

**Part 6: Israel's Unfaithfulness and God's Ridiculous Love
Kings & Prophets thru 722 B.C.**

**Message 6 – Elisha: Faithful Disciple, Faithful God
(1Kings 19:16, 19-21; 2Kings 2 - 8:15; 9:1-3)**

Introduction

The two great non-writing prophets of the Old Testament were **Elijah** and **Elisha**. Both ministered in Northern Kingdom of Israel during the reigns of numerous evil kings. Elisha, the God-appointed successor to Elijah, was not a “prophet of fire” like his predecessor, rather, a “prophet of compassion.” He ministered to *many* individuals. Elijah and Elisha, by both their personalities and their ministries, foreshadowed John the Baptist and Jesus. John came with a fiery prophetic message of repentance and coming judgment, as he prepared the way for Jesus. In contrast, Jesus came with a more personal and comforting approach, ministering to individuals and performing countless miracles. Jewish people in the days of Jesus would have recognized the parallel: John came as **Elijah** to call the nation back to God with a focus on a call to righteousness and repentance (Matt. 3:1-8); Jesus came as **Elisha** showing God’s tender mercy to individuals in the context of truth (Jn. 1:14,17).

The Elisha narrative is long and complex, yet there is an emphasis on three things: 1) His faithfulness as a disciple who also mentored younger disciples; 2) His power as a leader to kings, younger prophets, and individuals; 3) His ministry aimed at the Syrians – including the captain of the Syrian army, Naaman. Unlike Elijah who felt alone, Elisha spent most of his ministry in community. Perhaps this is why he had steady strength in desperate situations.

1. Transition from Elijah to Elisha: 1Kgs. 19:19 – 2Kgs. 3:27

His calling: Elijah the prophet was told that his successor would be Elisha. When he left the cave on Mt. Horeb, he found Elisha and called him to be his disciple.

So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah.

“Let me kiss my father and mother goodbye,” he said, “and then I will come with you.” “Go back,” Elijah replied. “What have I done to you?” So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his servant (1Kgs19:19-21).

In Luke 9:57-62, Jesus was approached by men who wanted to follow Him. His answers were challenging. 1) If you follow Me, there are no guarantees that you will have a predictable life. 2) You want to wait until your father has died sometime in the future and you bury him. Ie: you don't want to follow Me just yet but rather take your time. The time is now! 3) If you commit to following Me, but then look back with regret at leaving your occupation, you are not worthy to be my disciple.

The fact that Elisha sacrificed his oxen and burned his plows indicates that he *literally* “burned his bridges” and would not turn back from his new calling. He was like the 12 disciples who left everything to become Jesus’ disciples (learners) and later apostles (messengers) – see Matthew 4:18-22.

A ‘disciple’ is ‘a learner, or a follower’. When Jesus challenged people to follow Him, what He meant was: ‘Believe in Me, remain in Me, learn My ways and obey them’. He doesn’t call everyone to quit their occupation to be in full-time ministry. However, He does call each believer to learn about who He is and choose to walk with Him in the context of our life. As a disciple of Jesus Christ, I should be growing into maturity. Then I will bear much fruit in my life, 1) by being conformed into His likeness (Rom 8:29), and 2) by bearing fruit in others’ lives as they choose to become followers of Christ through my example (John 15:1-8). What have you done with Jesus’ challenge to follow Him as a disciple? How are you bearing fruit both personally and through your influence?

His empowering: Elisha was present to see Elijah taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. He was unwilling to be separated from Elijah for even a moment, knowing that his spiritual father would be snatched away at any time. In fact, Elisha had stayed close to Elijah’s side for 7-10 of his final years of ministry, observing and experiencing Elijah’s deep intimacy with God. When Elijah was about to be taken, he asked Elisha what one request could grant him as a reward.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?" "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied. "You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not . . . And Elisha saw it and cried out, "My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and the horsemen!" (2Kgs. 2:9,10,12).

The double portion was, in Israel, the special right of the firstborn son (Deut. 21:17). Thus, Elisha was asking his spiritual "father" for a special spiritual inheritance – a double experience of the living God, as Elijah's "firstborn son."

After Elijah was taken up, God granted the double portion to Elisha. He immediately began performing miracles that proved he was the Spirit-empowered successor to Elijah. He parted the Jordan River (as Elijah had done) so that he could cross back over. He then purified the bad water for the inhabitants of Jericho.

The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha" (2:15).

His retreat: Elisha took time to go to Mt. Carmel (2:25), the very place that his beloved Elijah had experienced his greatest victory of faith. No doubt, Elisha would be confronting similar challenges as he ministered in Israel which was so antagonistic to Yahweh. He would return to Mt. Carmel throughout his ministry (4:25).

Jesus spent mornings in a quiet place alone with His Father. When the disciples were weary, He invited them to go away for a retreat. Elijah ran to Mt. Horeb. Elisha returned to Mt. Carmel. King David let God "lead him by quiet waters" (Ps.23). Where do you go to renew your spiritual strength? We must find times and places where we can turn off the noise of this world and tune in to the Spirit of our living God. Otherwise we will grow weary and lose heart. Where is your Mt. Carmel?

2. His ministry to many individuals: 2 Kgs. 4:1 – 6:7

Elisha's ministry to various individuals shows *God's care for all kinds of people in all kinds of situations*. Whether someone lost a child or lost a borrowed tool, God saw and cared *through Elisha*. Each of the 6 miracles in this section bears witness to Elisha's faith in God. Further, we see individuals exercising *their own faith in God and Elisha His prophet*. The prophet's widow had to trust Elisha to supply her need; the Shunammite woman had to trust

Elisha for a miraculous resurrection of her son; the school of the prophets had to turn to Elisha in faith when they lacked food; Naaman had to come to the point where he trusted Elisha's word and go wash in the Jordan River 7 times; the prophet who lost the borrowed axe head had to turn to Elisha for help, believing that he *could* help.

Another thing to notice about Elisha's miracles is the **many parallels with the miracles of Jesus:**

- Elisha raised the dead son of the Shunammite (2Kgs. 4:33).
- *Jesus raised the dead daughter of a certain ruler (Matt 9:24).*
- Elisha multiplied oil in many vessels (2Kgs. 4:1-7).
- *Jesus turned water into wine in their pots (John 2:1-10).*
- Elisha multiplied bread for the prophets (2Kgs. 4:42-43).
- *Jesus multiplied bread for the multitudes (Matt.14:15-20).*
- Elisha cured Naaman of leprosy (2Kgs. 5:1-14).
- *Jesus cured 10 lepers in Samaria (Luke 17:11-19).*
- Elisha made an iron axe head float on water (2Kgs. 6:5-7).
- *Jesus walked on water (Matt.14:25-29).*
- When Elisha's body was in the tomb, his own bones caused a dead man to be raised back to life (2Kgs.13:20,21).
- *By Jesus' own death and resurrection, He raises us back to life.*

Clearly, Elisha was one of the great "types" of Christ in the Old Testament. The Jewish people in Jesus' day, familiar as they were with the Old Testament stories, would have interpreted Jesus' words and actions through this lens of 'a second Elisha.'

Three Women of Faith in the Elisha miracles

Of the 6 personal miracles in this section, 3 involve women of great faith. It is interesting to see how these 3 very different women exercised faith in God *from* their unique positions and challenging circumstances in life.

- The Prophet's Widow: 2 Kings 4:1-7

The widow of a godly prophet was left with debts she couldn't repay and 2 sons who were too young to work. The creditor was coming to take her sons to be his slaves. This widow had the courage to approach Elisha boldly, believing he could help her. When Elisha asked her what she had in her possession, she replied that she had only a little oil left. He told her to borrow as many empty jars as possible. She was willing to step out in faith and follow his instructions.

Then, Elisha miraculously multiplied her little oil in the many borrowed empty jars. She sold the oil, paid her debts and had enough money to support herself and sons in the days ahead.

When JESUS taught His disciples to *'Pray and not give up'* (Luke 18:1-8), He used a story of a widow who boldly and persistently claimed her rights before a judge. Maybe Jesus had this widow in mind when He told that story of bold, faith-filled prayer.

- The Shunammite Woman: 2 Kings 4:8-37; 8:1-6

Elisha's second personal miracle was performed for a wealthy (literally, "great") woman in the town of Shunem. Her compassion and wealth led her to care for people, even for Elisha since he often traveled through Shunem. She suggested to her husband (who trusted her greatly) to build a room for him to stay in.

This woman had learned contentment though she lacked a child. Elisha saw her loss yet peace, and prayed that God would give her a child, which He did. When her son was young, he suddenly died. She hurried to Elisha at Mt. Carmel urging him to come help. God used Elisha to raise her son from the dead – the 2nd resurrection!

This same woman appears again later in the story. Elisha told her to leave her land during the 7-year famine. When she later returned, she went to the king to beg for her land back. Elisha's servant 'just happened' to be in the king's court that very day, telling the king about how Elisha had raised a young boy from the dead! The king immediately granted her request, and the 7 past years of profit as well! This woman was blessed in many ways through her faith and obedience to God's word and Elisha.

- The young servant-girl: 2Kings 5

Naaman was the captain of the Syrian army. During one of their many raids into Israel, the Syrians captured a young Jewish girl, who was taken to be a servant to Naaman's wife. When she heard of Naaman's crisis of leprosy, she courageously spoke to her mistress of God's power through the prophet Elisha in Israel. Because of her faith and boldness (and her reputation as a faithful servant in their home), Naaman heeded her word and went to seek healing from Elisha. He was not only cured of his leprosy, but he was also converted to belief in Yahweh! This young woman had a profound impact on one of the most powerful people in Syria . . . all because of her faithfulness witness to the

power of her God. Naaman declared:

“Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel” (5:15).

From these 3 women, we learn that it does not matter so much what our position/circumstance in life looks like. We can all glorify God and serve Him from our unique position and set of circumstances. Ask God: What do you have in mind for me in my current position in life? How can I glorify You and point others to you from my current set of circumstances?

3. Elisha’s ministry toward Syria: 2Kgs. 6:8 – 13:21

While Elisha had a unique focus on *individuals*, he also ministered on a *national level*, primarily to the *kingdom of Syria*, (also known as the Arameans), *the northern enemy of Israel*. This reveals God’s concern for *all nations*, not just Israel.

- The Syrian army tries to capture Elisha: 6:8-23

The Syrians were often at war with Israel. The Syrian king (“the king of Aram”) was frustrated because the Israelites *always knew his next move*. He thought he had an information-leaker.

This enraged the king of Aram. He summoned his officers and demanded of them, “Tell me! Which of us is on the side of the king of Israel?” “None of us, my lord the king,” said one of his officers, “but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom” (6:11,12).

His solution was to send soldiers to capture Elisha. When they tried to do so, they were *captured by Elisha!* Elisha asked God to strike the Syrian soldiers with blindness, and then he led them on a 12-mile walk right into the court of the king of Israel! But instead of killing the enemy, Elisha counseled the king of Israel to treat the Syrian force with kindness and send them back to their Syrian lord.

“So, he prepared a great feast for them, and after they had finished eating and drinking, he sent them away, and they returned to their master. So, the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel’s territory” (6:23).

Jesus taught that we should ‘*love our enemies, and pray for those who mistreat us*’ (Matt. 5:44). Again, we see Elisha foreshadowing the ministry and message of Jesus.

- Israel miraculously delivered from the Syrians: 6:24 - 7:20

Shortly after the above acts of mercy toward the Syrians, the king of Syria attacked Israel again! They laid siege to Samaria during a vulnerable time for Israel (during a 7-year famine.) The Syrians nearly starved the Israelites to death (6:24-7:2).

Elisha bore the rage of Israel's king for causing the 7-year famine. Just as Jezebel had threatened to kill Elijah for the 3 ½ year famine, now the king went with his men to cut off Elisha's head!

Unlike Elijah who was alone and depleted, Elisha was sitting in his house, in community with the elders of the city. God revealed to him that they were coming to murder him. He handled it with complete calmness and gave a prophecy that the very next day the city would miraculously have food again. And so it happened:

Four lepers were starving and decided to go over to the Syrian camp and surrender themselves hoping they would be fed. But ...

“... when they came to the outskirts of the camp of the Arameans, behold, there was no one there. For the Lord had caused the army of the Arameans to hear a sound of chariots and a sound of horses, even the sound of a great army, so that they said to one another, “Behold, the king of Israel has hired against us the kings of the Hittites and the kings of the Egyptians, to come upon us.” Therefore, they arose and fled in the twilight, and left their tents and their horses and their donkeys, even the camp just as it was, and fled for their life. When these lepers came to the outskirts of the camp, they entered one tent and ate and drank... (7:5-8)

God routed the Syrian army in one night! The 4 lepers returned to the city with the unbelievable news. As Elisha had prophesied, by the next day there was more than enough food in Samaria.

- Elisha weeps over Hazael, the future king of Syria: 8:7-15

One of Elisha's most painful moments was when he met Hazael, a servant of Ben-hadad the king of Syria. God revealed to Elisha that Hazael would become the next king of Syria and, sadly, that Hazael would inflict tremendous harm upon Israel in the future.

(Elisha) the man of God wept. Hazael said, “Why does my lord weep?” Then he answered, “Because I know the evil that you will do to the sons of Israel: their strongholds you will set on fire, and their young men you will kill with the sword, and their little

ones you will dash in pieces, and their women with child you will rip up” (8:11,12).

Sure enough, Hazael returned to Syria, assassinated Ben-hadad and launched his reign of terror, inflicting great harm and taking away much territory from Israel.

- Elisha pronounces a triple victory over Syria: 13:14-21

As Elisha was nearing death, he had one last message concerning the Syrians. King Joash of Israel came to visit the ailing prophet.

When Elisha became sick with the illness of which he was to die, Joash the king of Israel came down to him and wept over him and said, “My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen” (13:14).

This tender encounter shows that while many of the evil kings of Israel despised God’s servant(s), those who had any sensitivity to God loved men like Elisha and saw the value of their ministry to the nation. In this final encounter between prophet and king, Elisha gave Joash assurances of future victories over the Syrians. He did this in two symbolic acts involving a bow and arrows. First:

Elisha said to him, “Take a bow and arrows.” So he took a bow and arrows. Then he said to the king of Israel, “Put your hand on the bow.” And he put his hand on it, then Elisha laid his hands on the king’s hands. He said, “Open the window toward the east,” and he opened it. Then Elisha said, “Shoot!” and he shot. And he said, “The LORD’S arrow of victory, even the arrow of victory over Aram; for you will defeat the Arameans at Aphek until you have destroyed them” (13:15-17).

What a beautiful picture of the *prophet’s hands on the king’s hands* holding the bow together. This was the way it was *supposed to work* in Israel – the prophetic office supporting, guiding and correcting the royal office. Then came the second symbolic act:

Then he said, “Take the arrows,” and he took them. And he said to the king of Israel, “Strike the ground,” and he struck it three times and stopped. So the man of God was angry with him and said, “You should have struck five or six times, then you would have struck Aram until you would have destroyed it. But now you shall strike Aram only three times” (13:18-19).

Given the context, it seems that Joash should have understood the symbolism behind the striking of arrows on the ground (that this

symbolized repeated victories over the Syrians). Elisha's stern rebuke implies that Joash did not exercise strong enough faith in laying hold of God's promises of victory, thus, he limited what God would do for Israel.

Is there some area in your life where you may be "limiting" what God desires to do? Has God been nudging you to "step out in faith" and invite Him to unleash many more victories over the enemies that assail you? Ask God to speak clearly to you about these issues. Ask Him to lead you in HIS path of victories.

- God's faithful witness to the Syrians through the Jewish slave-maid's witness, and Captain Naaman (2Kings 5)

We end these notes by reflecting back on the story of Elisha healing Naaman, the captain of the Syrian army. While this miracle story occurs in the context of Elisha's *ministry to individuals* (above) it also has some bearing on his *ministry to the nation of Syria*. Naaman was a national hero in Syria.

Even though Naaman had led many of the raids and had threatened Israel as captain of the Syrian army, *God was still relentless in pursuing his heart*. He was a 'great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded due to many victories as a valiant soldier' (5:1). Yet, when he contracted leprosy, there was no human cure. *It often takes being in situations beyond our control to be willing to hear about God, and then let go of our own solutions.*

His story reveals his *pride and expectations* as to the "proper" way that Elisha should heal him. He had to learn that God's ways are not our ways. He resisted and complained about Elisha's instructions to wash in the dirty Jordan River. Finally, his servants respectfully urged him to 'follow orders.' Naaman had to humble his pride before his own servants, and obey Elisha's word. *God was after much more than just a miracle of healing for Naaman. God was after his heart! And even more, through Naaman God was after the hearts of the people in Syria.*

So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child and he was clean. When he returned to the man of God with all his company, and came and stood before him, he said, "Behold now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel; so please take a present from

your servant now... But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, before whom I stand, I will take nothing..." Naaman said, "If you will not, please let me, your servant be given as much earth as a pair of mules can carry, for your servant will no longer offer burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god, but the LORD" (5:14-17).*

*See Exodus 20:24 to understand Naaman's sincere desire to take earth from Israel back to Syria.

This story sounds a familiar theme that God has been declaring from the beginning – that forgiveness and salvation are not able to be earned. Further these divine gifts are often not sought or valued until a crisis occurs. The human heart is self-willed and stubborn!

Forgiveness and cleansing from our sin of rebellion against God is a FREE GIFT for US, and yet a COSTLY GIFT for our Savior Jesus Christ, God's Son. He took upon Himself all the sin of humanity, and experienced judgment and separation from His Father, so that we could be cleansed from sin and have an eternal relationship with the God through Christ. Amazing GRACE.

Discussion Questions

1. In Elisha, we meet a *faithful disciple* who, in turn, helped other people become *faithful disciples*. Who is influencing you to become a faithful disciple? Who is God using you to influence to become a faithful follower of Jesus?
2. Elisha left everything to follow Elijah. Are there things that God is calling you to "leave" so that you can more fully follow after Jesus?
3. What most impacted you from the stories of the 3 women of faith who were included in the Elisha narrative (the prophet's widow, the wealthy woman of Shunem, the young servant-girl)?
4. Is there some way that God is currently inviting you to be part of His greater story in your life and world?
5. There is a great deal of emphasis on God's care for the Syrians, the arch enemies of Israel. How does this impact you? Are there people in your world that God is challenging you to move toward with His impartial love and grace?