



***Becoming Fully Devoted Followers
by Studying the Followers Before Us***

WEEK 21

ELISHA

MAY 21-26, 2007

DAY	<i>THROUGH THE BIBLE</i>	<i>ABBREVIATED STUDY</i>
Monday	2 Kings 1-6, Psalm 101	2 Kings 2:7-25, Psalm 101
Tuesday	2 Kings 7-13, Psalm 102	2 Kings 4:8-37, Psalm 102
Wednesday	2 Kings 14-15, Psalm 103	2 Kings 5:1-27, Psalm 103
Thursday	2 Kings 16-19, Psalm 104	2 Kings 6:24 - 7:16, Psalm 104
Friday	2 Kings 20-25, Psalm 105	2 Kings 13:14-21, Psalm 105

READ

2 Kings 2:7-25

Psalm 101

REFLECT

Elisha the prophet succeeded Elijah in his ministry of calling Israel to the ways of God. They both directed their message to the Northern Kingdom, the ten tribes that had broken away under Jereboam in 931 BC, after Solomon's reign. With its capital at Samaria, it was particularly open to the attacks of hostile and powerful neighbors; in these years it was the kings of Syria that kept up the pressure. The Southern Kingdom, comprising the tribe of Judah centered at Jerusalem, was less powerful as a nation, and less of a target militarily. Furthermore, the Northern Kingdom gloried in the worship of Baal, fostered by Ahab and Jezebel and their family. This spiritual rebellion had its reflection in the Southern Kingdom, but in a less virulent form; the source of infection was in the North. So Elisha continued to concentrate on Samaria, with some attention to Jerusalem as well, in the years 850-798 BC. Soon the Northern Kingdom would be given over to the Assyrians (*ca.* 721 BC), and be lost to history; then the Southern Kingdom would take its place in military and prophetic significance.

The installation of Elisha as prophet has given us one of the great metaphors of successions: he "inherited the mantle" of Elijah. Although Elijah was a lone figure in much of what he did, he did bring Elisha on board as a sort of apprentice, at the Lord's bidding (1 Kings 19:15-18). But our passage today hints of certain tensions in the succession. Elisha was avid to be considered next in line, as shown by his request to receive the "double portion" – which refers to the oldest son's inheritance of twice anybody else's, not that Elisha expected twice the spiritual power of Elijah. But Elijah can't assure him of the succession, unless "you see me when I am taken away from you." Commentators note that

this requires both the willingness of Elisha to follow and watch God perform the unprecedented act of assumption, and also the willingness of God to allow Elisha to see it all. The succession is in God's hands.

The sight of Elijah being transported heavenwards elicits Elisha's first prophetic words: "My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" It is a cryptic phrase, wrenched as it were from the heart of the prophet in the moment of an astonishing experience. They seem to encapsulate the central conviction of the prophetic line in Israel: that the strength of the nation is not found in military might but in spiritual insight and dedication. Elijah was the strength of the covenant people. This sentiment will find its echo upon the death of Elisha (2 Kings 13:14).

Two stories about Elisha confirm his appointment. The first is about the purification of the waters of Jericho; we will see that it is characteristic of Elisha's miracles that he often provides for the specific needs of the people. The second is not characteristic, and has caused perhaps the most offense of any tale in the Old Testament: why do 42 boys die for teasing the prophet? Well, first, the text says they were "mauled," that is, they may not have died. Second, at least in the future, Elisha will be known for his deeds of provision, life, and even resurrection.

RESPOND

As Elisha dedicated himself to a life of integrity before the Lord, so our psalm today sings of that joyous possibility: "I will walk within my house in the integrity of my heart; I will set no worthless thing before my eyes." And the psalmist is clear too that this kind of devotion can only come as a replenished gift from the Lord: "I will give heed to the blameless way; when wilt Thou come to me?" Here is one of the great promises of the Christian faith, that uprightness can be a daily refreshment, given by the faithful presence of God (Romans 5:1-5).

PRAY

Lord, thank You for Your own faithfulness in refreshing us in the beautiful integrity of Your way.

- D.D.

READ

2 Kings 4:8-37

Psalm 102

REFLECT

One of the things that marks Elisha's ministry sharply from Elijah's is his constant contact and association with people of all kinds. We hear at this time of a new group of people known as "the sons of the prophets," apparently a group of men (and some wives) who lived communally apart from society to serve the Lord. Elisha also found the benefit of having a close associate, Gehazi, to assist him. Did he foster this new communal approach to religion? If he didn't invent it, he surely supported it.

These same social instincts of his can be seen in the story of the Shunnamite woman and her son. He falls into connection with her circumstantially, but becomes a faithful friend. A rich woman herself, she "persuades" him to eat some food, and then convinces her husband that they should build an add-on room for his occasional use. She asks for nothing in return, but he discerns her desire for a child, and so prophesies that it will happen. The story skips to when the boy is grown, and suddenly has a headache and dies in her lap. She lays the dead boy in Elisha's bed, and then gets her servants to saddle a donkey and lead her to Elisha's home on Mount Carmel. Finding him, she insists, in spite of the efforts of Gehazi, that he himself accompany her back to her home to pray for the boy. Elisha does, and the boy is restored to life.

The story is long and detailed, with some humor running throughout. She is not the last wealthy woman to have strong opinions about how things ought to be arranged, whether in the way she gives gifts or in the way she receives her due. And Elisha, in going along with her, celebrates her generous spirit and her great heart. In the process he

expresses the great truth of his particular ministry in Israel: he is effective most often when he comes alongside the ordinary needs of particular people, and intercedes effectively and simply for them. He just meets people at their point of need. In doing so, he is the most effective interpreter in his day of the love of God for Israel.

The whole of this chapter describes such stories of miraculous provision for people in dire need. With this characteristic emphasis on practical love, Elisha's ministry comes the closest to Jesus' untiring ministry among the common folk of Galilee and Judea – note especially Elisha's feeding a multitude with just a few barley loaves (2 Kings 4:42-44). Elisha and Jesus did certainly have words for the political and spiritual leaders of their day; but their greatest satisfaction seems to have been here, in seeing the ways that God can touch people with His love and provision in the sorrows and challenges of everyday life.

RESPOND

Today's psalm describes eloquently the troubles we can face: fever, frailty, pain, sleeplessness, depression, rejection, despair. But it also affirms that the Lord is the healer of all these things: "Thou wilt arise and have compassion on Zion, for it is time to be gracious to her." Each of us suffers in some way; but how crucial it is that we cling not to our suffering, but to the Lord. It is equally crucial for us as Christians to realize our roles as intercessors for others, and to pray for the relief of the suffering of others.

PRAY

Dear Lord, Thank you for the strength that is ours in the relationships around us. Help us to support and celebrate the people we know, and to help build a community that glorifies You.

- D.D.

READ

2 Kings 5:1-27

Psalm 103

REFLECT

The account of the healing of Naaman the Syrian general is rich with detail, with surprising psychological insight, and unexpected plot twists. A little Israelite girl, a captive slave serving in the home of Naaman, wistfully says to her mistress (with an endearing concern common to little girls, but not to slaves) that she wishes that Naaman might visit the famous Israelite prophet Elisha, for his leprosy would be cured. Naaman takes the hint seriously and gets permission from his master, the king of Syria, for the trip. But the formal letter which his king writes to the king of Israel, paving the way for the visit of an enemy general, amusingly gives the king of Israel a conniption, as he considers the impact on international affairs: “Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure someone of leprosy?” This temper tantrum also reminds the readers what is at stake, lest we become too blasé about miracle stories: we are reminded that only God can do what is here being asked.

The way is clear for Naaman to go, but now he himself becomes upset with how things develop. He clearly expected Elisha to be a “healer,” a magic man who used the powers of a local god to work wonders. But Elisha doesn’t “perform.” He doesn’t even show up: he sends a servant to tell Naaman what he must do. Naaman is enraged both by Elisha’s absence and his instructions: if washing in a river was all that was needed, he could have done it in Damascus and avoided the trip. His own servants calm him down, and encourage him to follow Elisha’s instructions. The resulting cure at the Jordan restores him physically; he is made “like a little child,” recalling the little person whose concern for him started the ball rolling. But his attitude changes too: his cramped ideas about gods and magicians have been shattered forever.

So he returns to Elisha’s house, and in humility and wonder, and with the awkwardness of a new believer, he struggles with what he has experienced. “Behold now, I know there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel.” No so-called gods can hold a candle to what this God can do; Israel’s God has redefined who God is, and there can be only One. He wants to make a payment, but it is refused. He wants to take along a souvenir of Israelite dirt, and it is granted. He asks forgiveness in advance for bowing before Syria’s god when ceremony demands it, and he is told, “Go in peace.” The new believer is well on his way.

Naaman’s confession echoes the historic confession of Moses: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut 6:4-5) The word “one” in this verse is not a comment on philosophic monotheism, but a very practical reminder that the God who can do the kinds of things Israel has experienced, is in a class by Himself, as Lord of heaven and earth. Because He is the one God of all things everywhere, He also deserves our full love and devotion: all that we do, and all that we are.

RESPOND

We sing a chorus at Glenkirk that Naaman would have joined in with great enthusiasm:

You are the One that we praise; You are the One we adore;
You give the healing and grace our hearts always hunger for;
O, our hearts always hunger for.

PRAY

Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits: Who pardons your iniquity, who heals all your diseases; Who redeems your life from destruction, and who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion.
Psalm 103:1-4

- D.D.

READ

2 Kings 6:24 - 7:16

Psalm 104

REFLECT

We have noted that Elisha's miracles are usually centered on a compassionate provision for people in need, and have less to do with the broader fortunes of the nation. As Israel suffers under the reign of a series of bad kings, Elisha's ministry continues to witness to the love and care of the Lord for His people.

In our passage today we read of a siege of Samaria by the king of Syria, which reduces the city to famine and cannibalism. The details are gruesome, and the question brought by the childless mother to Joram the king of Israel – startlingly similar to the famous question that confronted Solomon – has no good answer that even a Solomon could have given. Jehoram understands it as an indictment of the national welfare, but takes no leadership responsibility. His public cliché affirms that only the Lord can relieve the situation (6:27); but in his rage he blames Elisha, and calls privately for his execution.

Elisha, seated in conversation with the leaders of the city, parries the attack of the murderer. But he prophesies that the dire situation will be entirely reversed within 24 hours. The unlucky official who mocks the prophet, and thus mocks the Lord, will see the miracle of food, but be unable to eat it.

Shakespeare's play *Much Ado about Nothing* features Dogberry the constable and his small band of assistants as comic relief. They are so inept and inarticulate that it is impossible to predict that they will have any effect on the main plot of the play. But as it happens they provide the key to unraveling the complicated deceptions of Don John, and restoring the sanity of truth and love. So also in Samaria the situation is saved by four lepers, outcasts, with no possible expectation of significant

involvement in the great plot. Creeping around the edges of the city, they try to decide if Samaria or the enemy camp represents the better hope of survival; they opt for the Syrians. Finding the camp deserted, they lose themselves in gorging on the food they find; and then it dawns on them that this may hold some greater significance. Fear for survival now impels them to rush the word to Joram before they are punished for delaying; and so Samaria hears that the siege is lifted.

We are told that the Syrians fled because they heard “a sound of chariots and a sound of horses,” and assumed a large army allied to Israel was about to sweep down on them. Here is an echo of the phrase that bookends Elisha's ministry – “My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” (2:12; 13:14) – as well as the vision in 6:17 of “the mountains full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.” This powerful imagery reflects the powerful and concrete provisions which Elisha knew to be available to God's people.

RESPOND

If King Joram's official deserves death for his doubt of the prophetic word, surely Joram deserves as much. And vengeance will come, with Elisha's anointing of Jehu for the destruction of Ahab's house (9:1-10). But for now the Lord's focus is on relieving His people at the point of their need, displaying His love and care for them in timely and effective ways. In this task, He finds Elisha to be a ready servant. We too find many opportunities to discern whether the moment calls for the dramatic gesture, or the specific and personal act of kindness. May love always be our guide.

PRAY

Dear Lord, We praise you with Psalm 104 for the many ways You flood our lives with provision and sustenance. Help us acknowledge these things as blessings from You, and be ready to give as freely as we have received.

- D.D.

READ

2 Kings 13:14-21

Psalm 105

REFLECT

The latter part of Elisha's story emphasizes his influence on the stage of history. The long-delayed vengeance of the Lord against the family of Ahab and Jezebel is let loose in a bloodbath when Elisha anoints Jehu to rebel against Joram his king and to bring final destruction on Jezebel and all their sons (9:1-10). Elisha is present only for the anointing and the charge; the rest of it happens as Jehu executes it. Included in the carnage are all the prophets, the priests and the worshippers of Baal; "thus Jehu eradicated Baal out of Israel" (10:18-28).

This prompted drastic action in the Southern Kingdom. King Amaziah, killed by Jehu, had left a large number of possible successors to the throne, but his queen, the daughter of Jezebel and inheritor of many of her traits, ordered their execution to assure her own rule. For seven years she ruled as lone monarch. Then to her amazement it was revealed that Joash the prince had been rescued and raised by the Temple priests, and was now being put forth as the legitimate king. In the South, this would have been acclaimed by the people in general as a miraculous reviving of the apparently dead line of David, and a further fulfillment of the promise of his eternal throne.

With the line of Ahab eliminated from the North, and David's line secure in the South, Elisha's ministry can be said to have reached a satisfactory conclusion, as it had been described so long ago (1 Kings 17:15-17). In today's passage, King of the Northern Kingdom Jehoash (or "Joash," but not the king of the South) hears Elisha is on his deathbed and comes to lament his death. His sorrowful repetition of

Elisha's lament of Elijah expresses his nervousness at the continued military threat of Syria: who will be Israel's strength when Elisha dies? Elisha has encouragement for him: Jehoash's straight shot of the bow and arrow indicates his ability to triumph. But there is bad news as well: his half-hearted striking of the ground with the arrows tells Elisha that his fighting will not be whole hearted (read "God-hearted") and so will not eliminate the problem. The eventual tragedy of the destruction, within a few decades, of the Northern Kingdom is thus portended, and the ever-present tragedy of the disobedience of God's own people is reiterated at the death of the prophet.

RESPOND

God's standards are high. The people of God are called to be as holy as He is holy, and as obedient as He is Lord. The tragedy of the imperfections of Israel is genuine tragedy, since half-baked doesn't get you the cake. As Christians, we can be deeply thankful for a development in the way God enables His people. By sending His Son to die for us and take upon Himself the guilt of all our sin, He enables us to approach the throne of the Holy One in true divine-given holiness. And by sending God the Spirit to dwell within and guide our ways, He enables our obedience from the inside, so that we can experience genuine devotion and genuine growth.

PRAY

Lord, Thank you for the lives of the saints we have known, and for the genuine Christian love we have experienced among Your people. Help us this day to respond to You, in obedience to Your will, and in love for those You love.

- Dave Dorman