

God's Work Goes On

DAVE BAST

Elijah was a tremendous hero of faith, a towering figure in the Old Testament. In some ways, he was the first and greatest of all of God's prophets; but like all people, his time eventually came to an end; and despite the spectacular way in which Elijah left the world, the message for us is quite an ordinary one, really: God's servants, even the greatest of them, pass on; but God's work goes on.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, today we have reached the end of our brief series – just four parts – on the life and ministry of Elijah; as we have said, the greatest of the prophets in many respects, certainly the fact that he and Moses are singled out in the New Testament. He is called the forerunner, you know, there is that prophecy that Elijah must come before the Messiah can return, and Jesus reinterprets that in terms of the ministry of John the Baptist; and then there is the Mount of Transfiguration, where Moses representing the Law and Elijah the Prophets appear to Jesus and strengthen him before the cross. So, this towering figure, really.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the stories about him...and indeed, we mentioned this, I think briefly in the first program in this series, but it bears mentioning that Elijah appears from out of nowhere in I Kings 17. There are a few more... about five or six more chapters in I Kings, although Elijah isn't in all of them, and then by the time you get to II Kings, which is where we will be today – the first chapter – he is gone. So this towering figure occupies a very small, little bit of Old Testament real estate here. One story we didn't include in this series, on Naboth's vineyard...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We have another show on that in the Groundwork archives, if you look that up, so we didn't include that. That is an interesting story; but really, this towering figure was significant because of when he worked, and the powerful way by which God worked through him; and then also his successor, Elisha, because really, there is not a whole lot of scripture about him. Moses is in the Bible... David is in the Bible... almost anybody you can name is in the Bible a lot longer than Elijah.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and I think mysterious is the word that we have often invoked in this series about him; and there are all kinds of mysteries about him, and even more about his successor, Elisha, whom we are going to meet today. Now, we have chosen not to extend this series to Elisha's life and work, but...

SCOTT HOEZEE

We might do it in the future.

DAVE BAST

Yes, we might; and there is some weird stuff in there. One of the interesting things about the two of them, among several things of note, is that the miracles of the Old Testament seem to cluster around these two figures, and some of them tremendous miracles. They each have a story of raising a dead boy, and we did look at that in, I think, the first program of the series on Elijah – that experience with the widow of Zarephath – but later Elisha will do the same thing; and those are the only resurrection stories in the Old Testament; I mean, the only other person who did anything like that was Jesus. There is some question about Peter also in the New Testament with Tabitha. So that would be, I guess, one more example; but this is a pretty rare occurrence, and it is these two prophets.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Elijah is this big deal; and again, if you have had any doubt, his appearance with Jesus and Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration would put that to rest, that he is a big deal; and yet, you know... So, he is a hero of the faith, in a way, but the Bible isn't into hero worship, right? It keeps...the Bible keeps the focus on a very human level, which is maybe why we had the story we had in the last program in this series – the third program – when he gets so depressed and flees to Mount Sinai...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; if that can happen to Elijah I guess...

SCOTT HOEZEE

It can happen to anybody.

DAVE BAST

No surprise if I get down.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it is always... As important as the human agents are – the human actors in the biblical drama are – God is the true agent – you want to talk about hero? God is the real hero because God is always the real power behind these people, and that is why their work also gains kind of an eternal significance. It is not just a human achievement, it is God working through us; and there is a lesson in that for us, especially for any of us who ourselves sometimes maybe feel insignificant or we have a yen – a yearning – to be significant – to make something of our lives – to be famous: I wish people knew my name; but you know, God, through this story, dramatic though this story is, even so there is this human element to it, where God says: It is really about me.

DAVE BAST

Yes, true enough; and you know, the thing is, if we link our lives to God and to his great project – his redemptive project for the world really... You know, it started in creation and then we messed up – we human beings – and now the world has all kinds of problems, but God hasn't abandoned it. God has come in person, as we noted in the last program. He has taken that long journey in Jesus to come alongside us, and he is determined, not only to save us, but to remake the whole thing – to renew it; and so, he uses people like Elijah, and even the great ones, like Elijah, their day comes and goes, and they will pass off the scene. The last thing we noted, I think, in the previous program is that great verse of the Apostle's at the end of I Corinthians 15, where he says in the light of the future of God's redemptive purpose – of resurrection and transformation:

⁵⁸Be steadfast, immovable; always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Nothing you do in the Lord's work is meaningless or pointless, so chin up, Elijah; your victory isn't wasted – it is not lost – and God's work will go on, and God will raise up new servants to replace those whose time is

over.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Many of whom we won't even know. You know, one of the things...and we kind of forget this because we focus just on the Elijahs and the Moses figures and the Davids and so forth in the Bible; but in the whole history of God's people... So, if you think of Israel starting with Abram in Genesis 12, think of the whole history of God's people, extend that into the New Testament with the new Israel as Christ gathers his followers, and then in the book of Acts, the Church – the new Israel begins; of all of the people – millions – maybe billions of people in history, we know the names of only just a few; a thin, thin percentage of people...

DAVE BAST

Tiny, tiny number.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes. God did tremendous work through millions of people that we have never heard of, and maybe never will until we get to heaven or something...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we know about David, we know about Peter and Paul in the New Testament, we know about Mary and Martha, but we don't know about so many others; and we even had that story in the first program in this series about the widow of Zarephath and her son. Neither of them is even given a name. How many...

DAVE BAST

The little people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

How many of the people that Jesus healed in the New Testament even have a name? We don't know their names, but they went on and they testified to Jesus and they witnessed to Jesus. We are all part of God's plan, and it is always the work of God that makes that significant; not whether or not your name is known.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and I guess one more thing before we move on with Elijah's translation, as it is sometimes called, from this world to the next, is the fact that no matter who you are and no matter what you do, even if you are a great, great person like this prophet, what you do is not as important as who you know, and whom you belong to; and the great message here is that the Lord is with Elijah and he is going to take him home when his work is done, and that is far greater and far better than anything he or any of us will accomplish. It is belonging to God that is our only comfort in life and in death, as we have been taught to say. But let's see what happens when we pick up the story. It is another very famous incident from the life of Elijah. We will turn to that next.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we now enter, Dave... This series so far has been the tail end of I Kings in the Bible. Now we are moving into II Kings Chapters 1 and 2, and at the end of I Kings 19, when God sends Elijah back to work after he was depressed, one of the things he had to do was anoint a man named Elisha, who would become a fellow prophet and a successor ultimately to Elijah. He does that, and Elijah and Elisha have been serving together and traveling through Israel together for some time now. By the time we get to the beginning of II Kings, Elijah's time is at an end.

DAVE BAST

Right; so we will pick up the reading in Chapter 2: ¹When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. ²Elijah 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. ³The 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, "So be quiet." ⁴Then 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.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁵The 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, "So be quiet." ⁶Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here. The Lord has sent me to the Jordan." And he replied, "As surely as the Lord lives and you live, I will not leave you." So the two of them walked on. ⁷Fifty men from the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. ⁸Elijah 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.

DAVE BAST

So, this is interesting. These two guys, Elijah and Elisha, are kind of doing this weird dance all the way across the middle of the kingdom of Israel. So they are going from place to place: Gilgal to Bethel, to the Jordan River, and at each place Elijah tries to leave Elisha behind...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And Elisha sticks to him like a burr on a long-haired dog. He just says: No, I won't leave you. And then meanwhile, there is this group called the company of the prophets, and they want to chime in, too. Who are they, anyway?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; we have no idea who they are. They keep coming up to Elisha and saying: You know, Elijah is leaving today; and Elisha says: Shhh, no; quiet. I don't want to talk about it; I don't want to talk about it. This happens over and over. It is a very strange rhythm, a very strange journey. Is Elijah really trying to get rid of him or just testing his loyalty? Don't know; he is not going to get rid of him, that is for sure, as you just said; and then this kind of chorus of other people...but you know, they are on a mission – they are on God's mission yet. God is clearly with Elijah. He is able to divide the Jordan River, which is a miracle, the likes of which we haven't seen since Moses and Joshua's day. There are a lot of parallels with Moses all through this, by the way, if you kind of make some of those connections. So yes, they are on their way, but it is kind of a zigzaggy path and it has all these odd rhythms. It is as though the narrative wants to pause here a little bit just to savor one last time the significance of Elijah.

DAVE BAST

Right; and we are told at the very outset that the Lord is about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind. We will see that story in our final segment. We will read it and reflect a little bit more about that, but that has been taken to mean that Elijah didn't actually die; that he was transferred physically – bodily. Often it is depicted that he mounts this chariot of fire and he is pulled up by horses of fire into the heavens. Is that actually what the biblical writer wants us to understand as taking place? Well, let's hold off on that, but let's reserve that question and come back to it in a moment.

In the meantime, these prophets, or this company of the prophets, or school of the prophets, it could be called. It seems to be a sort of seminary class or moving seminary of students who are going from place to place; but clearly, God has spoken to them, too. They are prophets in the sense that they have gotten this word from the Lord and they are trying to clue Elisha in that God... This is the day that God has appointed for an end to Elijah's ministry, and Elisha says: Yes, I know that. You don't need to tell me. So again, some very curious details, but Elijah is going to pass from the scene in the same way...very similar to the way Moses did.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, he just disappears.

DAVE BAST

Right; and in almost the same location; in the Transjordan, on the east side of the Jordan River, where Moses was stopped by God and prevented from entering the Promised Land.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; so lots of interesting parallels here. It is also possible, it occurs to me as you were saying that, Dave, Elisha may also be sad at the prospect of his master's leaving. They are good friends, they are colleagues; so maybe that is why he doesn't want to speak of it; but the end is coming near, so Elijah just appears in a non-standard way to leave earth. I mean, ultimately I assume that we would have to say he died in some sense; but you can see why in Jewish tradition there was this belief that he was still around and would come back, and that he would be a forerunner to the Messiah; and indeed, the Messiah won't come until Elijah comes; and Jesus will ultimately say John the Baptist was the Elijah figure they were waiting for; but before he goes, Elijah and Elisha have the conversation, and Elijah asks Elisha what he can do for him.

DAVE BAST

Yes, there is one more...we didn't read that part, but that is the last thing: Is there anything you want me to do? Any last requests?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Elisha says: Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me; and Elijah says: You have asked the hard thing, yet if you see me as I am taken, then it shall be so. So Elisha says: I want a double portion of your spirit. Elijah says: If you are around when I disappear, that is God's answer that you are going to get it; and he is not asking to be twice as powerful as Elijah.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes; that is a curious phrase, double portion.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, you know, to let him continue his ministry in that power of God.

DAVE BAST

Well, in the law I think the key to that phrase, double portion, is found in the law of inheritance because the firstborn, the heir of the family, was given a double portion of the property – of the land. So what Elisha is really saying is: You know, will you let me follow you? Will you let me take up your work – take up your

mantel, so to speak? In fact, there is a classic hymn: God of the fathers bless the prophet's son, Elijah's mantle on Elisha cast... and we will see that literally happening in this story. So what Elisha is really requesting as a final request from Elijah is: Can I be like you? Can I carry on your work? And Elijah says to him – one last prophecy, incidentally, the old man makes: If you see me when I leave – when I am taken from you – it shall be so.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we will see exactly how that happens. We will look at that in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, where today we are wrapping up our series on the life and ministry of Elijah; specifically looking at the narrative of the passing of the mantle, literally, between Elijah and Elisha; the act by which Elisha succeeds Elijah in the work of the prophet of the Lord; and actually witnesses Elijah's removal from the earth in a very dramatic way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Here it is from II Kings 2, starting at the 11th verse: 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. ¹²Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father, my father, the chariot and horsemen of Israel!" and Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two. ¹³Elisha then picked up Elijah's cloak that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. ¹⁴He took the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and struck the water with it. "Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" he asked. And when he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left and he crossed over.

DAVE BAST

Wow; so there is the story, and a famous one from the Bible, although maybe not as familiar... I was talking to a friend recently who said: Yes, I had kind of forgotten that; until their school-aged child came home and said: Did you know that there were two men who didn't die in the Old Testament? Enoch, of course...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Enoch, yes.

DAVE BAST

In the book of Genesis; and here Elijah and the chariot of fire; so, spectacular, yes; but maybe the key point is that Elisha has been given his request; and as he picks up Elijah's cloak he rolls it up and just like on the way over the Jordan, on the way back when Elisha beats the river with it and cries out: Where is the God of Elijah? The waters pass, and so the answer clearly is he is now with Elisha.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, exactly; he now probably...he does have the double portion of Elijah's spirit, as he had requested because, as Elijah prophesied, Elisha saw him go. So he is now clearly going to carry on the ministry; and indeed, we will now...we are not doing it again in this series, but there will be a series of stories in II Kings on Elisha and on a lot of interesting, curious, and sometimes rather odd miracles that he would perform; and so Elisha becomes the visible symbol of the presence of God, even in Israel at a time when they have been going through a time of great spiritual apostasy in other ways. So, the chariot of fire – very famous imagery; there are a number of famous songs built on it...

DAVE BAST

Swing low, sweet chariot...yes. Coming for to carry me home...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Psalm 104: God makes the clouds his chariot. He rides on the wings of the wind. He makes his messengers winds, his ministers a flame of fire. Elisha witnessed that. Again, does that mean Elijah didn't die? Well, ultimately I suppose he did pass away, as all of us mortal people do; but again, as we said in the last segment, it did create the idea that maybe he was still alive and would return to earth as a forerunner to the Messiah. Jesus said he did, and said: By the way, John the Baptist was the Elijah figure who was prophesied, and that therefore, Jesus is the Messiah.

DAVE BAST

Well, you know, I don't want to express judgment on it. I mean, I am happy with the traditional story that Elijah was spared death – that he passed directly from earth into heaven – from this world into the world to come; but if you look at the story carefully and note the details, it doesn't say anything about him getting in the chariot...the chariot of fire. The chariot and horses of fire separated Elijah and Elisha, the text says; so they formed a kind of barrier, as if Elisha, your time is not yet; you have to stay here, so you stay on that side; and meanwhile, Elijah is on the other side, and then it says: A whirlwind took him up to heaven. It caught up his body. Now was that a physical – a literal whirlwind or was it a supernatural wind? We are not told, but once more, the parallels with Moses... Moses' death was also very mysterious. The Bible says in Deuteronomy, at the end of that book, that clearly Moses did die like everyone else, but it says then the Lord buried him and no one ever found the body of Moses. Again, one of those mystery kinds of elements in the end of this famous leader of the people of God. So I think what it is trying to say is the same sort of thing happened with Elijah. That is why again they are paired together in the New Testament. Later on in the text...we won't read it, but this company of the prophets is there and they want to go out and search for Elijah's body; and Elisha says: You know, don't bother. You are not going to find it. But they go out anyway and come back empty handed, and he says: Well, I told you so. So that is kind of the end of that part of the narrative.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The story as it is passed on, and Elisha's subsequent question: Where now is the God of Elijah? Is God still with us when a great figure like this departs? You know, it has inspired a lot of reflections, and as we said, a lot of songs, and sometimes we wish that we could see those chariots of fire. We wish we could see the visible power of God. It doesn't always happen. It doesn't always come through. There was a movie well known some years ago called: *Chariots of Fire*...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. That makes me think of it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

About Eric Liddell, who won a gold medal running the 400 meters in 1924 at the Olympics. He was kind of famous at the time because he refused to run on a Sunday because he was a Christian. He became a missionary to China later, and died, actually, in 1943 while he was interred in a Japanese prisoner of war camp during World War II; kind of a sad end to his life. The movie sort of leaves the question: Where were the chariots of fire to bring this good man home? Where was the power of God? But the indication is, the power of God is still there even absent the chariots, as with Elisha, being able to repeat the miracle of dividing the Jordan. So, in all of our lives, that God of power is here whether we see him or not. The work goes on, God's presence goes on, there is always this tremendous hope.

DAVE BAST

It is an important lesson from scripture. God's servants come and go. Each one eventually comes to the end of his days, and whether it is a wonderful deliverance and instant transfer like Elijah's or whether it is a long, drawn out battle with cancer, as was the case of Eric Liddell, the truth remains that God will raise up in each generation the Elishas who will succeed. I have often been drawn to the ending of the book of Acts, where Paul is kind of under house arrest. He is sharing the Gospel with everyone. Luke says; With all boldness and

without hindrance. And stops...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is the end of the story.

DAVE BAST

What happened to Paul, you know? Who came after... It is as though Luke is saying: Paul, even Paul, isn't the hero. God is the hero of the story, and his work will go on.

Well thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee. We would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So visit groundworkonline.com to tell us about what you would like to hear next on Groundwork.

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