

## The Divided Kingdom (930-725 BCE)

### *Elisha the Prophet*

**Readings: 2 Kings 2:1-25; 4:1-17; 4:38-44; 4:18-37; 8:1-2; 6:1-7**

### **Reflections:**

- Now Elijah's departure to heaven and the initial ministry of Elisha is about as dramatic as one can imagine. The accounts themselves even exceed the normal (if you can call them normal) miraculous events of Scripture. Elisha's loyalty is made very clear indicating the kind of devotion he felt towards Elijah. The three-fold repetition of his commitment shows how complete his commitment is. The parting of the water obviously creates a clear parallel to Moses and the parting of the Red Sea. Elisha's final request to receive a double portion reveals Elisha's heart for God. Everything Elijah possessed in an intimate knowledge of God through the Spirit, Elisha wanted all of that and more. Now this calls into question how much do we want God? Elijah was doing incredibly powerful miracles and facing some of the most fearful situations. Most people would say "if only I could be half of what Elijah was!" Instead, Elisha says I want to be double that! It challenges the reader to reflect, "do I have that kind of bold faith?"
- The disappearance of Elijah in a chariot of fire may at first seem strange. What is this? In 2 Kings 6:17 we will discover that the horses and chariots of angels look like fire. So apparently, an angel gathered up Elijah and provided a taxi ride into God's presence in something that looked like a whirlwind. One of the Bible's UFO sightings? Nope. Just an ancient writer trying to describe an encounter with the angelic. This is a common problem through out Scripture. Seems we as humans if we see into the spiritual realm have a hard time finding words to describe it.
- Elisha immediately is given the Spirit of God and begins his full ministry by parting the waters as well with the cloak that Elijah left behind. The passing on of the cloak or the giving of a cloak finds parallel to David and Jonathan's close covenant friendship (see 1 Samuel 18:1-4) and Jonathan giving his cloak to David as a sign of that covenant.
- The youth that came out to make fun of Elisha's bald head has to make strike fear in the reader. The issue was not that the youth were making fun of Elisha, but more likely that they were making fun of God and Elisha as God's servant. Like other recent events in the story of Elijah and the Kings of Judah and Israel, animals (e.g. lions) are used to complete

God's judgment. Although this causes some moral questions, we must remember that God's judgment is real and not to be treated lightly.

- In these next sections we see a number of significant miracles. The provision of increased oil for the widow represented providing for the poor. The miraculous birth of a son for the Shunammite woman again was an act of mercy to see a woman vulnerable because of an aging husband and no son to care for her. The purification of the stew and the multiplication of the bread again revealed mercy in a time of famine. All of these reveal in dramatic fashion God's mercy and both point back to God's provision for the Israelites in the desert as well as point forward to many of the miraculous signs of Jesus (turning water into wine, feeding the crowds with a few loaves and fishes). The raising of the Shunammite son parallels Elijah's miracle of raising the widow's son in 1 Kings 17:17-24. What is intriguing around this story is that the woman miraculously received the son and when he died she immediately returned to Elisha pleading for God's help through him. Elisha's actions around this miracle are very dramatic and symbolic. He first sends his staff ahead to touch the boy's head since clearly there was something wrong with this head. We are left wondering if in some way Elisha thought that his staff may have power like Moses' staff. In any case, it doesn't work. Elisha arrives and lies down on the boy in a very strange fashion, two times. The boy then awakens, sneezes seven times and is restored to life and health. Now there is no explanation given and so we are left wondering "what in the world happened here?" I wish I knew. At some level Elisha had to embrace the dead boy for life to come to him. If the boy is symbolic of Israel, then the role of the prophet is not just to bring a staff of leadership against the nation, but to lay himself fully upon the dead nation, to embrace it fully and in the process of entering into complete and total identification and intimacy with this loved but dead one, be used by God to bring him back to life. In many ways, Jesus would follow this same approach – complete identification with us and through becoming like us be used by God to raise us to life.
- The woman and her son are then sent away to avoid facing a famine. Their lives are preserved. Maybe Elisha figured, they have already been through enough.
- The final miracle listed here is one about an ax head floating. This is simply a miracle to show that with God nothing is impossible. Nothing! For all of us that wonder if God can do "immeasurable more than all we ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20) here we find a series of miracles to remind us that yes, God can do anything he likes. His power knows no limit.