

O N E

2 KINGS 1-2

The Parting of the Ways

Elisha (“my God saves”) had been Elijah’s servant and apprentice for probably ten years, but now time had come for the Lord to call His courageous servant home. We get the impression that they were men with different dispositions, Elijah being the “son of thunder” and Elisha the gracious healer. This doesn’t mean that Elijah was never tender or that Elisha was never be stern, for the biblical record shows otherwise. But in general, Elijah came like John the Baptist, putting the axe to the root of the trees, while Elisha followed with a quiet ministry like that of Jesus (see Matt. 3:1-12 and 11:16-19). In the closing events of this spiritual partnership, we see revealed four important truths about the God of Israel.

God judges sin (2 Kings 1:1-18)

After the death of wicked King Ahab, the nation of Moab took advantage of Ahaziah, his son and successor, and broke the bonds of vassalage that had chained them to Israel (v. 1; see 3:4-5). Years before, David had defeated Moab (2 Sam. 8:2) and Ahaziah’s successor Jehoram (Joram) would join with Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, to fight against the Moabites (3:6ff).

But the Lord is in charge of the nations of the earth (Acts 17:24-28; Dan. 5:19, 21; 7:27), and His decrees determine history. Ahaziah was an evil man (1 Kings 22:10, 51-53), but when the Lord isn't allowed to rule, He overrules (Ps. 33:10-11).

Idolatry (vv. 2-4). A decade or so before Ahaziah's accident, Elijah had won his great victory over Baal (1 Kings 18), but Ahab and Jezebel hadn't been convinced or converted and neither had their family (1 Kings 22:51-53). When Ahaziah was severely injured by falling through a lattice, he turned for guidance to Baal and not to the Lord God of Israel. "Baal" simply means "lord," and "Baal-Zebul" means "Baal is prince." But the devout remnant in Israel, who worshiped Jehovah, made changes in that name and ridiculed the false god of their neighbors. "Baal-Zebel" means "lord of the dung," and "Baal-Zebub means "lord of the flies," one of the names His enemies used to insult Jesus (Matt. 10:25).

Why did the king decide to send messengers forty miles away to Ekron to consult the priests of Baal? True, Elijah had slain the 450 prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:19, 22, 40), but that was ten years ago. Surely other priests of Baal were available in the land. The king's parents had fed hundreds of these priests at their table (1 Kings 18:19), and it wouldn't have been difficult for King Ahaziah to import priests of Baal to serve as court chaplains. Perhaps he sent to Ekron for help because he didn't want the people in Samaria to know how serious his condition was. The temple of Baal at Ekron was very famous, for Baal was the chief god of that city, and one would expect a king to send there for help. Note that Ahaziah asked the priests of Baal for a prognosis and not for healing.

God keeps His servants informed about matters that other people know nothing about (John 15:15, Amos 3:7). This "angel of the Lord" could well have been our Lord Jesus Christ in one of His pre-incarnate appearances (Gen. 16:7;18; 21:17; 22:11; 48:16). When God's servants are walking with their Lord, they can be confident of His directions when they need them. This had certainly been Elijah's experience (see v. 15 and 1 Kings

17:3, 9; 18:1; 21:18). Elijah intercepted the royal envoys and gave them a message that would both rebuke and sober the king. Why did he want to consult the dead god of Ekron when the living God of Israel was available to tell him what would happen? He would surely die! This ominous declaration was made three times during this event – twice by Elijah (vv. 4 and 16) and once by the messengers (v. 6). Instead of being spokesmen for Baal, the messengers became heralds of God’s Word to the king!

Pride (vv. 5-12). It seems incredible that the king’s messengers didn’t know who Elijah was and didn’t learn his identity until they returned to the palace! Elijah was Ahab’s enemy (! Kings 21:20) and Ahaziah was Ahab’s son, so certainly Ahaziah had said something to his courtiers about the prophet. The description the messengers gave of Elijah reminds us of John the Baptist who ministered “in the spirit and the power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17; Matt. 3:4). The phrase “a hairy man” (KJV) suggests his garment rather than his appearance. The NIV reads “with a garment of hair.” Like John the Baptist, Elijah wore the simple camel’s hair garment of the poor and not the rich robe of a king (Matt. 11:7-10).

The announcement that he would die should have moved Ahaziah to repent of his sins and seek the Lord, but instead, he tried to lay hands on the prophet. (This reminds us of King Herod’s seizure of John the Baptist; Matt. 14:1-12.) Ahaziah knew that Elijah was a formidable foe, so he sent a captain with fifty soldiers to bring him to the palace; but he underestimated the prophet’s power. Did Ahaziah think that he could kill the prophet and thereby nullify the prophecy? (The Lord’s words in v. 15 suggest that murder was in the king’s mind.) Or perhaps the king hoped to influence Elijah to change the prophecy. But Elijah took his orders from the King of Kings and not from earthly kings, especially a king who was an idolater and the son of murderers. Years before, Elijah ran away in fear when he received Jezebel’s threat (1 Kings 19), but this time, he remained where he was and faced the soldiers unafraid.

The captain certainly didn’t use the title “man of God” as a

compliment to Elijah or as a confession of his own faith, for “man of God” was a common synonym for “prophet.” Elijah’s reply meant, “Since you called me a man of God, let me prove it to you. My God will deal with you according to your own words.” The fire that came from heaven killed all fifty-one men. This judgment was repeated when the second company of fifty arrived. Note that the second captain ordered Elijah to “come down quickly.” Don’t keep your king waiting! The memory of the contest on Mount Carmel should have warned the king and his soldiers that Elijah could bring fire from heaven (1 Kings 18).

We must not interpret these two displays of God’s wrath as evidence of irritation on the part of Elijah or injustice on the part of God. After all, weren’t the soldiers only doing their duty and obeying their commander? These two episodes of fiery judgment were dramatic messages from the Lord that the king and the nation had better repent or they would all taste the judgment of God. The people had forgotten the lessons of Mount Carmel, and these two judgments reminded them that the God of Israel was “a consuming fire” (Deut. 4:24 and 9:3; Heb. 12:29). King Ahaziah was a proud man who sacrificed two captains and one hundred men in a futile attempt to prevent his own death. These were not innocent men, the victims of their ruler’s whims, but guilty men who were willing to do what the king commanded. Had they adopted the attitude of the third captain, they too would have lived.¹

Disobedience (vv. 13-18). Insisting that Elijah obey him, the king sent a third company of soldiers, but this time the captain showed wisdom and humility. Unlike the king and the two previous captains, he submitted himself to the Lord and His servant. The third captain’s plea for himself and his men was evidence that he acknowledged Elijah’s authority and that he would do God’s servant no harm. The Lord’s words in v. 15 suggest that the danger lay in the hands of the captains and not in the hands of the king. Perhaps the king had ordered them to kill Elijah en route to the palace or after he had left the palace. If the king had to die, he would at least take Elijah with him!

The king was in bed when Elijah confronted him and for the second time told him he would die. How many times must the Lord repeat His message to a wicked sinner? The king would leave this world with “you will surely die” ringing in his ears, yet he refused to obey the Word of God. Again, we’re reminded of Herod’s response to John the Baptist, for Herod listened to John’s words but still wouldn’t repent (Mark 6:20). After about two years on the throne, Ahaziah did die, just as Elijah had predicted, and his younger brother Jehoram (or Joram) became king. Note that the current king of Judah was also named Jehoram (v. 17). To avoid confusion, we shall refer to Ahaziah’s brother, the king of Israel, as Joram, and Jehoshaphat’s son, the king of Judah, as Jehoram.

Before leaving this passage, we need to remind ourselves that a proud and unrepentant world will one day experience the fire of the wrath of God. It will happen “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thes. 1:7-9 NKJV). God “commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30 NKJV), which means that those who do not repent are rebels against the Lord. The gospel isn’t only a message to believe; it’s also a mandate to obey.

God wants us to remember (2 Kings 1-6)

King Ahaziah died but Elijah didn’t die! He was taken up into heaven in a whirlwind, accompanied by fiery horses drawing a chariot of fire. Like Enoch of old, he walked with God and then suddenly went to be with God (Gen. 5:21-24; Heb. 11:5). Both men illustrate the catching away of the saints when Jesus returns (1 Thes. 4:13-18). But before Elijah left Elisha to carry on the work, he walked with his successor from Gilgal to beyond the Jordan, and what a walk that must have been! The Lord had at least three purposes in mind when He led these two servants to walk together.

Taking advantage of the present. Elisha knew that his master was going to leave him (vv. 1, 3, 5), and he wanted to be with him to the very end, listen to his counsel and learn from him. It appears that Elijah wanted Elisha to tarry behind and let him go on alone, but this was merely a test of Elisha's devotion. When Elijah threw his mantle on Elisha and made him his successor, the younger man promised, "I will follow you" (1 Kings 19:10), and he kept that promise.

During the years that the two men had worked together, surely they came to love and appreciate one another in a deeper way. "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18) applies to ministry as well as marriage. Moses and Aaron labored together, and David and Jonathan encouraged each other. Paul journeyed first with Barnabas and then with Silas, and Dr. Luke seemed to be a regular companion to the apostle. Even our Lord sent out His disciples two-by-two (Mark 6:7; see Ecc. 4:9-12). We are not only fellow workers with the Lord, but also with the Lord's people, and there must be no competition as we serve the same Lord together (John 4:34-38; 1 Cor. 3:1-9).

We never know when a friend and fellow worker will be taken from us. God told Elisha that Elijah was leaving Him, but we don't know when it is our time or a friend's time to go to heaven. What great opportunities we miss by wasting time on trifles when we could be learning from each other about the Lord and His Word! It rejoices my heart when I see younger Christians and Christian workers appreciating the "senior saints," the veterans of Christian service, and learning from them. One day, these "giants" will be called Home and we'll no longer be able to learn from them.

These two men represented different generations and opposite personalities, yet they were able to walk together. What a rebuke this is to those in the church who label the generations and separate them from each other. I heard one youthful pastor say that he didn't want anybody in his church over the age of forty, and I wondered where he would get the wise counsel that usually comes with maturity. I thank God for the "Elijahs" in my life who

were patient with me and took time to instruct me. Now I'm trying to share that same blessing with others.

Preparing for the future. At Bethel, Jericho and Gilgal, the two men visited the "sons of the prophets" (vv. 5, 7, 15; 4:1, 38-40; 6:1, 7; 9:1; see 1 Kings 20:35), companies of dedicated men who were called of God to study the Scriptures and teach the people. Samuel led one of these "schools" at Ramah (1 Sam. 7:17; 28:3; see 10:5, 10; 19:20-23). These groups would be similar to the mentoring groups in our churches, or even like our Bible schools and colleges. The work of the Lord is always one generation short of extinction and we must be faithful to obey 2 Tim. 2:2 – "And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (NKJV).

These young prophets knew that their master was about to leave them, so these final meetings must have been very emotional. We have "farewell messages" in Scripture from Moses (the Book of Deuteronomy), Joshua (Josh. 23-24), David (1 Chron. 28-29), Jesus (John 13-16), and Paul (Acts 20:17-38 and 2 Timothy), but the Lord didn't record for us what Elijah said to his beloved students. Certainly he told them to obey Elisha just as they had obeyed him, to remain true to the Word of God and to do everything God told them to do as they battled against idolatry in the land. It was their responsibility to call the people back to obeying God's Covenant (Deut. 27-30) so that He might be pleased to bless and heal their land.

During the years that I was privileged to instruct seminary students, I occasionally heard some of them say, "Why should we attend school? Charles Spurgeon never went to seminary, and neither did Campbell Morgan or D. L. Moody!" I would usually reply, "If any of you are Spurgeons, Morgans or Moodys, we'll no doubt discover it and give you permission to stop your education. But let me remind you that both Spurgeon and Moody founded schools for training preachers, and Campbell Morgan was once president of a training college and also taught at a number of schools. Meanwhile, back to our studies."