

THE ASCENSION OF ELIJAH AND THE TRANSFER OF HIS MINISTRY TO ELISHA: A PICTURE OF TOTAL COMMITMENT TO GOD AND OF GOD'S POWER 2 KINGS 02:01–25

Introduction

Bad circumstances are faced by every one of us. Sometimes a bad circumstance becomes a severe crisis, even life threatening. Just think of the severe accidents some of us have experienced and others of us have barely escaped. Think of the threatening diseases, the periods of economic slump and unemployment and financial crisis that so many of us experience. And think of broken relationships within marriages and families and among business partners. Finally think of death, the loss of a child or spouse or loved one or friend. During these bad circumstances and severe crisis of life, we often feel helpless and hopeless. No matter who we are — how much knowledge or authority we have — there is an inability to handle the situation. There are severe crises that no person can prevent or stop.

In such times, the power of God is needed, and the wonderful news is that God's power is available to us. If we will turn to God, trusting and calling upon Him, He promises to help us through any bad circumstance. This is the wonderful message of this passage. It is a demonstration of God's power that is exercised on behalf of those who are totally committed to Him.

For over twenty years the great prophet Elijah had been ministering to the nation Israel. Now the close of his ministry had arrived, and he knew it. The LORD had revealed to Elijah that he was to depart this earth. And the very day of his departure had arrived. This was to be the last day of Elijah's life upon earth. He was confronted with the question that would grip any of us who knew it was our last day: What was he to do? How was he to spend the last hours of his life? This is the gripping subject of the present passage of Scripture: *The Ascension of Elijah and the Transfer of His Ministry to Elisha: A Picture of Total Commitment to God and of God's Power*, 2 Kings 2:1-25.

- I. Elijah's last day on earth and his ascension into heaven: a lesson on commitment to service (vv. 1-12).
- II. Elisha's call to replace Elijah proven: a picture of God's power (vv. 13-25).

I. 2 Kings 02:01–12 Elijah's Last Day on Earth and His Ascension

Elijah's last day on earth and his ascension into heaven is one of the most astounding and dramatic stories in all of Scripture. Scripture immediately says that Elijah was to leave this earth, and he was to leave it in a spectacular fashion. He was not to experience death; instead, he was to be dramatically swept up alive into heaven by a whirlwind.

1. Knowing this was to be his last day upon earth, Elijah wanted to confirm and strengthen the faith of his young disciple Elisha (vv. 1-2). The burden of his ministry was soon to be upon the shoulders of Elisha. Thus Elijah wanted to do everything he could to strengthen the commitment of Elisha. This he did by testing the young disciple's sense of God's call upon his life. He suggested that Elisha stay behind in Gilgal while he personally visited the school of prophets in Bethel. But Elisha knew beyond doubt that he was to replace Elijah, so he refused to stay behind. He insisted that he be allowed to continue the trip and continue to serve the aged prophet.

Somehow, Elisha and the student prophets knew that the departure of Elijah was near at hand (vv. 3-7). Most likely, Elijah had earlier shared that his departure was to be soon or else the LORD had revealed the fact to Elisha and the other prophets. Whatever the case, the young disciple Elisha had a deep sense that he was chosen by God to succeed Elijah, so he wanted to be with his master to the very end.

2. On his final day upon earth, Elijah also wanted to spend some final moments of exhortation with the young prophets at Bethel (v. 3). As stated, somehow they knew that Elijah's departure was to be this particular day. Approaching Elisha, the prophets asked him if he was aware of the fact. He acknowledged his awareness, but instructed them to say absolutely nothing about it. They must not bring up the subject. Just why Elisha gave these instructions is not stated.
3. Note that Elijah tested his young disciple's sense of call a second time. He suggested that Elisha stay behind at Bethel while he personally travelled on to Jericho (v. 4). Once again he was seeking to strengthen the commitment of Elisha. But the young disciple again proved his commitment by accompanying Elijah to Jericho.
4. Elijah's purpose for going to Jericho was the same as it had been for going to Bethel: to exhort the young prophets in the school at Jericho (v. 5). Note, they too were aware of Elijah's departure, and they also asked Elisha if he was aware of the fact. Again, Elisha instructed them to keep silent about the matter just as he had the young students at Bethel.
5. For a third time Elijah tested his young disciple Elisha by suggesting he stay behind in Jordan (v. 6). Sensing ever so deeply the burden of his mission, Elijah was driven to use every opportunity to strengthen the commitment of the young disciple. Responding emphatically to his master, Elisha made a solemn promise: as surely as the LORD lives and as Elijah himself lived, he would not leave his teacher Elijah. Beyond any question, he proved his commitment to God's call. He remained with Elijah as the two of them walked on.
6. With the hour of his departure from this earth drawing ever so near, Elijah sought to spend his final moments alone with his chosen disciple and replacement. He wanted to reinforce God's power upon the mind of the young disciple (vv. 7-8). Note as the two men left Jericho, walking to the Jordan River, fifty prophets followed behind

from a distance. When the two prophets reached the river, Elijah rolled up his cloak and struck the water of the Jordan River. Immediately the waters divided and the two prophets crossed over on dry ground to be alone. Note the similarity between this event and the dividing of the Red Sea by Moses through the power of God (Exo 14:16-28).

7. On reaching the other side of the Jordan and finding a comfortable spot, Elijah's heart reached out in love and compassion to his young disciple. This young man had been appointed by God to be his replacement, and Elisha had faithfully walked with him and served him for years. In love and compassion, sensing deeply the awesome weight of the mission that was to be placed upon Elisha's shoulders, the aged prophet wanted to know what final need he might meet for his young disciple.

No doubt taking a few moments to think through what he needed most, the young disciple ultimately asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit (vv. 9-10). By making this request, he showed that he knew the importance of God's Spirit working both in and through the heart of a prophet. Above all else, Elisha wanted spiritual power, a power far beyond his own abilities. He was undoubtedly gripped by the awesome task that lay before him, and he knew that he could never fulfil the shoes of Elijah nor the call of God without the fullness of God's Spirit. God's Spirit had forcefully dwelt and worked through his famed teacher and prophet Elijah. He desperately needed the very same Spirit and power working within and through him. Knowing that he was far less capable than Elijah, and being gripped by a sense of inadequacy, he knew that he needed far more help than Elijah ever needed. Thus, he asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit, a spirit that was controlled by God's Spirit.

Note Elijah's response: his disciple's request was a difficult thing for him to grant. In fact, he did not personally have the power to grant such a request. Only God could give His Spirit to people. But Elijah did give him a sign that would indicate whether or not the LORD was going to grant his request. If Elisha actually witnessed Elijah's departure from this earth, then he would be receiving a double portion of Elijah's spirit. But if he was not a personal witness of the departure, then his request would not be granted.

8. As the mentor and disciple continued to walk along together and talk, a chariot of fire suddenly appeared, drawn by several horses of fire. Then the aged prophet Elijah was swept away from Elisha up into heaven in a whirlwind of fire (vv. 11-12).

Stunned! Amazed! The young disciple cried out, "My father! My father! The chariot and horsemen of Israel!" This was the cry of a young man's heart after his father, a father who was being swept away from him forever. Elijah had been a spiritual mentor who had meant so much to him.

The reference to Elijah's being the chariot and horsemen of Israel meant that he was Israel's true protector. Israel's defence and protection had not rested in its army and military might but, rather, in the God of the great prophet Elijah himself. The LORD

had used this prophet to demonstrate that God alone had been the true strength and power, the defender and protector of the nation. In a dramatic expression of his sorrow, Elisha took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart.

Thought 1. This is a strong lesson on commitment to one's call in life. During the remaining hours of his last day on earth, Elijah tested the commitment of his young disciple time and again. And on each occasion, Elisha proved faithful. He was totally committed to his call and to the task God had given him upon this earth. In his commitment to service, Elisha is a dynamic example for us.

Whatever our call in life, whatever our task, we must be committed. Nothing gets done apart from commitment. A worker's labour is often unacceptable and incomplete if he or she is only partially committed to the job. A farmer reaps little if any crop if he is only partially committed. A business suffers financial loss and perhaps bankruptcy if the management is only partially committed. Workers are not rewarded and often lose their jobs if they are not committed. Homes disintegrate if husbands and wives or children are not committed to one another. Students suffer and fail to learn if teachers are not committed.

No matter what the task, no matter what our hands work at every day, our efforts and the job suffer unless there is commitment. Ministers of the gospel must be committed to the LORD and to the task God has given them. Christian believers must also be committed to the LORD and to the task assigned them. And the workers of the world must be committed and diligent in the employment provided by the businesses of this world. All of us — as citizens of this world — are called to be committed individuals and servants of one another. We are to minister to the needs of one another and to serve each other by providing the goods to sustain life and to provide pleasure and joy upon this earth. This is the clear teaching of Holy Word.

(1) Listen to what God says about being committed to Him personally:

Rom 12:1 *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship.*

Gal 2:20 *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

Deut 6:5 *Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*

Prov 3:5-6 *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.*

Prov 23:26 *My son, give me your heart and let your eyes keep to my ways.*

Jer 29:13 *You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.*

- (2) Listen to what God says to all the citizens of this world about being diligently committed to the task and work at hand:

1 Cor 4:2 *Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.*

Gal 6:2 *Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.*

Gal 6:4 *Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else.*

Gal 6:9-10 *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time He will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*

Col 3:17 *And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

Col 3:23 *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.*

2 Th 3:11-12 *We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat.*

2 Th 3:13 *And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good.*

2 Pet 3:13-14 *But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.*

Prov 10:4 *Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth.*

Prov 13:4 *A sluggard's appetite is never filled, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied.*

Prov 18:9 *One who is slack in his work is brother to one who destroys.*

Prov 24:30-31 *I went past the field of the sluggard, past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment; thorns had come up everywhere, the ground was covered with weeds, and the stone wall was in ruins.*

Eccl 9:10 *Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.*

Thought 2. Why did God take Elijah up into heaven in a whirlwind? Why did He honour this great prophet in such a way as to escape death? Why did He not let Elijah go through the normal, common, natural passage of death? Mathew Henry suggests three possible reasons:

- (1) God wanted to encourage and challenge His people to trust Him more and more, to seek after Him with the zeal that Elijah demonstrated throughout his life. Elijah had been faithful, persevering to the very end, sometimes at great cost. He had to

bear constant threats of persecution and death. The implication is, a person who is wholly committed and faithful to the LORD will be greatly honoured by the LORD.

- (2) Elijah was taken up into heaven by the whirlwind to demonstrate a great reward for those who truly trust the LORD and are faithful to Him. By taking Elijah up into heaven without his experiencing death, God demonstrated that heaven and eternal life are realities. Elijah was taken up to live eternally in heaven, serving God forever and ever. His ascension is strong evidence of a great reward for those who live righteously and godly, looking for the blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God and Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ (Titus 2:12-13).
- (3) The ascension of Elijah is a type of the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is also a type of believer who will rise to meet the LORD in the air when He returns at the climax of the age (Acts 1:9-11; 1 Th 4:13-18). Elijah was a man of righteousness and strong prayer, a man who communed and fellowshiped with God. Apparently, he gained an unbroken communion with God, a communion that never ceased. Thus, God was able to use him as a dynamic example to all people of all generations of all time. Moreover, the LORD was able to use him as a type of the Lord Jesus Christ and of the coming resurrection of the believer at the return of Christ. What an example of righteousness and prayer, of unbroken communion and fellowship with God!

II. 2 Kings 02:13–25 *Elisha's Call to Replace Elijah Proven*

Elisha's call to replace Elijah was clearly proven and demonstrated by the power of God. This is a clear picture of God's power to act in behalf of His people and to meet their needs. God gave five very specific proofs that Elisha was the replacement for the great prophet Elijah:

1. The first proof of Elisha's call was the fallen cloak of Elijah (v. 13). It had fallen at the feet of Elisha. Using a dramatic symbol, God showed that the very mantle of His Spirit that had covered Elijah was now to clothe the young disciple Elisha. Earlier, when God first led Elijah to the young man Elisha, the prophet had thrown his cloak around the shoulders of the young man who was to become his disciple. This had been a clear symbol that God was choosing the young Elisha to replace the prophet some day in the future. The mantle of leadership was eventually to be placed upon his shoulders. Now that day had come. Elisha was now to pick up the mantle of prophetic leadership to the nation Israel. The fallen cloak at the feet of Elisha was proof that he was appointed by God to replace the great prophet Elijah.
2. The second proof of Elisha's call was the dividing of the Jordan River (v. 14). This was a clear symbol of God's power to guide his servant through whatever difficulties lay in his path. Knowing that he was chosen by God, Elisha picked up the cloak of his teacher and walked back to the Jordan River, returning to the school of prophets

waiting on the other side. When he arrived at the Jordan, he struck the water with the cloak and cried out from the depths of his lungs, “Where is the LORD God of Elijah?” This was not a cry questioning where God was, but rather a cry for God to demonstrate His power through him just as He had done through Elijah. Immediately the water divided, piling up on the inflowing side and flowing out on the out-flowing side. Subsequently Elisha, God’s newly appointed prophet to the nation, crossed over on dry ground.

Note that the fifty prophets from Jericho witnessed the miracle. They immediately acknowledged God’s call for Elisha to replace Elijah, and they knew that Elijah’s spirit was definitely resting on the young disciple. Therefore, they bowed in respect, accepting his leadership. The proof of Elisha’s call had been given in a specific miracle.

3. The third proof of Elisha’s call was the verification of his word (v. 16). God’s power to give His servant spiritual knowledge and insight was to be demonstrated. The young prophets who had followed Elijah and Elisha had witnessed the whirlwind on the other side of the Jordan River. When Elisha shared that Elijah had been taken up into heaven by the whirlwind, the young disciples had difficulty understanding just how this could be. After some discussion, they approached Elisha about sending fifty of the prophets back across the Jordan to look for Elijah. They felt that perhaps the Spirit of the LORD had picked him up and set him down some place close by. Despite Elisha’s objections, the prophets repeatedly insisted until the new leader finally gave in to their request (v. 17).

For three days the fifty prophets searched all over the countryside trying to find Elijah. But of course, they failed. Eventually, they came to the conclusion that the LORD had actually taken Elijah up into heaven in the whirlwind, just as Elisha had said. When they returned to their new leader, the word and the spiritual knowledge of Elisha were proven, verified to them. Their conviction that he was God’s appointed replacement for Elijah was reinforced. They could totally trust his word and spiritual knowledge, for God had given him the unusual privilege of witnessing the actual ascension of Elijah, and he had faithfully declared the truth of the fact to them.

4. Elisha’s call needed to be demonstrated to the people as well as to the prophets of the nation (vv. 19-22). Thus, as a fourth proof, God immediately empowered Elisha to purify the contaminated water of Jericho. By performing this miracle, Elisha demonstrated God’s power to provide the basic needs of life. Before Elisha left Jericho and the school of the prophets, some men from the city approached him about the polluted water of the city. The water made the land unproductive and apparently had caused some deaths and barrenness among the women and animals of the city (see v. 21). To meet the need, Elisha requested a new bowl with salt in it (v. 20). Once the bowl with salt had been brought to him, he walked out to the source of the water and cast the salt into it. He then cried out that the LORD had healed the water.

Never again would it be unproductive or cause the death of any person or animal. The bad water was purified permanently, which was verified at the time of the writing of *Second Kings* (vv. 21-22).

5. Sometime later Elisha travelled up to Bethel, where God was to give a fifth proof of His call to replace the prophet Elijah. His ministry needed to be demonstrated to the wicked unbelievers of the nation. This was done by judgment being pronounced upon a large, threatening gang of hoodlums. God used the event to demonstrate His power to protect and deliver His servant.

As Elisha was approaching Bethel, this large gang of hoodlums began to surround him, mocking and threatening him. They mocked the fact that he was bald, using his baldness to publicly insult him and his prophetic ministry. They were ridiculing, insulting Elisha as God's representative. By being the newly appointed prophet of the nation, Elisha's very ministry was at stake. If the youthful hoodlums had been allowed to persecute Elisha without being punished, the people would never have accepted his ministry as the prophet to the nation. Sensing this fact from the Spirit of God, Elisha whipped around to confront the gang: he called down a curse upon them in the name of the LORD (Lev 26:21-22). They were like so many down through the ages who have "mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against [them]" (2 Chr 36:16).

Soon after the curse had been pronounced, the judgment of God fell upon the thugs. Two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of them (v. 24). From there, Elisha travelled safely home to Mount Carmel and then later made a trip to Samaria (4:23; 5:3).

Thought 1. God had the power to take care of His servant Elisha. And He has the power to take care of any servant of His, whether minister or lay person. If a minister's call is being questioned or doubted, God has the power to prove that call, that he is a true minister of God.

God does not use His power just to help the minister, but to help us all. Whenever we need help, God's power is present to help us. No matter what our need, whether for water as the people of Jericho needed or for safety as Elisha needed when he confronted the hoodlums, God's power is available to help us. God loves us and will meet whatever need we have. If we will do what Elisha did — turn to the LORD and cry out for His help — the LORD will help us. He has the power to help. No matter what the problem or difficulty, trial or temptation, nothing is too hard for the LORD. He can do anything, and He longs to use His power to help us. This is the clear teaching of God's Holy Word:

Mat 19:26 *Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."*

Luke 1:37 *“For nothing is impossible with God.”*

Acts 1:8 *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

Rom 16:25-27 *Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith — to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.*

Eph 3:16 *I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.*

Eph 3:20 *Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.*

2 Tim 1:7 *For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.*

2 Sam 22:40 *You armed me with strength for battle; you humbled my adversaries before me.*

1 Chr 29:12 *Wealth and honour come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all.*

Job 42:2 *“I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.”*

Isa 40:31 *But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*

Isa 41:10 *So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*

Isa 43:13 *“Yes, and from ancient days I am he. No one can deliver out of my hand. When I act, who can reverse it?” ■*