

2 Kings 2

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[0 : 00] And this evening, and we're going to carry on in two kings tonight. And the message that we're getting in this chapter, I think is that when everything changes, God stays the same.

When people change, when they come and when they go, God remains with his people. The funny thing about two kings too, is that if you take it out of the book of two kings, the narrative from the end of chapter one and then beginning at chapter three kind of works.

Anyway, it ends with King Ahaziah in chapter one and then picks up with King Jehoram in chapter three. And so we wonder, what is the point of this chapter here? And I think the author takes a break from the narrative on the kings to teach us about God in times of change.

If you look at verse one, we see the setting, we see the subject. Now, when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven, that's the context of this chapter.

Elijah's ministry will end and Elisha's ministry will begin. It's all change, isn't it? And change is unsettling.

[1 : 17] First of all, change is unsettling. There's a kind of unspoken tension in the air, certainly at the beginning of the chapter. There's a kind of huge elephant in the room.

It's as if Elisha, Elijah's understudy, doesn't want to believe or accept what is happening, that soon the great prophet and leader, Elijah, is going to be taken by God away into heaven and he's going to be removed from God's people.

Change. And so he clings on to Elijah, doesn't he? At every opportunity, he insists, I won't leave you, Elijah. And then this group of sons of prophets come alongside him and tell him a couple of times, very helpfully, do you know that today the Lord will take away your master from over you? Verse three and five. And both times, Elisha says, I know it. Keep quiet. There's an unspoken tension, an apprehension about the removal of this great man from the ministry.

It's going to be the end of an era, isn't it? The kingmaker is going to be taken. Change. And Elisha is clearly unsettled.

[2 : 38] He's upset by that. When Elijah does go into heaven, Elisha cries out in verse 12, my father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen.

Now, having looked at this passage this week, I changed my mind on what Elisha is saying there. I'm pretty convinced now that he's not talking about Elijah's mode of transport into heaven.

That's what I used to think. But we're actually told what his mode of transport is in verse 11. It's the whirlwind that Elijah's carried up in this wind. So he's not talking about horsemen and chariots appearing to take Elijah away.

But I think he's actually talking about Elijah himself disappearing into heaven. It's as if he's saying there goes the chariots and horsemen of Israel.

There goes the army of Israel. There goes the great man, the strength of Israel, the chariots and the horsemen. He was the great prophet, wasn't he?

[3 : 44] The kingmaker, the one who had wrestled with God, who brought blessings and curses, the one who put kings in their place. And now he's going.

And you can sense the anguish. My father, my father. There's this moment of anguish in verse 12 where Elijah tears his own clothes into two.

It's change. It's goodbye. And when he's gone, he asks the question, where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? The man of God has gone to God.

So how are we going to carry on? He's dealing with a massive change in the life of the church, isn't he? What are we going to do when Elijah goes? How can we continue?

How can we continue when all that we've known has been taken from us? When this man who has done so much, who has done what the kings of Israel wouldn't do, who's fought so valiantly for the

kingdom in these dark times, how is Israel going to survive without the chariots and the horsemen?
[5 : 00] God removes the chariots and the horsemen, takes them into heaven. Sometimes we ask the same questions, don't we? Leaders, great leaders in the church, they come and they go.

Influential people, gifted people, people that we miss. What will we do when there's no Billy Graham or Lloyd-Jones or John Stott?

What will we do when there's no Dick Lucas? There are people in this church we feel the same about, isn't there? What will we do without them?

Paul and Liz, Chuck and Waima. Change. It's really unsettling, isn't it? At a personal level.

Think of it from Elisha's point of view. When things change, when people move away. When people that we've grown up in the faith with and we've learned so much from and have led us, move away or change.

[6 : 06] It's upsetting, isn't it? We feel like we've lost our best warriors, the chariots and the horsemen. God's servants change.

Life changes. Church life changes. But God here, God stays the same. Change is unsettling. But God is unchanging. In his anguish, Elisha asks the right question. Look again closely at verse 12.

As Elijah is taken away, where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? It's really subtle, isn't it? Elisha doesn't ask, where is Elijah?

That's the mistake that the sons of the prophets, these guys who are hanging around, they make that a little bit later. They keep looking for Elijah, but he's gone.

[7 : 06] His answer isn't to carry on looking for Elijah, the servant, but to seek the God that he served, the God of Elijah.

Elisha knows deep down, doesn't he, that whilst things change, whilst God's leaders and servants come and go, it is their God that we need.

And he stays, he remains. The God of Elijah can still be found. And we need him, not just his servants.

And this chapter proves that to us, actually, because what we get in this chapter, it's kind of a strange chapter, is a collection of God's activity. There are these quick changes of scene, aren't there, where God is doing different things.

So you've got God getting Elijah, and then Elisha through the parted waters of the Jordan. God rescuing people at Jericho from some poison water.

[8 : 10] God judging these lads outside Bethel. All of this activity in this chapter tells us that when there is change, when there is this kind of handover, Elijah has gone, but it is still business as usual.

The business of salvation and of judgment, when things change, the anchor that holds us in place is that God still works.

Sure, it is the end of an era in ministry and human terms, isn't it? But God's work continues and is reassuringly familiar.

Actually, it's very familiar what God does after Elijah goes. But can you hear the echoes of God's work? The echoes of the way that God has already worked amongst his people.

Think about Joshua, Joshua chapter three and four. There's similarities, isn't there? Elisha is brought across the river Jordan by God's power.

[9 : 17] It's parted one side to the other, just like God did with Joshua. And then where does Elisha go next? He goes to Jericho, doesn't he?

And that was famously the same with Joshua. That was the first place he went to, Jericho. And do you remember that story of Joshua echoes what God did before Joshua with Moses?

Moses brought God's people earlier through the Red Sea. He purified the water that was poisonous. And that story is in this passage again, isn't it?

It's as if God's work echoes and echoes and echoes through the generations. Things and people and circumstances and time changes, but God stays the same and he still works again and again and again.

It's not to say that God's work is monotonous, though, or it's kind of unchanging in a stale way. There is a freshness always to God's work.

[10 : 24] And we see that in this chapter as well. When Elisha gets to Jericho, there's this story about him healing the water in verses 19 to 22.

The men of the city of Jericho, they say to him, verse 19, it's a nice place to live, but the water is bad and the land is unfruitful. It's probably a good translation to say that they were saying that the country suffers from miscarriages.

There's something deadly about Jericho. It's not just difficult to grow things there in the fields. There is something poisonous about the place.

The atmosphere is killing people. It's as if the land is cursed. There's a deadly darkness hanging over this place. It's contaminated, Elisha.

Don't go there. But Elisha goes there anyway, doesn't he? And God heals the water, verse 21. From now on, neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it.

[11:28] And I want you to see how fresh and how thrilling that moment is. Because what was going on in Jericho wasn't some random disease outbreak.

Jericho has got a very, very dark history. Now, you might remember a few months ago, we thought about those early chapters of Joshua when we looked at 1 Kings chapter 16.

And in Joshua 6, we remembered that Joshua, after the walls of Jericho come down, he places a curse on the city of Jericho. And that was relevant when we looked at 1 Kings 16, because Ahab sends his lackey, Hiel, to try and rebuild the city of Jericho at the cost of two of his children.

He feels that curse. So Jericho, it's like the kind of spiritual equivalent of Chernobyl, something like that. It's a kind of cursed city, a cursed land.

So it's why this healing is so fresh and why it's so thrilling. The cursed land becomes grace land. It's the last place you'd expect God to bless.

[12:51] But it's so typical of him, isn't it? It's predictably unpredictable of God. His grace is predictably fresh and surprising.

Do you see? He is the same thrilling, gracious God that he ever was in the days of Elijah, now with Elisha. And of course, at the same time, he's the same fearsome God that he ever was, too.

Now, I want to try and talk to you about the last three verses of this chapter. I can't go through this chapter without explaining them, can I, a little bit? Because they're just so, so strange.

I want to talk about the strangeness of them in a couple of weeks, because I think that's really important. But it is in our chapter now, another little picture that God is still working, isn't it?

Both in surprising grace and in judgment. Look with me at those verses, 23 to the end. And Elisha heads out from Jericho to this place, Bethel.

[14:00] And a group of lads come out from Bethel and they shout insults at him, don't they? And go up, you bald head. Go up, you bald head.

And it sounds really, really funny. In today's parlance, and forgive me if this is offensive to any one of you, they are kind of saying, get lost, you slaphead, aren't they?

And Elisha curses them. And two bears come and kill or cut some of the lads. It is utterly, utterly bizarre, isn't it?

Now, to cut a very long explanation short, this is not just Elisha being irritable. But he is the representative of God. He is the one who brings the power and the healing and the grace of God, as we've already seen.

And in the culture of the day, Elisha would have probably been traveling with his head covered. So these insults aren't just kids kind of being opportunistic, playing around, picking on someone's bald head.

[15:08] They are repeating a prevalent term of mockery that has been associated with Elisha, particularly in the town of Bethel.

It's what they say about Elisha. Elisha the bald head. They've probably been taught by their parents or those around town.

They're expressing a commonly held term of mockery that is a sign just for him. And he's well known for it. And so he's being held in deliberate contempt by these lads.

Who represent a kind of worldview on God himself as they slander his representative. It's a little dig at God's man, isn't it? It's like taking the Lord's name in vain.

It's using God's name or his servant's name in a way that despises him. And so the point is that God is still the fearsome God of righteousness.

[16:10] Who gives grace and lifts up the cursed and the lowly, but who brings down the proud.

You can still hear the echoes even after the kind of ministers change of him working as he has done before.

At the time when Joshua went over the Jordan was about five or six hundred years earlier than this chapter. And a lot can change in six hundred years, can't it?

But what can't change and what doesn't change is God's work and God's arm and his strength. Or his willingness to rescue and to heal people.

How different it would have been to live in Elisha's time compared with Joshua's time or Moses time before him. They're now in the Iron Age.

Joshua's in the Bronze Age. But God is still doing, isn't he? What he was always doing. He's still doing now what he was doing then.

[17:17] His work is not limited to a particular time in history or to a particular leader. God doesn't just work at Pentecost or in the Reformation, as we sometimes think, or in the 18th century revivals.

There is change. But God remains. And you can hear the echoes throughout the generations. The God of Peter and the God of Augustine and the God of Whitfield.

He is our God. He remains. So how does this happen? I want to end by thinking about how we can know this today.

How can we know that the Lord is doing this today in 2020? Through what means is God going to keep working even when we change?

Even when we come and go and things move around us? Well, the kind of obvious thing that I've missed up until this point in the passage is that God keeps working by providing a successor to Elijah, doesn't he?

[18:30] There's this passing on of the baton, particularly in verse 14. Elijah has gone and Elisha takes his cloak and strikes the water and it parts.

It's kind of mantle passing on thing happening. Elisha is Elijah's successor. And this was God's plan from the beginning, back from 1 Kings 19, where God tells Elijah to go and find Elisha and to anoint him to take his place.

And the successor is going to do exactly what the person they've replaced did. And you can see that in this passage, actually, in the geography of the journeys that go on.

Because the journey that Elisha takes is a mirror image of the journey that Elijah took before the handover. You might not notice that Elijah starts in Bethel in verse two.

Then he goes to Jericho in verse four. Then he ends up at the Jordan in verse six. And Elisha, he retraces those steps, the Jordan, then Jericho, then Bethel.

[19:44] So what Elijah had done, Elisha continues to do. He is the spiritual successor of Elijah. And I mean that literally.

Look at verse nine. Just before Elijah goes, Elisha asks for a double portion of the spirit of Elijah, doesn't he?

And as Elisha emerges on the other side of the Jordan, sons of the prophets who kind of witnessed this, they say of him in verse 15, the spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha now.

God remains as the spirit is passed from one servant to his successor. As one servant leaves, the spirit is given to the next.

The spirit of the man of God continues to work as he indwells and empowers the next man. The leaders change, don't they?

[20:50] But the spirit in this story remains. The spirit never leaves. And this is where we kind of start to pick piece clues together about the kind of so what for us now.

The Elijah, Elisha handover here is unique in the Old Testament. It is the only place in the Old Testament where a prophet names and appoints a successor.

And where the spirit explicitly of one prophet is given to that successor. And this is being shown us now to prepare us to understand the handover of ministry from Jesus Christ to his apostles and to the church, to the apostolic church that we belong to.

I don't know if you've ever wondered why the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, mention Elijah so much. Why him? Well, there are lots of reasons.

But one reason why is that the Gospel writers want us to think about Elijah and Elisha to show us how Jesus' work is going to continue after he has gone to heaven.

[22:10] Through his spirit given to the apostles. And if you think about the similarities, there are so many actually. Elijah appoints his successor here, Elisha.

And Jesus appoints his apostles. Elijah's spirit rests on Elisha. And Jesus' spirit rests upon his apostles.

The spirit of Elijah is given as he ascends into heaven in our chapter. Just as Jesus' spirit is given and is breathed out on the church and the apostles after his ascension in Acts 1.

Jesus' apostles have the spirit of Jesus. And in Acts, Jesus continues to work in the same way that he has done through them.

Bringing his fresh, surprising healing to outsiders and bringing words of judgment to those who are against him. The apostles will carry on doing what Jesus was doing through the work of his Holy Spirit.

[23 : 27] And, you know, the disciples doubtless asked the same questions that maybe Elisha was tempted to ask. What are we going to do without Jesus? What are we going to do without the man of God with us?

The great man himself, the great leader. And they were distraught, just like Elisha is here. And they looked into the skies, didn't they, in Acts chapter 1, to see where Jesus was going as he ascended into heaven.

And the angels come to them and say in Acts 1, why are you looking up to heaven? For he is going to come back in the same way that he went. And sure enough, in the next chapter, Acts chapter 2, at Pentecost, Luke tells us, there came from heaven the sound of a mighty rushing wind.

And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. They were asking the same questions. Maybe they were looking around the room, planning ahead.

Who have we got when Jesus goes? Peter. John. But they didn't need to focus and they didn't need to think about the servants of Jesus.

[24 : 42] Because they were going to get the spirit of Jesus. Things would change. The personnel, if you like, would change. But Christ himself would remain with them.

And this, do you see, is where the line of succession is still today in the church that we're in, isn't it? Through the spirit of Christ in his apostolic church that we belong to.

Do you know, our church, it believes in apostolic succession. We have the apostles and the prophets in our church every week.

The spirit of Jesus works through his apostles every week amongst us. But not in the way that some people think about that. Jesus' spirit works in this church through his apostles every time we open up the Bible.

This is where the line of succession is, isn't it? This is where, even though things change, God remains.

[25 : 49] As his spirit works through the apostles' teaching. It's why when the apostle Paul is appointing his successor, Timothy, he is not interested in whether Timothy is related to the apostle Peter.

Or whether the right-colored smoke comes out of a chimney. He is interested in whether Peter is going to continue to teach what the apostles have taught.

That he will guard the deposit given to them by the apostles and to live that out. That's where the succession is.

Christ's spirit working in us through the apostles' teaching. And so our legitimacy as a church today rests on the presence of the spirit and his word preached.

And spoken and believed in and lived out. Just as it was in Elisha's day, actually. He needed the spirit of Elijah and the word of God.

[26 : 49] Did you notice how the water was healed in Jericho? When it's healed? It was when God spoke. Verse 21. Thus says the Lord, I have healed the water.

Change is really unsettling, isn't it? What will we do without such and such? And it's right to feel like that. We can miss how things have been in the past.

And we're allowed to be sad, I think, when things change and when people change. We can miss people if we've got to move on whenever. But we don't have to idolize people, do we?

We don't have to idolize our leaders. We don't have to hope ultimately in the servants of God. Because we have the spirit of God.

And the echoes of his work continue again and again and again throughout every generation. Even when things and people change, God remains.

[28 : 01] Shall we pray together? Thank you.