

# ELISHA

## THE MAN WHO WAS INDESTRUCTIBLE (2 KINGS 11:1 — 13:25)

We are moving quickly through the final years of Elisha's life. In 2 Kings 11 we read of Athaliah's usurping the throne of Judah and then of the coronation of Joash as the rightful king. Chapter 12 tells of Joash restoring the temple in Jerusalem. In 2 Kings 13 we again pick up the story of the northern kingdom of Israel, where the work of Elisha was concentrated. When Jehu died, his son Jehoahaz was crowned king of Israel (13:1; see 10:35). After reigning seventeen years, Jehoahaz died; then his son Joash<sup>1</sup> became king (13:9). Joash ruled sixteen years and "did evil in the sight of the LORD" (13:11). During those decades, there is no mention of Elisha. I suggest, however, that "God's man for troubled times" had not retired, that he continued to fulfill his ministry. I base this conclusion on two facts:

- The character of Elisha, as previously revealed in our studies, indicates that he was not a man to quit.
- As Elisha neared the end of his life, King Joash made this statement: "My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" (13:14b). These words indicate that Elisha had continued to serve as the spiritual adviser to the nation ("father") and as God's agent of protection ("the chariots of Israel and its horsemen").

However, even great lives must come to an end (see Hebrews 9:27a). In this lesson, we will witness the sunset of the prophet's life—but

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<sup>1</sup>Again, we have kings in Israel and Judah with the same name: Joash (Jehoash).

what a spectacular sunset it was!<sup>2</sup> I am calling this final lesson "The Man Who Was Indestructible."

### DYING, BUT STILL GOD'S MAN OF PROPHECY (13:14–19)

As the story opens, Elisha was "sick with the illness of which he was to die" (v. 14a). He was between eighty and ninety years of age.<sup>3</sup> His illness could have been any one of the numerous ailments that plague the very old.

"Joash the king of Israel" was concerned and "came down" to visit Elisha (v. 14b). We do not know where Elisha was, but the location may have been some distance from Samaria. As a rule, kings did not go to people; they had people brought to them. The fact that Joash traveled to see Elisha indicates the king's respect for the prophet.

As Joash stood by Elisha's bed, he "wept over him<sup>4</sup> and said, 'My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!'" (v. 14c). His words echo those spoken by Elisha when Elijah left this earth (2:12). The words acknowledge that, like Elijah, Elisha had been the strength of the nation. However, unlike Elijah, Elisha was leaving no successor. Implicit in the king's statement is the question "What are we to do now?"

Elisha used his failing strength to assure the

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<sup>2</sup>You might describe a beautiful sunset you have seen.

<sup>3</sup>To determine Elisha's exact age at the time of his death, we would have to know how old he was when he became Elijah's apprentice.

<sup>4</sup>Literally, he wept over "his face," according to a margin note in my edition of the NASB. The king's tears may have fallen on the prophet's face.

king that his death would not mean God was no longer with His people. Elisha did this with a symbolic act (as prophets often did; see Acts 21:10, 11). He said to the king, "Take a bow and arrows" (2 Kings 13:15a). Armed men would have accompanied the king. From one of these, Joash "took a bow and arrows" (v. 15b).

Elisha told Joash, "Put your hand on the bow" (v. 16a). In other words, "Hold the bow in a position to shoot." While the king thus held the bow, "Elisha laid his hands on the king's hands" (v. 16b). Did the prophet struggle to his feet to do this, or did the king kneel beside the bed so Elisha could place his timeworn hands on the hands of the younger man? I do not know—but the gesture was to emphasize that Joash could not defeat his enemies without the help of Jehovah. A later Jewish leader was told, "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit," says the LORD of hosts" (Zechariah 4:6).

Elisha directed one of those present, "Open the window toward the east" (2 Kings 13:17a). "Toward the east" would have been in the direction of the east side of the Jordan, which Hazael had taken from the Israelites (see 10:32, 33). When the shutters had been pulled back, Elisha commanded the king, "Shoot!" "And he shot" (13:17b).

Then the prophet 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" (v. 17c). The message to the king was twofold: First, he was to be bold in attacking the enemy, to strike like the arrow (compare with Joshua 8:18). Second, if he would do so, the Lord would give him victory. Victory at Aphek was specifically mentioned. Aphek was located a few miles east of the Sea of Galilee, on the route from Samaria to Damascus (see the map on page 8 of the article "Elisha: The Man Who Blessed a Life"). Sixty or so years earlier, Ahab had won a decisive victory over Aram at Aphek (1 Kings 20:26–30).

God promised victory—but God's promises invariably have conditions, whether stated or implied. Elisha told the king, "Take the arrows" (2 Kings 13:18a). These were probably the arrows remaining in the quiver. Then the prophet told the ruler, "Strike the ground" (v. 18b).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>The original language may mean "Shoot [the arrows into] the ground."

Was the king puzzled by this instruction? He took the arrows and struck the ground "three times and stopped" (v. 18c). When he stopped after three times, "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'" (v. 19).<sup>6</sup>

We may think, "That is unfair. Elisha did not say how many times to strike the ground. He just said to strike it, and the king did what he said. Elisha had no right to be angry and penalize the king!" Evidently, the king was expected to continue striking the earth until the prophet told him to stop. Did Joash think "the whole arrow routine" had nothing to do with whether or not he would have victory over Aram? Did he grow tired of "playing the old man's game"? Was he embarrassed to do "such a foolish thing" in front of his men? We cannot know Joash's heart, but God did. What limited the king's victories? His own limited faith, zeal, and perseverance.

Several lessons could be drawn from this incident, including the danger of "doing the minimum." However, I want simply to emphasize that, even on his deathbed, Elisha was still God's man of prophecy. He said Joash would have three victories over Aram (v. 19), and that was the case. Six verses later, we read, "Three times Joash defeated [the king of Aram] and recovered the cities of Israel" (v. 25b).

## DEAD, BUT STILL GOD'S MAN OF POWER (13:20, 21)

Shortly after Joash's visit, "Elisha died" (v. 20a). Elijah had left the earth in a whirlwind, but for Elisha there was no dramatic translation to the heavenly realms. Rather, he shared in the common fate of mankind (see Hebrews 9:27a). After his death, "they buried him" (2 Kings 13:20b). Burial consisted of washing the body and wrapping it in clean cloths and spices. The CJB says that "they placed him in a burial cave." "According to Josephus . . . , his funeral was magnificent."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>It was left to Jeroboam II to gain eventual control over Aram (see 2 Kings 14:25, 28).

<sup>7</sup>G. Rawlinson, "2 Kings," *The Pulpit Commentary*, vol. 5, 1 & 2 Kings, ed. H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), 265; Josephus *Antiquities* 9.8.6.

At the time of Elisha's death, plunderers were a frequent nuisance to Israel. "The bands of the Moabites would invade the land in the spring of the year" (v. 20c). The Israelites had been plagued with marauding bands of Arameans (5:2); now they also had to contend with raiders from Moab.<sup>8</sup>

One day, during a burial, the mourners looked up and saw a band of Moabites in the distance (13:21a). Fearing for their lives, they prepared to flee. They did not have time to complete the burial, but they could not take the body with them because it would slow them down. At the same time, they did not want to leave the body for the Moabites to desecrate. They quickly rolled away a stone from a nearby burial cave, unceremoniously placed the body inside (13:21a), rolled the stone back, and ran for their lives.<sup>9</sup>

As it happened, the tomb cave was that of Elisha. As the bound body of the man "touched the bones of Elisha he revived and stood up on his feet" (v. 21b).<sup>10</sup> Can you imagine the surprise of his friends when they came back later to retrieve his body? In the Old Testament, there are only three accounts of raising the dead. Two of these are attributed to Elisha, and one occurred after the prophet was already dead! "The Jews regarded this miracle as the greatest glory of Elisha."<sup>11</sup>

Again, we could make several applications from this incident. It was probably included in the text at this point to give assurance that, even though the prophet had died, the God he served had not. Thus the victory promised by Elisha was sure. However, I would emphasize another truth: The good a man does is not limited to his

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<sup>8</sup>An earlier lesson told of Moab rebelling against Israel (see 2 Kings 3:4, 5).

<sup>9</sup>This paragraph is an attempt to expand the brief account found in the first part of 2 Kings 13:21.

<sup>10</sup>"This is the *first*, and I believe the *last*, account of a *true miracle* performed by the bones of a dead man; and yet on it and such like the whole system of miraculous working *relics* has been founded by [the Catholic Church]" (Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible with a Commentary and Critical Notes*, vol. 2, *Joshua—Esther* [New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, n.d.], 525).

<sup>11</sup>Albert Barnes, "Kings," *The Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1953), 264; quoted in James Burton Coffman and Thelma B. Coffman, *Commentary on Second Kings*, James Burton Coffman Commentaries, The Historical Books, vol. 6 (Abilene, Tex.: A.C.U. Press, 1992), 171.

earthly sojourn. The influence of a godly man extends beyond his lifetime.

After your death, your bones will not touch dead bodies and revive them; but, if your life was dedicated to God, the words you spoke will continue to touch hearts. The memory of the life you lived will touch lives. Your godly example will touch those who knew you—and life, spiritual life, will be imparted. It can be said of you, as it was of Abel, "Though he is dead, he still speaks" (Hebrews 11:4).

## CONCLUSION

Ralph Waldo Emerson said that the test of civilization is "the kind of men that the country turns out."<sup>12</sup> George Truett wrote, "Civilization is a dismal, ghastly failure, no matter how noisy its commerce, nor how wonderful its achievement in the material realm, if character is not the chief thing exalted in such civilization."<sup>13</sup> Character was not exalted in the northern kingdom of Israel, but God did have one man who measured up: His man for troubled times. We still live in troubled times—and we still need men, women, boys, and girls with the character of Elisha. Dale Hartman put it this way: We desperately need "common people with uncommon character."<sup>14</sup> Wherever you live, determine to be a man or woman on whom God can depend!

## NOTES FOR TEACHERS & PREACHERS

Because of space restrictions, this lesson was abbreviated. You will need to expand the applications suggested, as well as adding your own. For instance, you could note that Elisha became angry—and comment on when it is appropriate to be angry and when it is not (see Ephesians 4:26, 31; James 1:19, 20). When you use this sermon, include information on *how* to become "God's man or woman"—by becoming a Christian (Mark 16:15, 16; Acts 2:36–38).

Another title for this lesson might be "Death Is Not the End."

—David Roper

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<sup>12</sup>Quoted in George W. Truett, *The Prophet's Mantle* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948), 19.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Dale Hartman, sermon preached at the Eastside church of Christ, Midwest City, Oklahoma, 21 December 2003.