SECOND KINGS

Chapter 2

*Elijah Taken Up to Heaven*

**When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. 2 Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here; the Lord has sent me to Bethel.” But Elisha said, “As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel. 3 The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, “Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?” “Yes, I know,” Elisha replied, “but do not speak of it.” 4 Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here, Elisha; the Lord has sent me to Jericho.” And he replied, “As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So they went to Jericho. 5 The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, “Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?” “Yes, I know,” he replied, “but do not speak of it.” 6 Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here; the Lord has sent me to the Jordan.” And he replied, “As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So the two of them walked on. 7 Fifty men of the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. 8 Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground. 9 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. 10 “You have asked a difficult thing,” Elijah said, “yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise not.” 11 As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. 12 Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart. 13 He picked up the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. 14 Then he took the cloak that had fallen from him and struck the water with it. “Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?” he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over. 15 The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, “The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha.” And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. 16 “Look,” they said, “we your servants have fifty able men. Let them go and look for your master. Perhaps the Spirit of the Lord has picked him up and set him down on some mountain or in some valley.” “No,” Elisha replied, “do not send them.” 17 But they persisted until he was too ashamed to refuse. So he said, “Send them.” And they sent fifty men, who searched for three days but did not find him. 18 When they returned to Elisha, who was staying in Jericho, he said to them, “Didn’t I tell you not to go?”**

**2:1** IN A WHIRLWIND - Literally, the text reads “in the whirlwind” (*bǝsa‘arah*). The definite article suggests that the incident is known to those who read it. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 1)

**2:2** *I will not leave you.* Elisha was aware that Elijah’s ministry was almost finished and that his departure was near (v. 5). He was determined to accompany him until the moment the Lord took him. His commitment to Elijah and to Elijah’s ministry was unfailing (see v. 9; 1Ki 19:21). (CSB)

Elisha’s resolve is repeated in v 4 and again in v 6, each time in response to Elijah’s request that he wait behind. Elisha’s determination is heightened by the prophet’s explanation that accompanying his “father” is futile, since he will be taken. Nevertheless, by v 9 it is apparent that his stubborn adherence will be rewarded, as the request for a parting blessing is invited and subsequently granted. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 1)

**2:3** *company of.* Lit. “sons of ” (see note on 1Ki 20:35). During the days of Elijah and Elisha, companies of prophets were located at Bethel (here), Jericho (v. 5) and Gilgal (4:38). It appears that Elijah journeyed by divine instruction to Gilgal (v. 1), Bethel (v. 2) and Jericho (v. 4) for a last meeting with each of these companies. (CSB)

“sons of the prophets.” Lessing notes that in Kings, “sons of the prophets” always refers to disciples of true prophets (R. Reed Lessing, *Amos,* Concordia Commentary [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009], 472). As witnesses of the prophetic succession (e.g., T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings: Word Biblical Commentary* [Waco: Word Books, 1985], 20), they are therefore dependable. Similarly, at the transfiguration, the most trusted inner circle of disciples is chosen as witnesses, and their reliability is precisely the point being made in the traditional Epistle for this day from 1 Peter. Significantly, after the transfiguration, those select disciples, trusted also as witnesses of other events such as the raising of Jairus’s daughter and Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane, are charged to keep their own counsel regarding what they have witnessed (Mt 17:9). (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 1)

The sons of the prophets, first at Bethel and then at Jericho, have been told what must happen to Elijah and do not shrink from bearing the unwelcome news. Elisha’s response seems to be one of understandable irritation. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 1)

**2:7** *Fifty men.* These men were to witness the miracle by which Elijah and Elisha crossed the river. (CSB)

STOOD AT A DISTANCE - “stood at some distance from them.” At Bethel, the sons of the prophets had come out to Elisha; at Jericho, they had drawn near to him. But at this point, they keep their distance, perhaps sensitive to the emotion entailed in the separation or maybe in realization of the awesome encounter with the Almighty that will ensue. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 1)

**2:8** *Elijah took his cloak … and struck the water with it.* Elijah used his cloak much as Moses had used his staff at the time of Israel’s passage through the “Red Sea” (see Ex 14:16, 21, 26). (CSB)

The parting of the water is, of course, suggestive of Moses’ parting of the Red Sea in the exodus. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 1)

**2:9** *Let me inherit a double portion.* Elisha was not expressing a desire for a ministry twice as great as Elijah’s, but he was using terms derived from inheritance law to express his desire to carry on Elijah’s ministry. Inheritance law assigned a double portion of a father’s possessions to the firstborn son (see Dt 21:17 and note). (CSB)

“double portion” refers to twice what other heirs might inherit, rather than twice the portion of the spirit Elijah himself possessed. This would be in line with the allocation bequeathed to the oldest son. By this formula, we may understand Elisha to be the proper heir of Elijah’s prophetic ministry. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 1)

**2:10** *difficult thing.* Although Elijah had previously been told to anoint Elisha as his successor (1Ki 19:16, 19–21), Elijah’s response clearly showed that the issue rested solely with the Lord’s sovereign good pleasure. (CSB)

Elijah points out that Elisha’s request is not his to grant, but it is hard for Elisha to receive rather than for God to give. As the chapter unfolds, Elisha is confronted with the difficulties of his calling and his own limitations in meeting the challenge. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 1)

*If you see me … it will be yours—otherwise not.* Elijah left the answer to Elisha’s request in the Lord’s hands. (CSB)

**2:11** *chariot of fire and horses of fire.* The Lord’s heavenly host has accompanied and supported Elijah’s ministry (as it had that of Moses; see Ex 15:1–10), and now at his departure Elisha is allowed to see it (cf. 6:17). (CSB)

“chariots of fire and horses of fire.” What is meant by this is not clear, but artists have enjoyed colorful and dramatic portrayals of it. Fire is associated with theophany at many points in the Old Testament; for example, in Ex 3, where God speaks to Moses through the burning bush. Another emblem of theophany is cloud; again, for example, when God speaks to Moses on Sinai in Ex 19. This is the one that accompanies the voice of God at the transfiguration. In Ex 13, the two symbols are combined to demonstrate the unwavering presence of God with his people in the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 1)

*Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.* Elijah, like Enoch before him (Ge 5:24), was taken up to heaven bodily without experiencing death; like Moses (Dt 34:4–6), he was taken away outside the promised land without leaving a grave. (CSB)

**2:12** *chariots and horsemen of Israel!* Elisha depicted Elijah as embodying the true strength of the nation. He, rather than the apostate king, is the Lord’s representative. The same description was later used of Elisha (13:14). (CSB)

“Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.” The rending of garments is an expression of grief or distress. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 1)

It would be remiss to leave this text without considering the issue of Elijah’s reappearance. The Old Testament canon closes with the parting promise that “I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes” (Mal 4:5). Clearly by the New Testament era there was an expectation that Elijah would appear before the Messiah. The Synoptic Gospels portray John the Baptist in terms resembling the description of Elijah the Tishbite in the previous chapter of 2 Kings given by the king’s messengers: “He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist” (2 Ki 1:8). Anyone could recognize John in this role, and Jesus himself affirmed, “For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come” (Mt 11:13–14). The last of the prophets corresponds to the first. In a sense, then, it is unnecessary for any further appearance of Elijah to fulfill the prophecy of Malachi. John himself, however, insists that he is not Elijah when asked explicitly about it (Jn 1:21). So there follows the very literal fulfillment on the Mount of Transfiguration. Perhaps it is a reminder that God may be super-abundant in the keeping of his promises, but never lacking. After the transfiguration, there can be no doubt at all that the stage is set for the Messiah to accomplish his work. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 1)

**2:13** *He picked up the cloak.* See note on v. 8. Possession of Elijah’s cloak symbolized Elisha’s succession to Elijah’s ministry (see 1Ki 19:19). (CSB)

**2:14** *When he struck the water, it divided.* See v. 8. The Lord authenticated Elisha’s succession to Elijah’s ministry and demonstrated that the same divine power that had accompanied Elijah’s ministry was now operative in the ministry of Elisha. In crossing the Jordan as Joshua had before him, Elisha is shown to be Elijah’s “Joshua” (Elisha and Joshua are very similar names, Elisha meaning “God saves” and Joshua “The Lord saves”). (CSB)

**2:15** *bowed to the ground before him.* Indicated their recognition of Elisha’s succession to Elijah’s position. Elisha was now the Lord’s official representative in this time of royal apostasy. (CSB)

**2:16** *Perhaps the Spirit of the Lord has picked him up and set him down.* Obadiah expressed the same idea years earlier (see 1Ki 18:12). (CSB)

*do not send them.* Elisha knew their search would be fruitless. (CSB)

**2:17** *Send them.* When the company of prophets refused to be satisfied with Elisha’s answer, he permitted them to go so that the authority and truth of his words would be confirmed to them. (CSB)

*Healing of the Water*

**19 The men of the city said to Elisha, “Look, our lord, this town is well situated, as you can see, but the water is bad and the land is unproductive.” 20 “Bring me a new bowl,” he said, “and put salt in it.” So they brought it to him. 21 Then he went out to the spring and threw the salt into it, saying, “This is what the Lord says: ‘I have healed this water. Never again will it cause death or make the land unproductive.’ ” 22 And the water has remained wholesome to this day, according to the word Elisha had spoken.**

**2:19** *city.* Evidently Jericho (see v. 18). (CSB)

*the water is bad and the land is unproductive.* The inhabitants of Jericho were experiencing the effects of the covenant curse (contrast Dt 28:15–18 with Ex 23:25–26; Lev 26:9; Dt 28:1–4). See 1Ki 16:34; Jos 6:26. (CSB)

**2:20** *new bowl.* That which was to be used in the service of the Lord was to be undefiled by profane use (see Lev 1:3, 10; Nu 19:2; Dt 21:3; 1Sa 6:7). (CSB)

*put salt in it.* Elijah may have used salt because of its known preservative qualities, but it is more likely that he used it to symbolize the covenant faithfulness of the Lord (see notes on Lev 2:13; Nu 18:19; see also 2Ch 13:5). (CSB)

**2:21** *I have healed this water.* Any idea of a magical effect of the salt in the purification of the water is excluded by the explicit statement that the Lord himself healed the water. In this symbolic way Elisha was able, as the first act of his ministry, to proclaim to the people that in spite of their disobedience the Lord was merciful and was still reaching out to them in his grace (see 13:23). (CSB)

*Elisha Is Jeered*

**23 From there Elisha went up to Bethel. As he was walking along the road, some youths came out of the town and jeered at him. “Go on up, you baldhead!” they said. “Go on up, you baldhead!” 24 He turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the Lord. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the youths. 25 And he went on to Mount Carmel and from there returned to Samaria.**

**2:23** *Go on up.* Since Bethel was the royal cult center of the northern kings (1Ki 12:29; Am 7:13) and Elijah and Elisha were known to frequent Samaria (perhaps even as their main residence; see note on 5:3), the youths from Bethel no doubt assumed that Elisha was going up to Samaria to continue Elijah’s struggle against royal apostasy. (Some believe that the youths, in their mocking, were telling Elisha to ascend to heaven as Elijah had done.) (CSB)

*you baldhead!* Baldness was uncommon among the ancient Jews, and luxuriant hair seems to have been viewed as a sign of strength and vigor (see note on 2Sa 14:26). By calling Elisha “baldhead,” the youths from Bethel expressed that city’s utter disdain for the Lord’s representative, who, they felt, had no power. (CSB)

**2:24** *called down a curse on them in the name of the Lord*. Elisha pronounced a curse similar to the covenant curse of Lev 26:21–22. The result gave warning of the judgment that would come on the entire nation should it persist in disobedience and apostasy (see 2Ch 36:16). Thus Elisha’s first acts were indicative of his ministry that would follow: God’s covenant blessings would come to those who looked to him (vv. 19–22), but God’s covenant curses would fall on those who turned away from him. (CSB)