

Week 7: *Elijah Is Taken Up in the Whirlwind* – 2 Kings 2:1–18

Hook



Main Point: Power comes from the Lord alone, not human might.

Q: If you could witness any biblical moment in person, which one would you choose?

Q: When you think about the most powerful moments in Scripture, what comes to mind—and what does that reveal about how you understand God’s power?

Many people might choose the Red Sea parting, David’s slaying of Goliath, or the Resurrection of Jesus. Today’s passage contains another powerful and unique moment: Elijah’s being taken to heaven in a whirlwind with chariots of fire – one of only two times in the Bible in which someone never died. This moment reminds us that Elijah’s ministry was never about his own strength – the power always belonged to God.

RECAP: In the first lesson, we talked about the role of the Old Testament prophets as God’s messengers calling His people to repent and how they pointed ahead to Jesus. In week 2, we saw God’s provision for both Elijah and the widow of Zarephath during the drought, which was a consequence for Israel’s idolatry. In lesson 3, God raised the widow’s son from the dead, which not only showed His sovereign power, but also His care for the vulnerable and His heart for all the nations. In lesson 4, we saw God’s superiority over other “gods” as Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. In lesson 5, Elijah ran for his life from the wrath of Jezebel and found refuge in the Lord. God spoke to him not in the thunder and lightning but in the still, small voice. In lesson 6, Elijah called Elisha to succeed him, and Elisha left his old life behind. Then Elijah prophesied the deaths of Jezebel and Ahab, but the end of Ahab’s dynasty was delayed because he repented. Ahab’s first son died because he worshipped false gods, and his second son became king.

In this lesson, Elijah is taken up to heaven in the whirlwind and Elisha takes over his ministry with the same Holy Spirit upon him.

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Book

Main Point: Power comes from the Lord alone, not human might.

2 Kings 2:1–8 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Israel had been unfaithful to the Lord in the Promised Land.

Q: What did the sons of the prophets tell Elisha in each city? What does this tell us?

Q: What does it tell us about Elisha that he refused to leave Elijah's side?

Elijah's last journey looks strange on a map: from Gilgal to Bethel, then from Bethel back to Jericho, which is very close to Gilgal. Why would God send Elijah to Bethel only to bring him back to the same area? This journey wasn't about efficient travel; it was theologically symbolic. A previous journey had taken him from the wilderness to Mount Horeb to retrace the first Exodus generation's commitment to God's covenant. This time he was seemingly retracing Israel's steps as the second generation finally entered the Promised Land in the conquest, but in a different order.

Gilgal is where Israel camped after they first crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land, before the first battle at Jericho.¹ There, God's people renewed the covenant by circumcising those who had been born in the wilderness, celebrated their first Passover, and set up a memorial site to remind future generations of how God had parted the Jordan River for them (Joshua 4–5). Gilgal became their military and spiritual base throughout much of the conquest. They frequently returned there to regroup and to offer sacrifices (Joshua 6–10).

Bethel ("house of God") is where God first called Jacob "Israel." Jacob had bookend encounters there with God, one as he was fleeing the land (the vision of the stairway to heaven) and one as he was coming back (when he wrestled with God). As Israel later did at Gilgal, God reaffirmed His covenant with Jacob, and Jacob built a memorial there (Genesis 28; 35). In the conquest generation, Bethel was where they kept the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant after they entered the Promised Land, before the temple was built in Jerusalem. But when the nation split, Bethel was the southern city (along with the city of Dan in the north) where Jeroboam put a golden calf for idol worship.

Jericho was the site of the conquest generation's first battle in the Promised Land. Just after they renewed the covenant at Gilgal and consecrated themselves, they marched around the city, and God knocked down the walls (Joshua 6).

Retracing Israel's steps under Joshua, Elijah would have gone from parting the Jordan, to Gilgal, then to Jericho, then to Bethel. But Elijah ended with parting the Jordan, yet his steps before that weren't the conquest in reverse. His trip to Bethel in between was

more like a detour, which is theologically significant. Bethel is where Israel started detouring from worshipping God when Jeroboam set up the golden calves there and at Dan. In his last journey, Elijah was emphasizing again the false worship of Israel.

At each of these cities, they encountered “sons of the prophets,” which refers to students or disciples at prophetic schools, not biological sons. Later in the story, Elisha met with them when he went through their towns (2 Kings 6:1–2). Fifty of these men followed them to the Jordan when Elijah parted it.

For each new place he went, Elijah told Elisha not to come, but Elisha refused to leave his side. At each place, the sons of the prophets told Elisha that God was going to take Elijah away, and Elisha said he already knew. This echoes the way Ruth refused to leave Naomi and foreshadows the way the disciples *said* they would never leave Jesus. Both Elijah and Elisha knew God was taking Elijah away. Elijah’s offer for Elisha to stay provided a test of his loyalty, common for ancient Near Eastern master/disciple relationships. It wasn’t a test in a negative way; rather, it was an invitation. Discipleship should never be coerced, demanded, or guilted into but only entered into willingly, intentionally, even excitedly. Elijah was giving him an “out.” Elijah offered three times, the same number of times that Peter denied Jesus.

When they arrived at the Jordan, Elijah struck the water; it parted, and they walked through on dry ground as the Israelites had done 575 years before – except that Elijah was crossing *out* of the Promised Land, not into it. Israel had crossed through the Jordan to enter the Promised Land and find rest (Joshua 21:44). But after they entered the land, they never had peace for very long because they continued to worship false gods. Throughout the judges and the monarchy, there was a repeating cycle of rest when they were faithful to God but oppression when they were unfaithful (Judges 2). Elijah’s final journey and departure from the land illustrated Israel’s failure to live as God’s covenant people in the land. But his message wasn’t just one of judgment, it was one of hope. Elijah was leaving the physical Promised Land to enter the true, eternal rest of God in heaven. Elijah’s *reversed* miracle of crossing the Jordan in the other direction points us to the fact that the physical Promised Land was never the ultimate goal. The true goal is the eternal kingdom of God where we will find true rest (Hebrews 4:1–11).

Q: In what ways is our modern culture like Israel during the time of Elijah?

Q: Elijah’s testing of Elisha shows that discipleship must be chosen willingly. Why is voluntary commitment important in following God?

Q: What does Elijah’s final journey reveal about Israel’s spiritual condition—and how do you see similar patterns in your own life?

2 Kings 2:9–12 [Read]

Talking Point 2: The faithful will enjoy eternal rest with the Lord in heaven.

Q: Why is it significant that Elisha called Elijah “my father”? How does this connect to the “double portion” request?

Q: How did Elijah let God determine the answer?

When they had crossed the Jordan, before Elijah was caught up to heaven, Elijah asked Elisha what he wanted Elijah to do for him. Elisha asked for a double portion of his spirit. We will talk about this in more detail in the next lesson, but a “double portion” isn’t necessarily a request to be twice as powerful as Elijah. “Double portion” was the language of inheritance law in the ancient world. The oldest son received a double portion of the father’s inheritance. This was about being Elijah’s rightful successor, not being more powerful or greater than he was. Elijah said it was a “hard thing” because it was not his job to grant that request, only God could choose his successor. It was also a hard thing Elisha was asking to take on. Elijah’s journey had been difficult, full of persecution, fear, rejection, loneliness, even despair. Being a prophet who speaks hard truths to rebellious people is never easy.

Elijah answered by essentially saying God would decide this for them. If Elisha saw him being taken, it would be so. Elijah was reminding us that no one controls the Spirit of God. Only God decides *where His Spirit goes* and *what His Spirit does*. Elisha did see Elijah being taken up; he didn’t just disappear, so Elisha received what he had asked. Elisha called him “My father! My father!” referring not only to their previous master/disciple relationship but also his role as Elijah’s successor, like the first-born son, the one inheriting his ministry.

As they were still talking, the chariots of fire appeared between them, and Elijah was taken up in a whirlwind to heaven. It is ironic that God would use a whirlwind and fire to take Elijah away when at Mount Horeb, God had not been in the wind, earthquake or fire but in the still, small voice. At Horeb, Elijah was broken, afraid and ready to quit, and God met him gently. At the Jordan, Elijah had reached the end of a difficult ministry and God’s dramatic display honored him publicly. The way God speaks and acts always fits the moment, yet God meets His people not according to our expectations, but according to His perfect wisdom, faithfully providing what is needed to accomplish His purposes in every season.

Horses and chariots are symbols of military strength. The book of Psalms tells us not to trust in them but to trust in God (Psalm 20:7). Elisha’s seeing these chariots of fire is a reminder of God’s invisible heavenly army² that had protected and strengthened Elijah throughout his ministry and would protect and strengthen Elisha. Later, when Syria attacked Israel again, God showed Elisha and his servant a whole mountain full of horses and chariots of fire (2 Kings 6:17). This is the great army that fights for God’s people, greater than the eye can see, than we can even imagine (Exodus 14:14; Deuteronomy 1:29–30). When we face the enemy in our spiritual battles (Ephesians 6:12) and are afraid, we can know we have a heavenly army fighting for us.

There is only one other person in Scripture whom we are told went to heaven without dying. We don't know that much about Enoch, except that he walked faithfully with God. He was the seventh generation from Adam through Seth's line and was the father of Methusaleh, who lived longer than any other human recorded and the great-grandfather of Noah. In the well-known "faith chapter," Hebrews tells us he was taken up "by faith" (Hebrews 11:5). We don't know if there was anything that made him special, just that he was faithful to God during a time of increasing wickedness among humanity. The same is true of Elijah. We don't know if he was particularly smart or brave or talented, just that he was faithful to God in a time when everyone around him was unfaithful.

Q: How does it feel to know that God has a heavenly army protecting His people? How can knowing this impact your day-to-day life?

Q: When you imagine eternal rest and peace, what do you envision?

Q: Why is it important that Elisha understood the weight of what he was asking for—and how should that shape the way we think about following God's call?

2 Kings 2:13–18 [Read]

Talking Point 3: God carries on His ministry through each new generation.

Q: Why did the prophets want to search for Elijah? What did Elisha say?

Q: What does it tell us about Elisha that he parted the Jordan as Elijah had done?

When Elijah was gone, Elisha tore his clothes, a physical act that reflects the grief and anger of someone whose loved one has died, as if your heart is torn in two. It gives the mourner a physical way to express his emotions. Even though Elijah didn't die, Elisha still grieved his loss. The narrative quickly moves from grief to action because he had a job to do. He picked up Elijah's mantle³ and carried on his ministry right away.

In ancient Near Eastern culture, the cloak symbolized identity, inheritance rights, and in this narrative, functions as a visible symbol of prophetic succession and authority. Just as the robe of a king represented his authority, the cloak of a prophet symbolized his. When Elisha picked up the cloak, he was taking on Elijah's role. He took the cloak to the Jordan and did the same miracle Elijah had just done, parting the Jordan. Elijah's cloak wasn't a magic wand; it held no power in itself, but it represented his prophetic authority. When Elisha struck the water, he didn't say a magic spell; he called on the Lord. He recognized that the power didn't come from the cloak or from Elijah, but from the Lord. *Where was the God of Elijah?* He was with Elisha. The vessel for God's power was a new person, but the power was the same. The sons of the prophets immediately recognized what had happened – the spirit of Elijah was now on Elisha. Elisha would carry on the ministry by the power of God's Holy Spirit.

But they still didn't quite understand – they wanted to go looking for Elijah, just in case the Holy Spirit had just sent him somewhere else. This idea reflects known instances where God's Spirit transported individuals (1 Kings 18:12; Ezekiel 3:14–15; Acts 8:39–40). But Elisha said no; Elisha knew he was gone. They kept urging until he finally relented and they sent 50 men to look for him for three days. But Elijah's disciples did not find him. He had gone up to heaven. Sometimes people must learn things through their own experience. Even prophets, even disciples. Like Thomas's wanting to touch Jesus' wounds to believe.

When Elijah crossed the Jordan, he was crossing out of the land and up into heaven. Elisha was now crossing back into the land, back into the ministry of calling God's people to repentance. This reminds us God wasn't finished with Israel yet. They had been unfaithful generation after generation, and Ahab was the absolute worst. But God hadn't given up on them. It's noteworthy that this happened between the reigns of Ahab's two sons, which Elijah had prophesied would end in the destruction of Ahab's dynasty. God knew how this story would end, but He still sent Elisha back into the land to speak truth and call His people to repentance. God, in His patience, continues to call His people to repentance, even while warning of the consequences of continued rejection.

Elisha continuing Elijah's ministry in the same spirit and power reminds us that God will continue His mission through new people in each generation. We may look at our church leaders and think they are irreplaceable, that the church will never be the same after they are gone. They are special, and God has used them mightily. But God's plan for any ministry is never limited to one person, no matter how gifted, wise or wonderful. God's work does not depend on any one person. He raises up different people in different seasons to accomplish His purposes, ensuring that His mission continues even as leaders change. It's about God's Spirit working through us. Paul told the Corinthians that he, Peter and Apollos were just workers planting and watering seeds, and it was God who caused the growth. Remember, we are not the foundation. We are just faithful builders for a moment in time, and when our moment is done, God according to His will & purpose, will raise up the next, because His Church does not stand on us, it stands on Christ.

Q: Reflect on any spiritual mentors or spiritual “parents” you have had in your life. How might you be called to carry on their ministries after they are gone?

Q: Reflect on godly church leaders you have known. What did you most respect about their life and ministry that you would like to emulate?

Q: Where in your life might God be asking you to move from holding on to what was to stepping into what He is now calling you to carry forward?

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Took

Main Point: Power comes from the Lord alone, not human might.

Elijah's story reminds us that God's work has never depended on one extraordinary person – it depends on God's power. Elijah was taken away, but the mission of God continued because the same Spirit was still at work. This week, when you face something difficult, overwhelming or beyond your ability – pause and ask yourself: *Am I trying to handle this in my own strength, or am I trusting the Lord's power?* Instead of relying only on your own effort, intentionally bring that situation to God in prayer and ask Him to work through you. Remember the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9: "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

CHALLENGES

THINK: Think about how God may be calling you to carry on someone else's ministry. Or carry on in leading your family spiritually. (This may be difficult to imagine if your parents didn't lead your family in a godly way. If that's the case, think about how God is calling you to be different.) How can you pick up that person's mantle? How can you lead in the same spirit? How can you emulate the good things he or she did? What may need to be done differently? How does God equip you with His Spirit? Where is He calling you to go and preach His truth?

PRAY: Pray for your own life and ministry. Ask God to give you wisdom and vision for where He is calling you, even if it's into a difficult situation as Elisha was called into. Pray for His strength to correct you, guide you, and empower you. Pray for those you lead, in ministry or in your family, that the Lord will soften their hearts to hear His Word.

ACT: Pick up the mantle. Reflect on one way this week, big or small, that you can emulate the ministry of someone you respect who is no longer with us. Maybe your grandmother wrote people encouraging notes. Maybe your high school youth pastor played basketball with local students to build connections. Whatever it is, choose one specific way you can carry on that person's ministry in his or her memory and honor – and do it this week.

¹ While this is likely the Gilgal situated between Jericho and Jordan, some scholars hold it to be a different Gilgal, about 7 miles north of Bethel. Paul R. House, [1, 2 Kings](#), vol. 8, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 257.

² Note: the word “host” in “heavenly host” refers to an army. We often read that and just think it means a big group of angels, but that word means army, so when we read “heavenly host” we shouldn’t imagine just a choir of angels singing, but an army ready for battle.

³ Note: “mantle” just means “cloak.” The phrase, “carrying the mantle” meaning taking on someone else’s role of leadership comes from this story about Elisha.