

Continuing the Prophecy

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning again, Brunsfield. It's lovely to be with you. Thank you for your invitation. It's been lovely to get to know the Shanks family. I've had a fantastic hour this morning reading with Eve and singing Hop Little Bunny, Hop, Hop, Hop.

And now the greater privilege of opening God's Word together. So do keep two kings open in front of you. I've been dwelling a lot with Elijah and Elisha recently, and this passage has just been just a lot on my heart and mind. So I thought when Graham gave me a free choice of what to preach, I would bring this. Two of my favorite Old Testament characters, I'm sure they are for some of you too. Two great prophetic figures. I'm really not sure that Elijah would have been a particularly easy person to be around. It's quite an abrupt prophetic character for very difficult times. Those are very difficult times that he's living in. A loner, sometimes despairing of life, feeling that he has failed to turn Israel back to the Lord, and sometimes believing that he is the last believer left. Imagine that. Imagine thinking that you're the last Christian left. What happened? God. What was that all about then? What was the point? Was it even real, all those promises? That worship, that stuff we did in church. And now I'm for the chop too. Not a very tame individual, Elijah. Prophets usually aren't. And there's quite a lot of confrontation and calling down fire from heaven in Elijah's story. Now, what's a prophet? A prophet in the Old

Testament was somebody that God sent into situations where his people were turning their backs on him. And that was sometimes through drift, oftentimes through quite deliberate, outright defined obedience, disobedience. And the prophet comes and reasserts God's truth and God's reality into that situation.

He confronts unbelief, confronts idolatry, reasserts God's covenant with Israel through Moses, the plumb line of God's truth, and then reveals what God has said is going to happen if they repent and turn to him.

And sometimes reveals what God has said is going to happen if they refuse to repent and turn to him. So prophets align people to truth. They recalibrate them to true north, if you like, like a compass so that the people know where to go.

[2 : 5 1] And by the time we reach Elijah's day, the situation was really bleak. It's very bleak indeed. After a few somewhat better years under Kings David and Solomon, the building of the temple, bringing of the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, God blessing Israel with peace and with growth.

After that time, the kingdom split. And 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel, the sons of Jacob, had turned their back on the house and kingdom of David.

They'd left Jerusalem and they had set up a new kingdom in the north with a new capital city called Samaria. Built by their first king, who was a real stinker called Omri, came to power in a military coup.

So they've got this new kingdom in the north with the majority of the tribes. They call it Israel, and their capital city is in Samaria. Leaving just two tribes with the house of David around Jerusalem.

And that's now called Judah. So Israel in the north and Judah in the south. And this kingdom in the north, Israel, the 10 tribes, they instituted a new national state religion with new national idol gods.

[4 : 05] They started with golden calves, just like at Exodus. But then they moved on to Baal idols and Asherah poles and other fertility idols and weather gods.

And they set up counterfeit feasts to mimic the great celebrations of God in Jerusalem, particularly a fake feast of tabernacles. And that had all the pomp and paraphernalia and performance of state religion to prevent people from returning to Jerusalem.

Why would you want to go back to Jerusalem when we got this fantastic ceremonial yuck stuff going on up here? It was very impressive.

Now, Omri was bad, but his son King Ahab was worse. And we are told that he did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than anybody before him, with the possible exception of his wife, Queen Jezebel.

She was even worse. She was a vicious, murderous, pagan Amorite from a place called Sidon. And she had brought with her 400 prophets of Baal, the Sidonian storm god, and 400 prophets of the fertility goddess Asherah with her.

[5 : 20] And she had installed them right at the heart of the national life of the kingdom. The real shock is that the people of God had gone from the high point under King David to Elijah thinking he might be the last believer left on earth in just under 100 years.

They had gone from the dedication of the temple under King Solomon with just the high point, everyone thinking Yahweh is so wonderful, to prophets hiding in caves and the religion of Yahweh being declared illegal in 58 years.

That is the blink of an eye. That is the absolute blink of an eye. 58 years. What is that? A generation and a half. Quite astonishing.

Those priests in the temple who had seen the power of God, this was their worst nightmare and it happened so fast. How on earth did that happen that quick? Tells you just how quickly things can go wrong when leaders and churches don't remain steadfastly faithful to the truths of God.

It is lovely to come somewhere this morning where the Bible is taken seriously. And into the middle of all that, God sent Elijah and Elisha.

[6 : 42] Elijah's name means, my God is Yahweh. My God is Yahweh. And some of you will remember how he burst onto the scene in 1 Kings 17 and confronted King Ahab with the words, I stand before the God of Israel who lives.

Therefore, it's not going to rain in the land except of my word. I stand before the God of Israel who lives. Therefore. And I know that many of us will be familiar with lots of the events that my God is Yahweh was involved in.

Mighty confrontations with the powers that be in Israel, with its false religion. So seemingly inconsequential, just one little guy against hundreds of fervent idol priests and all the power of the state behind them.

But my God is Yahweh. Despite all appearances, you are always secure when my God is Yahweh.

I don't know what you're facing this week, but if your God is Yahweh, then you are safe. And Elisha.

[8 : 02] Elisha was Elijah's apprentice and his eventual successor. And his name means, my God saves. My God saves.

Elijah's ministry was mainly on the national stage. There were a few more individual stories like Naboth and his vineyard. But even that's basically the tale of God versus Omri, Ahab and the Baals.

That battle going on. And with Elisha, we get a lot more stories of redemption and rescue at a personal level. But they both form this sort of unit at the center of the books of 1 and 2 Kings, bringing the word of the Lord to the northern kingdom.

This apostate ten tribes with their new state religion. And that is amazing. Because the northern kingdom had comprehensively rejected God. Utterly turned their back.

They turned to idols enthusiastically. And you might have thought that the Lord would just wash his hands on them. Wipe them out. Rather than send prophets.

[9 : 09] These two books, 1 and 2 Kings, they were actually written much later. After God had actually allowed the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel. And the exile of the southern kingdom. The writer had seen both of those things already happen.

The writer knew what the trajectory was when he wrote this. And yet is still very keen to point out that God was still very active in the north. He did mighty miracles there.

There were schools of prophets there. Even though the writer knew that the people hated God. He knew what the trajectory was when he wrote it. God was at work.

Just amazing grace. People might be faithless, but the Lord never ever is. Were we to turn on a few chapters to chapter 13, we get a little hint of why the Lord was gracious to them.

Even in their apostasy. Where we read in chapter 13, the Lord was gracious to them and showed concern for them because of his covenant hundreds of years earlier with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

[10 : 10] To this day, he has been unwilling to destroy them or banish them from his presence. Now that covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was a set of amazing promises that God made.

That I am going to bless you just because I am the God who blesses. You are going to be a blessing. There is going to be blessing to the whole earth through you. And particularly to an eventual successor to this promise, the Lord Jesus.

It is going to happen. I am going to do it. I am going to keep my promise. And I'm going to keep it over generations and centuries and millennia. I don't know about you. I find it hard to remember what I agreed to three weeks ago.

He is astonishingly faithful to promises made centuries before to Abraham. Regardless of all the people's unfaithfulness. And the prophetic ministry of Elijah and Elisha is the Lord showing grace and concern for people who are turning their backs and being destroyed by the very idols they're embracing.

And he did keep a remnant. When Elijah thought he was the only one left, God said, actually I've reserved 7,000 who haven't bowed the knee to Baal. And even when the northern kingdom is finally obliterated, he still keeps his promise because 700 years later, those of you who know the story about the baby Jesus will know that when the infant Jesus was presented in the temple, we meet a lady called Anna.

[11 : 36] I'm told she's a very old prophetess looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. And she was descended from the tribe of Asher in the northern kingdom that was destroyed 700 years before.

I don't know. Maybe she traced her ancestry back to the companies of prophets we hear about here. But we don't know. What we do know is this. The Lord is so faithful to us.

Over generations. Our little personal stories are part of his great story of faithfulness. He is sovereign.

And that means that you are safe. He's never going to break his promise. Regardless of all the sins of people. The world and worldly rulers, the Omris, Ahabs and Jezebels of our age can rage all they like.

He is unstoppable. Amen? Amen. He is going to have a people for his own possession through the Lord Jesus. Anyway, that's a bit of a long-winded introduction.

[12 : 40] This passage is about the transition between Elijah and Elisha. Elijah's job in God's purposes is coming to an end with two things. Firstly, the death of Ahab's evil son, Joram.

Ironically, his name means Yahweh is exalted. But the mantra of his life was, there is no God. Hubris. And the second thing is that Elisha is now prepared and ready.

The handover moment has come. Start of 1 Kings was the handover between David and Solomon. The handover of kingship. This is the transition of prophets.

Generation passing to generation. You teenagers, listen to this stuff. Generation passing to generation. When we first met Elisha, 1 Kings 19.

Elijah hit a low point. God said, as part of the replenishment for you, I'm going to give you an apprentice. I'm going to give you a companion. You need somebody with you in the work, Elijah. Sometimes he just needed to be alone.

[13 : 45] But now God says you need, post Mount Carmel, you need to not be isolated. You need somebody with you. And we're told that when they first met, Elisha was plowing a field with 12 yoke of oxen.

There had been a drought in the land. It's very interesting that here he is. The rains have come after Mount Carmel. He's plowing with 12 yoke of oxen, probably from a wealthy family, probably found it very difficult to keep the oxen alive over that period.

You'd have thought, oh, no. The critical thing is that I stay just plowing my field. I keep going. I keep the family alive. I keep the crops coming. But Elijah goes and meets him and signifies that God is calling Elisha to prophetic ministry now by throwing his cloak around him.

Just hold that detail in your mind as we go on, the throwing of the cloak around him. We'll come back to that in a minute. And we're told that Elisha burnt his farm equipment, burning his bridges. I'm sure his family liked that.

I am following the call of God now. I am not going back. And so we heard read, thank you, Cater, for reading so beautifully, that when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, the two of them were on their way from a place called Gilgal.

[15 : 05] And Elijah said to Elisha, stay here. Stay here. The Lord sent me to Bethel. Maybe there's a sense that this handover, this parting is going to be painful for Elisha.

They have been together for years like a son with his father in the ministry of Yahweh. And Elijah is the great leader. It's very intimidating when great leaders depart, isn't it?

Oh, but we've relied on you. Is the blessing going to depart with you? Is Elisha going to get the authority of Elijah? Or is the ministry all going to grind to a halt with the transition between generations?

You know, was God's plan for salvation just centered on that one person? Do I have to carry on doing it like Elijah did? It's very difficult when you get handovers. Praise God, that is never true.

It wasn't with Elijah. It is not true now. It's not true at Bruntsfield. All Elijah was called to do was be faithful for his part in his day.

[16 : 12] But the Lord's purpose and the Lord's story are far bigger than even a great prophet like him. It is not dependent on Elijah. It's not dependent upon any of us or any person except the Lord Jesus.

So here they are. They're going along. And Elijah says, I'm giving you, Elisha, permission to not be there when this happens. And Elisha says, I'm not having any of that.

I am with you. It's just real closeness we heard read. He wants to be with him and he wants to be close to what the Lord is doing. And Elijah repeats it another two times.

Do you want to go? No, no, I'm not going. I'm not going to leave you. And they're met by two companies of prophets. One at Bethel and one at Jericho.

And they emphasize it too. Elisha, do you know that your master is going to be taken from you today? Yes, I know. I know. Now, when you're doing Bible studies, always look up the postcode.

[17 : 09] Always look up the location. Bethel was the big northern center of calf idol worship. And Jericho was a city that had been cursed by God.

Dark, dark places. And here, God has companies of prophets in both of them. Astonishing. Just because somewhere feels extremely dark, spiritually oppressive, far from the Lord, never imagine he cannot raise up people of the word there or here.

UK can feel very dark at the moment. Do not think the Lord is not at work. Maybe there's a little hint about what Elijah and Elisha have been doing together. Maybe they have been raising up these schools of prophets.

Maybe God is sending Elijah there for a final chance to just see his friends and his protégés hand on the baton to the next generation. We don't know. But it is clear that God sends him to where the schools of the prophets were, certainly so the prophets can witness and testify that Elisha has succeeded him.

But maybe too, so that Elijah can see some of what God was doing all the time, even when he thought it was so hopeless. A lovely thing a few weeks ago, I'm sure that many of you have experienced as well.

[18 : 30] Someone told me about something that God did in their life through something that I prayed about with them 18 years ago. I never knew about it at the time. Just 18 years later, God came at exactly the point I needed some encouragement.

I know that many of you, there'll be many stories like that in this room. Many of us have found out years later we inadvertently encourage somebody in their faith by something that we said or did.

And God graciously gives us glimpses, just so we know that he's at work all the time. Maybe something like that is going on here. These prophets seem very tender for Elisha, very concerned, very caring at this time of departure.

But they have been summoned by God to be witnesses as well. Not only does Elijah know that he's departing, but so does Elisha, and so do the companies of prophets. So God seems to have been setting it up, preparing them all beforehand for this event.

So they are walking along and they come to the Jordan River. Elijah takes his cloak and he strikes the water with it and it parts.

[19 : 41] He's moving out of the picture, but he's doing it in the power of God, very much like the manner of Moses parting the Red Sea at the Exodus. Or probably more so, Moses' successor Joshua.

When God first led the people into the Promised Land, he told Joshua, I am going to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel today, and the people will know that I'm with you, like I was with Moses, by the parting of the Jordan River.

I wonder if you can just guess where Joshua parted the Jordan River at the power of God, and you would be right if you guessed right here at Gilgal.

That's exactly what's going on in exactly the same place. Always look up the location. Find out if anything happened there. We've got wicked Bethel, wicked Jericho, and Gilgal, where Joshua had led the Israelites across the Jordan into the Promised Land at the end of Exodus.

God has a previous history of parting the Jordan River at Gilgal. By doing so, he demonstrated Joshua was the leader in the strength and power of God.

[20 : 58] By doing so, he's now demonstrating that Elisha is going to be the leader in the strength and power of God. And once again, Israel, in the form of the company of the prophets, is watching closely.

Is that going to happen? Is Elisha going to be Elijah's successor from God, in the same way that Joshua was Moses' successor? Well, we won't see. Tragically, none of these three places ended well, even though God was doing things in power then.

So anyway, Elijah parts the water and they cross over. And Elijah says to Elisha, what do you want me to do for you? And Elisha replies, I want a double portion of your spirit.

That doesn't mean I want twice the prophetic anointing, twice the power. It means I would like the double portion that was given to the heir. He's asking to be Elijah's legitimate successor.

I want the mantle. And Elijah replied and said, well, that's a difficult thing. And it depends on you seeing me when I'm taken from you. Perhaps the implication is, this isn't my gift to give you, Elisha.

[22 : 10] Even after all our time together, I can't do it. I can't promise you that. That needs to come from God. And the way that Elisha will know is if God chooses to show him what is supernaturally happening.

Is he going to have eyes to see what's going on? And they carry on walking and talking. And in the middle of their talk, the supernatural parting happens.

They were separated by a chariot and horses of fire. And Elijah ascended, not you notice in the chariot, but in a whirlwind. And Elisha saw it.

He did see it. And he cried out, my father, my father, the chariots and horsemen of Israel. And then Elisha saw him no more. Now that's a very interesting phrase, the chariots and horsemen of Israel.

Elsewhere, it refers to the armies of heaven protecting God's people. Very real, but not usually seen. Think about the supernatural, angelic protection of churches, the angels of the churches in the book of Revelation, for example.

[23 : 21] I enjoyed hearing Revelation earlier. Earlier. Very real, not usually seen. But here it doesn't mean that. Here, the phrase, the chariots and horsemen of Israel means Elijah.

Elijah is the chariots and horsemen of Israel. That is Israel's defense and shield. And we know it because later on, when Elisha dies, he is mourned with the same words.

My father, my father, the chariots and horsemen of Israel. And there's no supernatural vision of chariots and horsemen at that point. I think what it's doing is connecting the very real, supernatural, angelic protection of God's people with the ministry of the word of God through the prophets.

They're two edges of the same sword, two sides of the same coin, if you like. There is a battle for faithfulness going on on the earth. Are we going to be faithful to the word of the Lord and secure protection for the faithful that is going on in the heavenly places?

They're going on at the same time, like the angels of the churches in Revelation. We, dear friends, are in a spiritual battle, not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers in the heavenly realms.

[24 : 36] The situations you go into this week as a Christian, God is for you. God is protecting you. God is hedging you around. God is for you around. And he who is in us is greater than he who is in the world.

He's for us. And that's what Elisha is now given spiritual eyes to see. The writer is telling us about it to give us the eyes of faith to see.

And you notice that he picked up the cloak. It's his now. He did get the prophetic mantle because he sees. And we, Christians, we, churches, we, Brunsfield, get the prophetic mantle because we see with the eyes of faith.

Jesus said, those who haven't physically seen me are nevertheless blessed because they believe. So we see by believing with faith.

The Bible says you have two sets of eyes. The eyes of your head and you see physically. And you have eyes in your heart that enable you to see spiritually by hearing the word of God with faith.

[25 : 49] Trusting. Jesus said, it's not just hearing my words. Remember, he's talked about the guy with the two people building a house on the sand or on the rock. The difference is that they both hear, but one does.

The one who hears my words and puts them into practice is the one who is believing with faith, says Jesus. And we're living after the resurrection, the ascension, coming of the Holy Spirit. We know where God's plans for salvation are heading.

We know and we see far more than Elijah and Elisha did. It's amazing. And he picks up the cloak that Elijah has dropped.

It is his. Israel has not lost its shield with Elijah's departure because Elijah's God is with Elisha.

The critical thing was never Elijah. It wasn't his gifts. It wasn't his personality. It wasn't his competence as a leader. It was the presence of his God.

[26 : 54] And Elisha's not going to be doing all the things that Elijah did. In some ways, as a very fresh start, the ministry was quite different. What he needs is God's spirit resting on him.

He had the calling years before with the cloak. Now he has the cloak. But, does he have the empowering? Perhaps he doubted it at first because he took the cloak and just like Elijah, Elijah had whooshed it at the water.

So now he sort of whooshes it at the water just like Elijah had done and asks, where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah? Is he with me? And the waters parted.

And the Jericho of the prophets, a company of prophets, saw it. And they testified, yes, the spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha.

Phew. It's all going to be all right. God has not left the building. And they don't yet have a fully worked out doctrinal understanding of the Holy Spirit, but that's what they mean, the Holy Spirit of God.

[28 : 02] But Elisha went on in the spirit of the Lord. We just finish with two thoughts from the New Testament.

So Elijah's departure here is not the last we hear of him. But when Jesus asks his disciples, who do people say that I am?

They reply, well, some people think you're Elijah. Elijah, calling Israel back to God. That's the most supernatural person they can think of. When Jesus mentions Elijah in Luke 4, it's very interesting what happens in Luke 4.

He uses Elijah to point out that God saves Gentiles as well as Jews. He says, Elijah wasn't sent to any of the widows in Israel in his time, but to a pagan widow in Zarephath, in Sidon, in Jezebel's backyard, in the darkest places of satanic demon worship.

You think God can't work in Sidon? Think again. You think he can't work in Edinburgh? You think again. You think he can't work through you? Think again. And while the very last experience of Elijah's earthly life was the heavenly horses and chariot and whirlwind, it wasn't his last, or in fact, his greatest supernatural experience.

[29 : 22] Because he topped that of the transfiguration in the presence of Jesus, the Lord of the angels. When he came to talk with Moses, we are told about the exodus that Jesus was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.

When through the cross, forgiveness is going to be made available. When through the resurrection, Jesus is declared to be the Son of God with power. and through whom everybody who believes, Jew and Gentile alike, is going to get swept into the great rescue of God from sin and death and given a new cloak of righteousness in the place of our own righteousness, which the Bible says is like filthy rags.

So delighted just to hear your leaders yesterday talking about what it means to be strong in the grace of God, which means that you are declared righteous in Jesus.

I don't know if that is a message that you hear all the time, but I pray it is. The heart of the gospel is that you are adopted into God's family and declared righteous in Jesus.

It's a free gift. Entirely free. By faith. Very lastly, do not think that Elijah and Elisha are unlike us.

[30 : 45] It's very, very easy to read these kinds of accounts and think, well, that was amazing, but that was then and they're not at all like me. Romans 15 says these things were written for our learning.

1 Corinthians says they were written as examples and warnings for us to imitate. Yeah, we are meant to learn how to follow God from the details of Elijah and Elisha's stories. And most tellingly, James chapter 5 says, Elijah was a man just like us.

He prayed and it didn't rain. And he prayed and it did because he knew God and was empowered by the Spirit of God. Elisha says, I've got to have your spirit.

That's why Jesus told the disciples, wait, don't go on without receiving the gift my Father has promised, even power from on high. The very same Holy Spirit promised to them, given to them, is promised and given to us.

We have far greater insight in the knowledge of God and his Christ and his plans and his purposes this side of the cross than Elijah and Elisha could have dreamed of.

[31 : 55] Some of you are sitting here thinking, I am too young. I'm just too young to be used by the Lord. Or, I'm just too old to be used by the Lord.

Or, I'm not competent or I'm fearful. I just, I can't, I'm not going to see God do great things. My dear friends, that is just not true.

Give him your heart this morning. I wonder if he's asking you to take a meaningful step of trusting him as a result of this. What is that?

I wonder what you need to pray about with somebody afterwards. Ask him to empower you. Get the help of your Christian friends here. Pray. See what he wants to do. We go this week into a country where there are no fewer battles for idols than there were in that day.

There are going to be battles for our hearts. There are going to be battles to be faithful. And Jesus is with us as we submit to him and seek him and love, obey, and worship him.

[33 : 02] So God bless you this morning at Frontsfield as you continue to walk this great walk of faith together with our mighty Saviour who loves us. Amen.