Kings 2:19** *The men of the city said to Elisha, "My lord can see that this is a pleasant city to live in; but the water is bad, so that the ground is causing miscarriages."*

But that makes no sense because the problem was said to be the water. The issue is that the word being translated as "ground" is **eretz** and that is more commonly translated into English as land (as in the land of Israel). The most common word used for "ground or soil" in the Bible is **adamah**, and that word is not present here. So the idea is that the community they lived in (the land of Jericho) was experiencing miscarriages by females, and they concluded that it was due to the bad water source that was in the land; their only water source.

Elisha tells the people to get him a new container and to put salt in it; he went to the water source and threw the salt into the water. Then he turned to the people and gave them an oracle that he credited as being directly from Yehoveh: "I have cured this water, there shall no

longer be from it death and mourning". And verse 22 testifies to the fact that history proves that from that moment forward the water became pure and the miscarriages within the community of Jericho ceased.

Just a brief explanation: the requirement for a new container (for the salt) was somewhat formulaic, as it symbolized a new work of God in the sense that something was going to be made as new and unadulterated. Therefore it would be wholly improper that a container that had been previously used for something common, would now be utilized for something as holy as a direct work of God (characterized as a "new" work). This God-principle is of course carried across to the New Testament and one place that it is presented is in Christ's parable in Luke 5.

CJB Luke 5:36-39

³⁶ Then he gave them an illustration: "No one tears a piece from a new coat and puts it on an old one; if he does, not only will the new one continue to rip, but the piece from the new will not match the old.

³⁷ Also, no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the new wine will burst the skins and be spilled, and the skins too will be ruined.

³⁸ On the contrary, new wine must be put into freshly prepared wineskins.

³⁹ Besides that, after drinking old wine, people don't want new; because they say, 'The old is good enough.'

Salt was seen in ancient times as a highly important substance. It could generally be called a purifying agent that also had the ability to arrest decay. Thus it was used daily in religious services as an agent of incorruptibility and purification. In our case, the salt was no more than a visible symbol of its physical and spiritual qualities. God miraculously performed the water purification; the salt was merely symbolic of that fact.

Some time later Elisha leaves Jericho to go and visit another prominent prophet's guild located in Beit-El. But as he was traveling there he was accosted by some youth. These would have been mid to late teens as the Hebrew word for these youths is ***na'ar***. The KJV says "little children" and that is simply not what ***na'ar*** means.

These youths taunted Elisha (and I have no doubt that Elisha wore as strange clothes as did ***Eliyahu***), but the brunt of their insulting language was to mock his baldness. The passage

explains that he saw the 42 youths and cursed them. First, getting back to our Hebrew, the word used in English is “cursed”, but it is translating the Hebrew word **qalal**. And indeed it means curse, but not in the sense of “putting a curse” on someone. Rather it means to belittle or to demean. The Biblical Hebrew word that DOES mean to put a curse on someone is **naqav**. So what he did was to chastise them, harshly, and put them in their place. And he also invoked Yehoveh’s name likely letting them thoroughly understand that as a Prophet of YHWH, whatever they did to him was the same as doing to God, because he represented God and they full well knew it (not unlike those 2 groups of 50 soldiers and their captains who were burned up for coming to arrest Elijah; but they fully understood that Elijah was God’s man).

The result was that 2 female bears suddenly appeared and mauled that gang of 42 insolent youths. Some English translations will say that the bears killed the 42 youths, but that is simply not in the text. No doubt some did die from the mauling; but others were injured and still others likely escaped with not much more than a scare and a horror story to tell their friends. Here is a classic example of nature being supernaturally ordered, by God, to act. It reminds us of Moses and Pharaoh in Egypt whereby things that occurred naturally in nature were used in supernatural ways that were usually several times their typical ferocity, in order to bring about God’s wrath.

After this Elisha left for Mt. Carmel, Elijah’s old stomping grounds, and then on to Samaria, the capital city of the 10 tribes of the northern kingdom. Actually according to 2nd Kings chapter 6 verse 32, he owned a home in Samaria, so that’s why he went there.

Next week we’ll begin chapter 3.