

Week 8: *The Double Portion* – 2 Kings 2:9–10, 15; 4:18–37

Hook



Main Point: Elisha carried on Elijah’s ministry, but God expanded it.

Q: What is something meaningful you have inherited or received from someone in your family? What made it valuable to you?

Q: When you inherit something important, do you think the goal is to preserve it exactly as it is or to grow and build on it? Why?

Maybe it was money, a family heirloom, a piece of land, or even something simple such as your grandfather’s tools or your mother’s recipes. When we inherit something valuable, the goal usually is not just to keep it locked away or leave it exactly the same – it’s to carry it forward and sometimes even grow it. Often the person who receives the inheritance uses it in new ways while still honoring the person who passed it down. In today’s lesson, Elisha asks to inherit Elijah’s ministry as a firstborn son – and then carry it forward into the next generation.

RECAP: In the first lesson, we talked about the role of the Old Testament prophet 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 punishment 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 delayed the end of his dynasty because Ahab repented. Ahab’s first son died because he worshipped false gods, and his second son became king. In lesson 7, Elijah was taken up to heaven in the whirlwind, and Elisha took over his ministry with the same Holy Spirit upon him.

In this lesson, we will explore exactly what it meant when Elisha asked Elijah for a “double portion” of his spirit.

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Book

Main Point: Elisha carried on Elijah's ministry, but God expanded it.

2 Kings 2:9–10 and Deuteronomy 21:15–17 [Read]

Talking Point 1: The double portion was the inheritance of the firstborn son.

Q: Why did Elisha ask for a double portion of Elijah's spirit? (2 Kings)

Q: What is the right of the firstborn? Why? (Deuteronomy)

Elisha's name means "God is salvation." He grew up in a wealthy and industrious family that owned lots of land and 12 yoke of oxen, which would have been a substantial agricultural operation at the time. When Elisha was called to follow Elijah, he left his wealthy farming family behind to follow him into an economically uncertain life in the wilderness. But he trusted God. He spent several years as Elijah's protégé until Elijah was carried up into heaven. Then Elisha began his ministry, which lasted about 60 years, through the reigns of Jehoram, Jehu, Jehoahaz and Joash.

Elisha loved Elijah like a father. The day Elijah was departing; Elisha refused to leave him and even called him "my father" when he was taken up into heaven. When Elijah asked what he could do for Elisha, Elisha asked for a "double portion" of his spirit. He was not asking to be more powerful than Elijah. He was asking to be considered Elijah's son and inherit his ministry. In the ancient Near East, the firstborn son received a double portion of the father's inheritance.

Elisha was already acting like Elijah's spiritual son, but he was asking for that status to be made official. Elijah did not have any children, so when it came to his material estate, he could choose whom he wanted to inherit it. But when it comes to ministry, God chooses who will be one's successor. It's not automatically the biological son as with the material estate. It might not even be the spiritual "son" who had been one's protégé for many years. Just because Elisha had been following him for years didn't mean God would choose him. Elisha's wanting to be Elijah's successor, even giving everything up for it, didn't guarantee he would be.

By specifically asking for a double portion of "your spirit," Elisha indicated that he wanted to inherit Elijah's spiritual calling. Elijah answered that this was a "hard thing." Some who read this out of context deduce that he was saying it would be hard for God to give Elisha twice as much spirit as Elijah, but that's not what it means. First, nothing is too difficult for God, but that's not what Elijah meant by a "hard thing." It was a difficult thing because choosing his successor was not Elijah's job, it was God's. God would show them His choice by whether Elisha saw Elijah leave. Elijah also recognized that following in his footsteps would be hard. His journey had been full of persecution, fear, rejection,

loneliness, and despair. Elisha's journey would be different, but also hard; speaking hard truths to rebellious people is never easy. He was asking to take on a hard thing.

Secondly, he wasn't asking God to give him twice as much spirit as He had given Elijah. Or that he would be stronger or more powerful than Elijah had been. The sons of the prophets said the spirit of Elijah rested on Elisha as if it were the same spirit. And Elisha did the same miracle as Elijah in that moment, not something twice as big or important. That's not what double portion means. Double portion refers to the firstborn inheritance status of ancient Near Eastern culture. It was about succession, Elisha's being Elijah's "son" who carried on his ministry after he was gone.

Q: How have you seen faithful and biblical preachers today experience persecution and struggle?

Q: How might God be calling us to carry on the ministry of those who came before us?

Q: Why was Elisha's request considered a "hard thing"?

1 Kings 17:17–24, 2 Kings 4:18–37, and 2 Kings 13:20–21 [Read]

Talking Point 2: God grows successful ministries even more with new generations.

Q: Compare and contrast Elijah and Elisha's raising of a child from the dead.

Q: How many people did Elijah raise? How many did Elisha raise?

The "double portion" did not mean that Elisha received twice as much of the Holy Spirit as Elijah, nor that he was twice as powerful or more important, it referred to the firstborn son status of inheritance. Interestingly, however, the number of Elisha's recorded miracles does surpass those of Elijah. Even so, this should not be taken to mean that Elisha's ministry was better or that he was greater in significance. Elijah is referenced far more than Elisha in the Gospels. He even appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. Elijah is the one who never died but was called up to heaven. Elijah is the one the Jews are waiting for to return. Recording the numerous miracles performed in Elisha's ministry reminds the reader of the succession relationship between Elijah and his successor.

Elijah raised one person from the dead; Elisha raised two. Elisha's first resurrection story is very similar to Elijah's, but the second was completely different and even more amazing. Elisha didn't actually perform the miracle. In fact, he was already dead, and it was well after his death, because his body had decayed and his grave only contained bones. A man was raised from the dead just by his body's touching Elisha's bones in the grave.

There were other doubles, too. The length of the famine Elisha predicted was exactly double the length of the one Elijah had predicted (seven years versus three and a half). Elijah prophesied through the reigns of two kings and Elisha through the reigns of four kings. We don't know the exact dates of their ministries, but Elisha's ministry was more than double the length of Elijah's. If we add the lengths of the reigns of the kings to whom they prophesied, Elisha's is exactly three times longer than Elijah's. Elijah's ministry started near the beginning of the reign of Ahab (22 years) through the end of Ahaziah's reign (two years), a total of 24 years. Elisha's ministry lasted through the reigns of Joram (11 years), Jehu (28 years), Jehoahaz (17 years) and Joash (16), a total of 72 years.

All of these "doubles" (and one triple) symbolically make a theological statement. Elisha's ministry wasn't better or more powerful, but his ministry did expand more widely. In a similar way, Jesus said His disciples would do "greater works" than He (John 14:12). This doesn't mean His disciples were more powerful than Jesus, but the reach of the Gospel stretched further, beyond Israel to all the nations. Even though Elisha did double the number of miracles, the sons of the prophets said "the spirit of Elijah rested on Elisha" because it was the same Holy Spirit who empowered them both. Elisha didn't have more of God's spirit, but his ministry extended farther and wider. As the successor, Elisha grew the "family business" of his father in the next generation.

Elisha carried on Elijah's ministry but took it to new places and new situations. The ministry and calling were still the same – preach God's Word and repentance to His people. But the ministry grew. We want the same to be true for any modern successor who carries on a spiritual parent's ministry. We hope that through the successor, God expands and grows the ministry even more widely and further than his mentor did. But that doesn't make him or his ministry better than his predecessor. Elisha could not have done what he did without Elijah's ministry preceding his. Elijah's ministry prepared the way for Elisha's, and all of it was empowered only by God. The same is true of any ministry today. God is building His Church through all of us together. Each of us puts our "stone" on top of those who have come before us, all built on the foundation of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:9–16). We stand on the shoulders of those who came before us, and all of us are just vessels of God, who is building His Church through us. Each of us has a role to play in the body, but it is the Spirit who empowers us all.

Q: How have you seen people not only carry on someone else's ministry but also expand it? How was their ministry connected to but different from their predecessor's?

Q: How can you invest and raise up spiritual leaders in the next generation?

Q: How can we faithfully carry on someone else's spiritual legacy while allowing God to expand it in new ways?

2 Kings 2:15 and 1 Corinthians 12:4–6 [Read]

Talking Point 3: God uses different people, but it's the same spirit in all of us.

Q: If Elisha asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit, why did the sons of the prophets say "the spirit of Elijah" was resting on him, not double? (2 Kings)

Q: What does this passage tell us about the spirit each person has? (1 Corinthians)

Elisha's ministry was not better than Elijah's; it was just different, partly because he was in different situations interacting with different people, but also because Elisha was a different person with different gifts, skills, experiences and resources. They did things in different ways because they were different people in different situations. As the New Testament tells us about the body of Christ – the same Spirit but different gifts, roles, and callings (1 Corinthians 12).

Elijah's ministry was done mostly alone, until Elisha joined him. Elijah alone announced the famine; he faced 450 prophets of Baal by himself; and he stood alone on Mount Horeb hearing God speak in the still, small voice. Elijah spent most of his recorded ministry in hiding, away from people. Elisha's ministry was much more communal. Fifty other prophets were there when Elisha took over; he had an assistant from early in his ministry; and he interacted with other prophets often. Elisha spent a lot of his time around ordinary people and most of his miracles addressed their practical concerns, such as purifying water, multiplying food, healing disease, helping a widow pay her debts, and raising the dead. His miracles not only displayed God's power but also show His concern for life, restoration, healing and provision, especially for the vulnerable.

Elisha also offered counsel to the kings of Israel but remained untempted by political power. He confronted sin and spoke truth in the face of persecution. When Jehoahaz sought the Lord, Elisha offered compassion. When Jehoash saw Elisha was dying, he wept over him and called him "my father," just as Elisha had called Elijah. While Elijah had been King Ahab's enemy during his ministry, Elisha had mixed relationships with the kings during his ministry.

Elisha was a different person with different gifts, but he didn't have a different spirit; he had the same spirit, the Holy Spirit. When the prophets saw Elisha part the Jordan, they said the spirit of Elijah rested on him. This is how God empowers His people, by giving them His Holy Spirit. Having a "double portion" of the spirit didn't mean Elisha had any more or less of the Holy Spirit than Elijah. It means he carried on Elijah's ministry as his son and heir. The Spirit may have empowered different people in different ways to do different things, but the Spirit was the same. In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit came upon people and empowered them for a specific task or period of time, like Samson, Saul or David (Judges 14:6; 1 Samuel 16:13). The Holy Spirit also left people when they were unfaithful to God (1 Samuel 16:14). But in the new covenant, because of Christ's atoning work on the Cross, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell *inside* God's people (1 Corinthians 3:16). We have the same Holy Spirit living and working inside us that Elijah

and Elisha had upon them. The mission of the Holy Spirit in our lives is not just to work through us, but to work *in* us, sanctifying us, making us more and more like Jesus every day (2 Corinthians 3:18).

We have different gifts, roles and responsibilities, but the same Spirit. Each of those different gifts works together in the body of Christ. But no part of the body is any more important than any other. No one should think less of themselves because they are a part the world might consider “small” or unimportant. Every part has a role to play. And every part is empowered by the same spirit. No calling is any less important or any less holy than any other; it’s just different and unique to our own life situation, gifts, resources and calling.

Q: What unique spiritual gifts, skills and resources do you have for ministry?

Q: Reflect on where God has placed you, your circles of influence. How can you use your unique gift, skills and resources to impact the world around you?

Q: How is your life currently being shaped or transformed by the Holy Spirit?

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Took

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Teacher, take time this week to write a short note to a spiritual mentor who has invested in you, or to a spiritual son or daughter you are discipling. Thank that person for specific ways you’ve seen God at work in his or her life and share one or two things you are praying for him or her right now. During class, plan to read just a portion of your note and challenge your LifeGroup to write letters of their own this week. Be sure to remind your group that if they don’t currently have a person they are discipling – or if they need someone to disciple *them* – you would love to talk with them about helping them find that kind of relationship.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Think about what it means to be someone’s spiritual son or daughter. Who has been a spiritual parent to you? How has that person impacted you? How did that person impact their world? How can you emulate that person in the way you live your life and continue his or her ministry and impact? Are there people in your life who are like spiritual sons and daughters to you? How can you pour your life into them and help them grow in spiritual maturity?

PRAY: Pray for the next generation of spiritual leaders in your life, in our congregation, and in the world at large. Pray for those God will raise up to be prophetic voices in the world. Pray for the current adults in the church to help grow and develop these young people into mature believers. Ask God to show you whom you can disciple.

ACT: Disciple. If you don’t already have a spiritual son or daughter that you disciple in the faith, choose one person God may be leading you to disciple. Ask that person if he or she is interested in a discipleship relationship and start meeting regularly. If you already have a relationship like this, take this week to think intentionally about how you can deepen that relationship, how you can make a greater impact in his or her life or how you can meet more often or in more meaningful ways.