

Where is the God of Elijah?

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Date: 10 March 2024

Preacher: Lewis MacDonald

[0 : 00] All right, we're going to read tonight from the Old Testament, from 2 Kings chapter 2. This is the Word of the Lord.

Now, when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal.

And Elijah said to Elisha, Please stay here, for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel. And Elisha said, As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.

So they went down to Bethel. And the sons of the prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, Do you know that today the Lord will take away your master from over you?

And he said, Yes, I know it. Keep quiet. Elijah said to him, Elisha, Please stay here, for the Lord has sent me to Jericho. But he said, As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.

[1 : 00] So they came to Jericho. The sons of the prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha and said to him, Do you know that today the Lord will take away your master from over you?

And he answered, Yes, I know it. Keep quiet. Then Elijah said to him, Please stay here, for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan. Everybody said, As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.

So the two of them went on. 50 men of the sons of the prophets also went and stood at some distance from them as they were both standing by the Jordan.

Then Elijah took his cloak and rolled it up and struck the water. And the water was parted to one side and to the other, till the two of them could go over on dry ground.

And when they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, Ask what I shall do for you before I'm taken from you. And Elisha said, Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me.

[2 : 00] And he said, You have asked a hard thing. Yet if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you. But if you do not see me, it shall not be so.

And as they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

And Elisha saw it and he cried, My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen. And he saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

And he took up the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. Then he took the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him and struck the water, saying, Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?

And when he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other. And Elisha went over. Now when the sons of the prophets who were at Jericho saw him opposite them, they said, The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.

[3 : 08] And they came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. And they said to him, Behold, now there are with your servants fifty strong men. Please let them go and seek your master.

It may be that the spirit of the Lord has caught him up and cast him upon some mountain or into some valley. And he said, You shall not send. But when they urged him till he was ashamed, he said, Send.

They sent there for fifty men. And for three days they sought him, but they did not find him. And they came back to him while he was staying at Jericho. And he said to them, Did I not say to you, Do not go?

Now the men of the city said to Elisha, Behold, the situation of the city is pleasant as my Lord sees, but the water is bad and the land is unfruitful. He said, Bring me a new bowl and put salt in it.

So they brought it to him. And he went to the spring of water and threw salt in it and said, Thus says the Lord, I have healed this water. From now on, neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it. [4 : 07] So the water has been healed to this day, according to the word that Elisha spoke. He went up from there to Bethel. And while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, Go up, you baldhead.

Go up, you baldhead. And he turned around and when he saw them, he cursed them in the name of the Lord. And two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the boys. From there he went on to Mount Carmel. And from there he returned to Samaria. So tonight we are, we're carrying on with Elijah and Elisha.

And one thing we've seen in the last few weeks in this series is that at the heart of almost everything that happens in Israel, in this time in history, at the heart of it is idolatry. And we're told at various points how this idolatry is expressed. And Elijah is surrounded in his life by the prophets of Baal who say that there is no one true God.

[5 : 07] There are many gods that you can pray to, but there is not one true God. So if you want rain, then you pray and you will get rain.

If you want your wealth to increase, then you pray in this direction and you'll be heard. You believe and worship all the gods you want to, but make sure you do not say there is only one true God. That is the world that Elijah is in. And now he's about to be taken away and you see what's happening. Elijah is about to leave a minority group of people who believe the same as him. He's about to leave them behind and yet nothing has changed really in Israel. Ahab might be dead. The king who we've been looking at the last few weeks is the evil king. He might be dead. He might be gone, but Israel is determined to continue the way it's going. It's determined that it will continue to build its culture around this idolatry.

[6 : 11] It will continue to say fundamentally there is not one true God. You go out into the city today.

You go into Edinburgh today. And we probably agree that there's not much difference in attitude between Edinburgh today and Israel in the Bible.

The writer John Hick, he said it in his book. He talks about interpreting religion and he looks at all the religions and he says this, these traditions or religions are ways along which men and women can find salvation, liberation, ultimate fulfillment.

He's describing how our culture works, how it operates. You find what you want in any religion or movement. They can all be true if you find what you want, if you find fulfillment in one or if you find that all your hopes are answered here.

There is room to believe in everything you want in Edinburgh today. There is room to find truth in different places but surely there cannot be one true God.

[7 : 25] Israel, 9th century BC or Edinburgh today, the need that we see here is for spiritual renewal.

The need is for an absolute trust in the one true God who promises to protect the tired and the weak and the needy. The need is for the people we are close to and spend time with every week to come and see what we know ourselves to find that there is one who promises to make their lives like they are meant to be.

There is a lot, as we were reading that, there's a lot in this chapter, a lot that we will have to pass over but just two points from it tonight.

In a place that needs spiritual renewal, Israel, 9th century BC, Edinburgh today, in a place that needs spiritual renewal, two things happen that we see in this chapter.

We bear the family name and God heals the land. So firstly, we bear the family name. Verse 9, Elijah is about to be taken into heaven, his life on earth is almost over and he's spent the last probably six years with Elisha.

[8 : 50] So Elijah has been watching and following his teacher, we assume in the background because he's not really mentioned in the last few chapters. So he's the prophet in training, he's the apprentice to the true prophet.

Elijah is near the end of his life on earth, everyone seems to know it and he tells Elisha to ask for what he wants from him before he goes. He says, ask what you want and Elisha asks quite boldly for a double portion of his spirit.

What is Elijah asking for? He's asking to be given the same power that Elijah had. He's asking to continue the work that Elijah was doing in Deuteronomy 21.

We get to the laws on inheritance rights and it says in verse 17, to your firstborn only, you shall give him a double portion of all that you have.

So you'll give them possessions, you'll give them land more so than you would give the rest of your children. But most importantly, to receive a double portion was to take on the family name.

[10:05] It was to continue the work of the Father. It's the firstborn who bears his Father's name. So it's not in this passage that Elijah once doubled the power, doubled the effectiveness that Elijah had.

He wants to continue the ministry that his prophet before him was working out in terms of inheritance rights. He wants to bear the family name.

And yet look at Elijah's response. He says it's hard for him to grant this. It's hard for him to give him what he wants. Why is it hard?

What does he say to Elijah? If you see me as I'm being taken from you, it shall be so. If Elijah sees Elijah being taken up in the whirlwind, if he sees heaven breaking in and lifting Elijah up, if he understands that everything that happens here is a spiritual work completed by God and not by Elijah, then he says it shall be so.

And he does see it. And when he returns to the Jordan River, he strikes it and he asks, where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? The prophet has gone. Has God gone with him?

[11:30] Has God left with him? No, the river parts just like it did earlier when Elijah struck it. Straight away, Elijah can do the work that Elijah did.

In fact, we'll probably see in the next few weeks, he goes on to perform double the amount of miracles that his mentor did. But he can do that.

He can part the river because it's God's work. Where is the God of Elijah? Does his work end with one man?

No, it says he works through all his people. In John 14, Jesus is preparing for his own departure, he's speaking to his disciples, and as he is doing that, he tells them, this, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do, and greater works than these will he do because I am going to the Father.

When Jesus leaves, he says, those who believe in him, those who are left behind will do greater works, in what sense?

[12:46] Jesus' offer of salvation, his offer of being saved and being forgiven, the offer that he made in the three years of his ministry on earth was made on the basis that in the future he would die and he would rise again to secure that forgiveness and that saving.

His offer was pointing forward to his death and resurrection when these things would be secured. But we do greater works because he has gone to be with the Father.

We do greater works not by pointing forward, but we do greater works because we point backwards and we say it's been completed.

Forgiveness has already been bought. We do not wait in anticipation, John Piper says like this quite helpfully, what's new and greater is that never before in the history of the world had anyone ever been forgiven by faith in the already crucified, already risen, already reigning, already indwelling Christ.

What does it mean to bear the family name? What it means to do the greater works that Christ has given to us.

[14:10] There needs to be something in how you do your work, nine to five, Monday to Friday. There needs to be something in how you interact with your friends in school and you need, there needs to be something in how you talk to your family.

There needs to be something in how we live that says to the world, there is one true God. Your honesty in the workplace, your refusal to speak harmful here about someone behind their back, you caring for your family and loving them.

Our work is to live in a way that says there is one true God who rose again and who reigns in heaven.

The prophets, they look over the river, they look over the Jordan River, they see Elijah and they say look here is one who comes just like Elijah. He does the same work, he parts the river.

But it's God's work that continues. In a society that needs renewal, in a city that we know is looking for peace. We know people here who look for peace anywhere they can be found.

[15 : 24] In that place, in that city, we bear the family name. We are sent and told to do greater works by Jesus and we do that.

We do these greater works when we live in a way that says there is one true God. Where is the God of Elijah?

God still works, but he does it through his people who bear the family name. People who are sent by Jesus.

Just quickly and more specifically here. There is fear in the prophets over how God will work when Elijah goes. The first seven verses are showing these prophets coming to Elisha and they say don't you know your master is going to be taken from you.

Don't you know your friend is going to leave you. What God shows in this handover is that he chooses to work through not one man, but all his people.

[16 : 30] His work of spiritual renewal does not end with one person. So that means that we are not meant to look in any one place and expect that God will do all his work there.

We don't look to our minister. We don't look to our curc session. We don't look to our denomination and expect that God is only going to work in this city through that person, through these places. No. God works out spiritual renewal through his people and he works it out across different years regardless of the person.

Those who trust and those who know his voice, those who bear the family name have been given the greater work of going out and living and saying that there is one who has already come and died.

He says he will work through these people and bring hope to the searching. So we bear the family name. Our second point, God heals the land.

[17 : 35] In a society that needs spiritual renewal, God's people bear the family name and it's God who heals the land. If you look at verse 19, the prophets that have watched Elisha return across the Jordan River, they go with him to Jericho.

When you read this chapter, you see, you probably saw it when Cori was reading it, Elisha is retracing the steps that he took with his master Elijah a few days before that.

They travel together, probably east, directly east, to Bethel, to Jericho, to the Jordan River and then Elisha, he comes back over the Jordan River to Jericho, to Bethel and then up to Samaria.

When he comes back on his own, Elisha is not just retracing the steps he took a few days before. He's retracing the steps that Joshua and the Israelites took 500 years before that.

So if you read the first few chapters of Joshua, you see that when they first come into the land, they cross the Jordan River, they go to Jericho, they go to camp near Bethel.

[18 : 49] In Elijah's last days, he is heading east, away from a society that is adamant it can find truth wherever it likes. When Elisha comes back, he comes back the same way and God does exactly the same thing.

He takes the land and he tells it, he is the only true God. So where does he do that? Elisha's first call is to Jericho.

In Joshua 6, Joshua and his army, they destroy Jericho. We are told because of how evil the people are. And at the end, he makes an oath and he says, curse before the Lord, be the man who rises up and rebuilds this city, Jericho.

This idea of cursing is quite foreign, it's quite alien to us today. And the Bible to be cursed is to be handed over by God to the consequences of your wrongdoing, of your evil.

So when Joshua says curse before the Lord, he is saying, if anyone tries to rebuild this city, Jericho, they are going to be handed over to the consequences for their evil.

[20 : 00] The curse Joshua says is the loss of family, it's death. In a few chapters before this, we see it in 1 Kings 16, a man named Teal, he comes and he rebuilds Jericho.

And so his oldest child and his youngest child, they die. Elisha comes to the rebuild Jericho.

And the prophets say to him, this city is beautiful, there's just one problem, the water kills. In verse 21, it says that this drinking water has been killing people and causing miscarriages.

The curse remains in 2 Kings 2. The prophet comes to the city and though this curse remains, he throws salt, he performs his miracle, throws salt into the spring and the water is cured.

God's first step in renewing the city, in healing the land, is going to Jericho and healing the water and lifting the curse of death.

[21 : 09] Elisha says himself, thus says to the Lord, I have healed this water. The curse is undone in Jericho. Elisha comes and God works through him to remove the curse of death.

He heals the water. Paul in his letter to the Galatians, he takes up this language of being cursed.

And he says this in the third chapter, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. For it is written, cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.

Paul says to us tonight, the curse doesn't just belong to Jericho. It belongs to us.

It's not just them who are punished for their evil know it. He says very clearly we are as well and we fall under the same judgment. We don't live like we're meant to.

[22 : 10] For all the ways that God shows us how to live well by his law, we go and we do the exact opposite of what he says. We are convinced we can live in the way that we want to.

We are convinced that we can rebuild Jericho and the curse that comes with that, Paul says, is the curse of death. Yeah what does he say?

Christ is set as free by taking on our curse himself. The rule in the Old Testament is that whoever is hung on a tree is cursed.

Where did Jesus go? Where does he walk to? He goes up the mountain and he's hung on a tree.

He's nailed to the cross. The Son of God who lived perfectly hangs on a tree.

He takes on the curse of death that belongs to us. And he does it so that we who were cursed by our own fault can be free.

[23 : 11] If you're here and you haven't believed, if you haven't trusted in Jesus, then Elisha's journey is important to you.

The curse of death remains. The curse of death for rebuilding Jericho is the same consequence for you and me who might decide that we will live the way we want to live.

It's the same consequence for us when we say we will look for truth, we will look for meaning everywhere apart from in the true living God. And yet you can have freedom from the curse if you trust in the one who took that curse on himself.

And just as he who died on the tree was raised three days later, those who believe in him, the Bible says, will not be held down by death either. But they will be raised again and they will be able to spend eternity with him in his presence.

God heals the land by curing the water and lifting the curse. Christ heals us by taking the curse on himself.

[24 : 28] Lastly, just one more episode here in this account of God healing the land. Elisha carries on this journey and he goes to Bethel and we read it there, the last three verses that again it's something that our modern minds probably struggle to read and make sense of even more so than the last scene.

It says that this group who were mocking Elisha at first, it seems because he's bald, they... or Elisha calls this curse from the Old Testament and has this group killed by these two bears and even more unsettling is the fact that in verse 23 it says that they were small boys who were mocking him.

Why does Elisha participate in undoing the curse in Jericho and then come to Bethel and call out a curse against these 42 boys who only seem to be making fun of him?

Our first reaction is probably to be shocked and disturbed and we're not going to fix that completely. But just two or three things to help us make sense of these last few verses.

The first thing is that the Hebrew word used here for small boys does not exclusively mean small boys.

[25 : 54] It can mean adults as well. One thing the commentaries pick up on is this word being used across the Old Testament for people who are adults. So they might be boys, they might be 12, they might be in their 30s as far as this word is concerned.

But the other thing is that Bethel in terms of idolatry is as bad as it can get. It's the center for the worship of false gods and there's this golden calf that's situated in Bethel purely to stop people worshipping the God of Israel.

It's not the case that you can look here and there for truth and maybe pray to the true God at some point, no, under no circumstance will you pray to the true God.

It's a completely hostile place. The last thing is in what the boys do and say, they come out of the city to meet Elisha.

They don't just sit there and wait for him to walk past but they come out to him and when they shouted him, being bald is a minor issue for Elisha here.

[27 : 08] They come out and they shout at him, they come out and they mock him because they know he comes in the name of someone greater than himself. They know he comes to do God's work.

So when they say go up, go up, go up you bald head, go up where? Go up where Elijah went. Go up wherever your master supposedly went.

Don't you bring the God of Israel here to Bethel? That's what they're saying. Don't tell us he is the only true God. Don't tell us that we have done wrong.

That's what they say. Whatever we make about Elisha's curse, the bears that God sends to kill the 42, however we work by one point is this, God has the final say.

You see these boys, this group, they know who Elisha is. They know whose name he comes in. They know which God he believes in and ultimately they're not mocking Elisha, they're mocking God himself.

[28 : 17] The one who brings about spiritual renewal, the one who cures the water and ends the rule that death has in Jericho. Yes, they might only be chasing his messenger out, but they are denying God and it brings about their judgment.

God has the final say for this group. God brings spiritual renewal, that's his work. If you are searching for the truth, if you want to know why you have been made, if you question why your life looks the way it does, the answer is to run to Jesus who promises healing.

Like the water in Jericho being cured, being healed, God promises to heal you by coming to his son, Jesus. If you say that he is not the one true God, then you don't get the final say.

Paul says himself, eventually God's people will be with him in a perfect place forever. But for those who refuse him all their days, for those who reject him, for those who reject the idea that he is the only true God, for those who force him out of Bethel, eventually they will be judged.

And the judgment will be spending eternity away from his goodness, which you could have known down here.

[29 : 58] Judgment will be spending eternity separate from the love that God has offered to you, all your life. Where is the God of Elijah?

He's still here and he works through his people who bear his name and he heals the land. He brings hope that overrules grief.

That is what Jesus gives to you in the gospel. That is what we know if we have trusted in him. His work is spiritual renewal. So don't sit in Bethel and chase him out, force him out, but come to him who promises you the truth and tells you you can be healed.

The city, Edinburgh needs to be spiritually renewed. And that work is done by the one true God, but he says to the church, he says to his people, those who know his voice, those who go with the family name.

He says to go out with the greater work that has been given by Jesus, to live in a way that says he is the one true God.

[31 : 07] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for this chapter. We thank you for what we see and how you deal with Elijah and Elisha. Lord, we pray that we would bear the family name.

We pray that we would go out and do the greater works given to us by Jesus. The work of living and speaking in a way that says there is one true God who loves perfectly and who offers hope and peace to the lost.

So be with us in these ways. If anyone is here and they have not yet trusted in you, Lord, we pray that tonight even they would come to know the love of a true and living God who shows kindness and forgiveness to all who run to him.

So heal this land, we pray, heal our families, heal our friends and use us in this work, we ask, for Jesus' sake. Amen.