



July 15-16, 2017
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Best Supporting Actor: Elisha

2 Kings 2:1-15

Larry and I just got back from vacation in the South to visit his family and mine. Thank you for letting us take that time to rest and spend time with our family! We got to introduce our toddler, Reed, to a lot of friends and extended family. It's good to remember who you are when you're with your family, isn't it? But it's still funny how much family gets our names wrong. I get the whole name run down when I'm being called from the other room to this day. Lindsey! Mike! Puddin (the old cat)! I mean, Megan! Or with Larry's extended family I have to introduce myself as married to Doug's son, Lawrence, which always feels strange.

When I knew we were going to do this series on the supporting actors— the disciples who made history but weren't the headliners—I knew I wanted to clear up name confusion for the sake of this one man, Elisha. Not Elijah, Elisha. For a long time I thought the two men were the same person, just some people said his name wrong or had written the spelling differently. But the Old Testament tells us about two different men whose lives overlapped, Elijah and Elisha.

The meaning of their names is similar. Both of them start with the El, which in Hebrew means "God." Elijah means Yahweh is God. And Elisha means God saves or God rescues. Elisha was Elijah's protégé. He was disciplined by Elijah as a prophet. Before Jesus, God spoke through prophets.

Elijah was a very special prophet. He is a leading actor, if you will. Even children's Bibles rarely skip over his story because he had such amazing experiences of God. He lived up to his name, Yahweh is God! Yahweh revealed himself powerfully. The most memorable was when God came down in fire and consumed an altar and a sacrifice drenched in water. Right after that, God sent Elijah a message that he was to anoint Elisha as the next prophet. Elisha was disciplined for about five years. During that time, Elisha saw some very public, even lightning displays of power and also was part of the prophet's work of sending messages from God to the powerful rulers of the day.

We are going to look at Elijah's last day on earth, when the spotlight shifts from Elijah to Elisha. It's from 2 Kings 2, beginning with verse 1. This story is the pass off between God displaying the uniqueness of his power as the one and only God Yahweh to the story of Elisha's life, where Yahweh is known as the personal God who rescues even in the day-to-day. As I read this story, I want to invite you to think: Do you want to know God? Do you want to know his power? To know God for yourself as the one who rescues from the kinds of everyday scenarios like lost keys and untimely deaths and not knowing what to do next? Let us be inspired from Elisha how to know God and be filled with God.

Let me just tell you the beginning of the story. God has revealed to Elisha that this will be Elijah's last day on earth. God sets them out for this last day on a trek to revisit some significant places of Israel's history and the group of prophets that live in each of these towns. It's like watching the story of Israelites just after they came into the Promised Land on rewind. They go backwards from Gilgal to

Bethel to Jericho (where the walls came tumbling down) back down to the Jordan River. It's like Eli is saying goodbye to these significant places and his friends along the way.

At each town, Eli tries to get Elisha to just stay there. Perhaps it was a test of faith or just of Elisha's dedication to be with Eli to the end, but he steadfastly sticks with him. And he sticks up for him, too. The prophets in each place are like, "Do you know God is taking Elijah from you today?" And he's like, "Yes! Shhh! It's rude to talk about his death. He's right there!" Then they miraculously cross the Jordan River, just as the Israelites had. Elijah takes his cloak and smacks the river and it crosses and they pass. Elisha is rewarded for his dedication with a final death-bed question from Elijah. And that's where I want us to focus today. Pick up in 2 Kings 2:9.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken from you." And Elisha said, "Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me." And he said, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you, but if you do not see me, it shall not be so." And as they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it and he cried, "My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" And he saw him no more.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

This is Elijah's final question: "Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken for you." The Message paraphrases it this way, *What do you want me to do for you?* This is Elijah's question, and it's a Jesus question. I love the questions Jesus asks. I could sit in them for a *long* time. In John 1:38, when a couple of guys following John the Baptist leave him to follow Jesus he asks, "What are you seeking?" When he passes two blind men in Jericho in Matthew 20:32, Jesus stops and asks them, "What do you want me to do for you?" It's the question for you, right now, "What do you want Jesus to do for you?"

This is the kind of question worth writing down on your bulletin or underlining in your Bible. I've been thinking about this question for weeks, and I'm still not sure I have a way to answer it that feels very satisfying to me. There are people I want to see healed. After listening to Krish's sermon last week, there are 100,000 families I want God to raise up to adopt. I'd love to have a daughter if God would allow us. But I feel like I want a *profound* answer. But Jesus doesn't need me to be profound. He knows what's in my heart. After two weeks of batting that question around, I'm coming to answer it like the disciples did back in John 1. Jesus said, "What are you seeking?" And the guys answered, "Where are you staying?" I feel like my answer right now is, "I don't know, Jesus. What do you want for me? Where are you going? Can I come?"

So think about that question. "What do you want me to do for you?" Is your answer big enough? I want us to think about this as a community: What are we asking Jesus for? Is what we desire too small? Is it in line with what Jesus wants for us?

The first time I read Elisha's response, I thought he was greedy and selfish. Elisha responds in 2 Kings 2:9, "Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me." I didn't understand his response. Then I read *The Message* which is a paraphrase of the Bible in our modern language. It helped. Listen to this, "Your life repeated in my life. I want to be a holy man just like you."

Suddenly his response felt really endearing. I have a young friend in this congregation. Last year at the end of the school year the kids were asked, "What do you want to be when you grew up?" And she

answered, “A pastor... or a tattoo artist.” Either way, she’s aiming for making permanent marks in people’s lives, right? This year, she kept it to just “a pastor.” It blesses me that she is thinking toward ministry! Elisha’s response sounds like that of a disciple who loves the one he is following! *Your life repeated in my life. I want to be a holy man just like you.* So I began to see the way that I, too, would want to respond to Jesus’ question for me, *What do you want me to do for you?* Your life repeated in my life, Jesus. I want to be a holy woman, just like you.

But there’s more to this response that I discovered. There’s more that makes it more than just sentimental thinking. There’s more that helps us understand, then, Elijah’s reaction. *“This is a hard thing; yet if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you.”* What’s more to understand is back in this translation that you have in front of you in the ESV. It’s in Elisha’s request for the double portion of the spirit of Elijah. And I didn’t see this on my own. My Study Bible’s commentary at the bottom of the page pointed me to it. That’s why I find it so helpful to use a study Bible when I’m reading the Scriptures, and I encourage you to read a study Bible as well! If you already have one at home, start with what you’ve got. But if you’ve never owned one, I recommend to do you the *Quest NIV Study Bible* as a place to start. They answer the most popular questions in the margins. I’m not from 9th century BC Israel, and neither are you. So we rely on Bible scholars to help understand things like this. So... it brought this to my attention:

The double portion is the language of the inheritance given to the firstborn son. Elisha is asking Elijah what a son asks of a father— for his inheritance. For the family treasure. Not for what is earned but what is given purely by birthright. He’s asking to be treated as Elijah’s firstborn son, given what is most precious to him in the world, the spirit of Yahweh that dwells in him. It’s not something Elisha can earn. But it is a request that he can ask because he is considered family, as a son.

It’s what we can ask of Jesus as well. We are actually invited to ask Jesus for this audacious request, the request to receive the double portion as the firstborn children of God! We are invited to approach God as his children. We are invited to approach Jesus as his brother, to share in *his* inheritance. We are invited as disciples approaching the one we follow to ask to carry on his ministry. To ask for his life to be repeated in our life.

Listen to these incredible things God speaks over us, Romans 8:16, *“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs— heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.”*

It is not an arrogant thing to ask of Jesus— Please, Jesus. Your life repeated in my life. Please, Jesus. Let there be a double portion of your spirit on me. It’s not arrogant. It’s who we are! This is our birthright because God has claimed us as his own! Jesus has adopted us into his family and given us the right to share in *his inheritance*, which is life forevermore with God. *And* it’s all the riches of the kingdom of heaven born in our life, now, because God dwells with us now.

What do you want Jesus to do for you? Do you want to know God? Do you want to be filled with *his* Spirit, *his* power? Do you want this *more than* you want temporal things? Do you want friendship with God more than comfort? More than a healthy body? More than anything this life has to offer? Because God has made it possible for us to bring the kingdom of heaven here for the sake of those around us. All of the provisions we want and the emotional and physical well-being that we want is the secondary thing—not the primary thing. God wants to give us *himself*. God’s Spirit is available to you because of *who you are* in Christ!

Elijah says this will be a hard thing for Elisha. When they first met, Elijah was on the run for his life. Elijah was infamous as the guy who walked around in animal skins and caused trouble for the kings. Being the namesake to “God is Yahweh” was not easy! And it would be a hard thing for Elisha. And just so, desiring God’s inheritance for us is a hard thing! It is hard for us to desire God more than what God can give. There is a tremendous cost associated with following Christ. That beautiful passage in Romans 8 I just read, when we recite that verse we often cut off the last half of verse 17. If we are children, then heirs— heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, *provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*”

Why is that so hard? We’ve got our eyes fixed on the wrong places. I have my eyes fixed on the wrong places! This vacation, what did I want from Jesus? I wanted to not be irritated with doing chores on vacation. Seriously, we had to stop and pray about our irritation one morning. Don’t you think Jesus wants more for us than just that?

Elijah told Elisha, *“You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you.”* If Elisha fixed his eyes on Elijah, he would receive a double portion of his spirit. And he did! I love how the Bible paraphrase put the finale to this story, *“And so it happened. They were walking along and talking. Suddenly a chariot and horses of fire came between them and Elijah went up in a whirlwind to heaven.”* There they were, just doing the mundane, every day, discipleship thing on an ordinary, but they also knew, extraordinary day, walking along and talking... and boom! “God is Yahweh” revealed himself amazingly once again in a chariot and horses of fire that came down out of heaven and whisked Elijah away.

Learn from this disciple Elisha. I realize that discipleship is a word we’re using a lot around here. It really just means following someone else, becoming like them, and doing what they do. You are disciples of anyone you spend a lot of time with and want to be like and copy everything they do. Jesus wants us to be his disciples. To follow him, become like him, and do what he does.

Elisha was a disciple. He had a deep desire to know God and to have the spirit of God dwell in him, and he steadfastly watched the one he followed until one day as they were walking and talking, suddenly God appeared. Then Elisha did receive God’s spirit. And his life was an outpouring of God, “God who saves,” on everyone around him.

Sometimes life with God is extraordinary. Elisha certainly knew the power of God!—like when he healed a leper who was a pagan and became a God-follower; when he raised a boy to life; when he called on God to fill an entire valley with water. But more often, it was in ordinary things that he experienced that God rescues and saves, and they’re not so dissimilar to what we experience— like when a prophet lost his axe in a pond when he was cutting down trees for a house. Imagine, it was his only tool. How would he have built without it? Elisha prayed and got it back by God’s power. I’ve been praying for four months for God to return my keys to me, and I believe he will! Or so similar to Jesus taking care of the crowds, one day there wasn’t enough food and he prayed and the apples and bread multiplied. I know our deacons meet every week with people in need, and the resources of this church are multiplied on a daily basis to feed and provide gas and electricity to meet a daunting number of needs. Elisha also shared a lot of messages with kings, just like Elijah had. Now where does a farmer like Elisha find the wisdom to advise on military issues? Or medical conditions? But God gave him words of wisdom for those in authority over him. God has all knowledge and knows the future! He will use us to pass on words of wisdom in business, medicine, military, agriculture, and every other trade he has created you for!

Your invitation as a disciple of Jesus is just the same as the invitation of the disciple Elisha. I believe God still pours out his spirit on his people. The double portion inheritance is ours as children of God. His Spirit belongs not to just one prophet but to each of you who want Jesus to live in you! I believe God still wants to work extraordinary and ordinary miracles through you so that the world will know that God saves. And I believe that one day when we are walking and talking on an ordinary day, suddenly, Jesus is going to reappear. And those who are watching will find they come into a heavenly inheritance prepared for them by God himself. I want us to be found following Jesus, becoming more like him, and doing what Jesus does.

What do you want Jesus to do for you?

Do you want to know this God? Read Elisha's story this week (with a Study Bible to help the nuances of his story). Read 2 Kings 2-13 and meet Elisha—"God saves."

Do you want the double portion of his spirit? Pray! It's yours as a follower of Jesus, adopted by God the Father, as a birthright. His life repeated in your life. This is his desire for each of us!

Do you want to reveal his power? Take a lesson from Elisha. Pray for others. Pray for words of wisdom for your boss or for your elected leaders. Share the words God gives you.

There is a God who saves. His name is Yahweh. He revealed himself in Jesus. And he desires that you follow him. I'm going to pray inviting any of you who desire to follow Jesus to start a conversation with God. He loves you and wants to be known by you.