

Week 38 – MINISTRIES OF ELIJAH AND ELISHA

Key Verse: I Kings 18:37 Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again."

The lives and ministries of Elijah and Elisha are some of the most exciting to read about in the Old Testament. We see the power of God manifested through these two very different characters. They both appear suddenly in the narrative of the evil kings which reminds us of how God so often works in "suddenlies!"

These prophets that spoke the word of God directly to the people were used mightily during the era of the Divided Kingdom. Their lives still speak to us today.

The studies only include selected scriptures, but you would be blessed to read all the chapters that include their lives. Elijah's ministry begins in I Kings 17. Elisha's ministry ends at 2 Kings 13:21

DAY 1: ENTER ELIJAH

Read I Kings 17:1-24

Elijah suddenly appears on the scene to confront the wicked King Ahab. At God's command, Elijah announces the commencement of a drought upon Israel.

1. Why is this drought coming? (1 Kings 16:33). _____

2. What did Baal supposedly have control over? (see Pagan God's sheet) _____

God would demonstrate that He, not Baal, is in control of nature for the benefit of the nation. God sends Elijah into hiding, first to the wilderness east of the Jordan (1 Kgs 17:2-7), then to the region of Sidon where a Gentile widow would care for him (1 Kgs 17:8-16). The widow's kindness and faith are rewarded by the raising of her son from the dead by Elijah (1 Kgs 17:17-24). This begins a period of numerous miracles which are designed to substantiate the prophetic warnings of judgment against Israel which will precede its eventual fall.

3. Why was it necessary for Elijah to hide (comp. 1 Kgs 18:10)? _____

4. What demand did Elijah make of the widow to test her faith in God? _____

5. What do tragedies often do to us (1 Kgs 17:17-18)? _____

PRAYER FOCUS: When you doubt that God is at work in your life, or you feel like he is punishing you because of sin, read Isaiah 66:13. Just as a mother comforts her child, God promises to comfort you and offer peace like a river. He does that for us personally, and Isaiah prophesies that upon Christ's return, He will do that for all Jerusalem.

DAY 2: THE TROUBLER OF ISRAEL

Read I Kings 18:1-19:18

After three-and-a-half years of drought has ravaged the land (1 Kgs 18:1; Jas 5:17), God now tells Elijah to announce its conclusion to Ahab, and Elijah sends word to the king through his servant Obadiah to meet with him (1 Kgs 18:2-16).

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1. Who does Ahab blame for the distress of the land? (1 Kgs 18:17-19) _____
What does Ahab call Elijah? _____
2. How does Elijah respond? _____
Who is to gather on Mt. Carmel? _____
3. What challenge does Elijah give to Ahab in I Kings 18:21? _____
4. Have you ever found yourself "faltering between two opinions? _____
5. How did you resolve the conflict? _____

6. How many prophets of Jehovah stand with Elijah? _____
7. Can we always determine what is right by the number of people voting for an issue? _____
Discuss: _____

8. How would the true God be identified in this challenge? _____
9. How did Elijah mock the prophets of Baal regarding their false notions of deity? _____

10. For what did Elijah pray before God's fire consumed the sacrifice? _____

The location and circumstances of this challenge to Baal's prophets is especially appropriate as Mt. Carmel was a stronghold of Baal worship. Jezebel was the daughter of the Sidonian king (1 Kgs 16:31), and Baal was also the god of fire and is pictured with a thunderbolt in his left hand. Surely if Baal were the true God, he could show his power in such a tailor made setting. Elijah begins with a challenge to the convictions of the gathered Israelites: "*How long will you falter between two opinions?*" (1 Kgs 18:20-21). They need to make up their mind who they will serve, and Elijah provides some evidence to assist them in their decision (1 Kgs 18:22-40). So dramatic and convincing is this display that the people not only confess Jehovah but at the command of Elijah capture the prophets of Baal for execution.

Jezebel is neither intimidated nor impressed by the victory of Elijah and she threatens to kill him (1 Kgs 19:1-2). Elijah thus goes from fugitive to victor to fugitive again (1 Kgs 19:3-10). Under extreme emotional and physical distress, Elijah heads into the southern Judean wilderness in search of God's termination of his life. He feels that he has failed and that he cannot effectively combat the forces of evil. From his perspective, all appears lost and hopeless. God is aware of Elijah's human frailty and limitations; He sends an angel to provide sustenance for Elijah's journey. Elijah eventually makes his way to Mt. Horeb, or Sinai, "*the mountain of God,*" where Moses stood before God about 700 years previously and pleaded for God to spare the idolatrous Israelites fresh out of Egypt (Ex 32). Elijah, however, is in no mood to intercede for the people.

11. Describe the physical and emotional stresses upon Elijah. _____

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How do they affect him? _____

12. How does Elijah perceive himself? _____
How has this weakened him? _____

God provides a demonstration which helps revive Elijah's flagging spirit (1 Kgs 19:11-13). The mountains are blasted and rocks split by a mighty wind; an earthquake shakes the ground beneath Elijah's feet; a raging fire sweeps past the mouth of the cave – yet the Lord does not reveal Himself in any of these. Instead, He speaks in a soft whisper. Perhaps Elijah placed too much emphasis upon the great contest at Carmel; perhaps he expected national repentance to follow the grand public victory. But such did not happen. God's work is often accomplished in less dramatic events. Elijah is told to go back and anoint two kings and a prophet whom God will use as instruments of punishment.

13. What question is twice asked of Elijah (1 Kgs 19:9, 13)? _____
How might that question apply to you? _____

14. Elijah is to anoint what Gentile king? _____
What Israelite king? _____
What prophet? _____

15. Has the Lord ever spoken to you in a soft whisper? _____
Do you prefer the whisper or the loud voice? _____

PRAYER FOCUS: Read Isaiah 35 and note all the emotions that Isaiah speaks of as he looks forward to the future glory of Zion. We will hear God speak and share his love for all that He has created in the final kingdom where justice is established and evil is destroyed.

DAY 3: ELIJAH EXITS AND ELISHA ENTERS

Read I Kings 19:19-21; 2 Kings 2:1-25

This second chapter of 2 Kings details Elijah's departure from the earth and the commencement of Elisha's ministry. Elisha had been Elijah's servant and apprentice for about seven or eight years, and God had revealed that Elijah would be taken to Heaven. The sons of the prophets were groups of students who were in training. Schools for the prophets had been started in the time of Samuel, and the students apparently lived in selected cities, including Gilgal, Bethel, and Jericho. Perhaps Elijah visited these places on his last day to encourage them.

1. What was Elisha doing when Elijah found him? _____
2. What did Elijah put on Elisha? _____
3. What does Elisha ask for in 2 Kings 2:9? _____
4. What was required of Elisha in order for him to receive a double portion? _____
5. What does his desire for a double portion of the spirit of Elijah indicate about Elisha? _____
6. What steps can we take in our lives to exhibit the kind of faithful determination that Elisha had? _____

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7. Are we always eager to take on the responsibility of a "double portion?" _____

The Hebrew words *pi shenayim*, translated *double portion*, mean "two parts," not double the quantity. Elisha's request for a double portion was a reference to Deuteronomy 21:15-17, which granted two shares of the inheritance to the oldest son who would become the family leader. At this time, students of distinguished teachers were commonly described as their children. Because Elisha had been called to become the leader of the prophets in Elijah's place, he wanted to claim this inheritance of "a double portion of his spiritual influence" so he could fulfill his role. Granting Elisha's request was not in Elijah's power; the answer had to come from God, but it was promised if he saw Elijah go to Heaven.

A fiery chariot and horses separated Elijah from Elisha, and a whirlwind caught up Elijah. The only other people who have left this world without dying were Enoch and Jesus after His resurrection. Elisha saw Elijah go, and his expression, "My father, my father," acknowledged Elijah as his spiritual father and mentor. The mantle worn by Elijah was probably made of sheepskin. That God directed its fall to where Elisha could pick it up indicated that Elisha had received the double portion he had requested and confirmed that Elisha was Elijah's successor. Elisha tore off his own clothes, perhaps as an indication of his grief, but the putting on of Elijah's mantle could have been symbolic of stepping into his new role. The sons of the prophets, who were watching from afar, had seen Elijah strike the Jordan River with his mantle, and had observed that the river had parted. As Elisha stood by the river and smote the water with the mantle, God confirmed to Elisha and also the watching sons of the prophets that Elisha had received His anointing. The prophets accepted him as their leader. When they asked to look for Elijah's body, Elisha told them not to go, but they insisted. The futility of their search further confirmed Elisha's leadership position.

The miracles God promptly worked through Elisha authenticated his position as Elijah's successor. At Jericho, contaminated water was cleansed by using salt. On the road to Bethel, mocking youths were punished. The word translated *children* can refer to people in their twenties or thirties, and these must have been old enough to be accountable for their actions. Some Bible scholars believe these were young men who were demonstrating great disrespect for God, as shown by their dishonor of His messenger. Bethel was the Northern Kingdom's center of idolatry, and the people of the area had a disdainful attitude toward God and His prophets. Elisha pronounced a curse, but God sent the punishment.

PRAYER FOCUS: Even though some around us may try to discourage us, perseverance with God never goes unnoticed or unrewarded. Read Hebrews 10:36-39 which encourages us to persevere. The Old Testament Prophet, Habakkuk is being quoted here. Compare Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11. Do you think God is making a point here of how we must live?! Reflect on what you need to do to deepen your faith in the Lord.

DAY 4: THE PROPHET, ELIJAH'S CHARACTER

Various selected scriptures

We want to compare the similarities and differences in the characters of the two speaking prophets of the day.

1. How would you describe Elijah from what you have read so far? (i.e. what did he wear, what did his hair look like, was he strong, a loner? Give examples _____

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2. How do you see Elijah’s relationship to God? Think of the stories and his interactions with others that reflect his dependence on God. _____

3. How does James describe Elijah? (James 5:17-18) _____

4. What responsibility has God entrusted Elijah with before the “great and dreadful day of the Lord” comes? (Malachi 4:5-6) _____

5. Who is the Elijah that was to come? (Matthew 11:11-15) _____

PRAYER FOCUS: Read James 5:17-20. Ask the Lord if there is someone that you need to affect like Elijah did. Does the Lord have you interceding in prayer for something in particular?

**DAY FIVE: THE PROPHET, ELISHA’S CHARACTER
VARIOUS SCRIPTURES**

We know next to nothing about Elisha’s early life until sometime around the year 856 BC, when he was probably in his twenties.

1. Describe Elijah’s first meeting with Elisha. (I Kings 19:19) _____

2. Elisha’s wealth could be discovered through what he was ploughing with. How many yoke of oxen was he using? _____

3. What was Elisha’s relationship with his parents? (I Kings 19:20) _____

4. What did Elisha do with the oxen that demonstrated his complete departure from his former life? (I Kings 19:21) _____

We hear nothing more of Elisha for at least the next four years, but we can assume that he faithfully served Elijah during that period and learned from him. Knowing that the Lord was about to take him Elijah tested his servant’s devotion by asking him three times to remain while he went on in turn to Bethel (2 Kings 2:2), Jericho (2:4) and then over the Jordan (2:6). Elisha and the other prophets of the Lord were well aware of what was about to happen and he refused to leave his master.

5. Before Elijah was taken up into heaven, what did Elisha ask of him? (2 Kings 2:9)

Compare the miracles they both performed (See sheet on comparisons of miracles). Did Elisha receive what he asked? _____

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Elisha proved to be of a different character to his former master. Whereas Elijah had been a solitary figure, spending much of his time alone without even a servant (1 Kings 19:3; 2 Kings 1:6) Elisha was often found in the company of the "sons of the prophets" (2 Kings 4:38-41; 6:1-7) and even with the elders of Samaria (6:32). Elisha spent some of his time with the kings of Israel and on one occasion, the king of Judah as well (3:11).

In common with Elijah, Elisha's ministry took him far and wide, but we know that he had his own house in Samaria (6:32) and the use of an upper room in the town of Shunem (4:8-10) when he was in that region, an arrangement that went on much longer than Elijah's with the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8-16). The overall impression we get is of a man who is prepared to be involved in society and the everyday details of life (6:1-4). He was even willing to lend his aid in recovering a lost axe head for one of his students (6:5-7), but like his master, would not suffer any insult against his office to go unpunished (2:23-24; cf. 1:9-12).

Unlike Elijah, Elisha died a natural death at the end of a long illness that confined him to bed. Such was the power of God that he had enjoyed in his life and ministry that even after his spirit had departed a dead body touching his bones was restored to life (13:14, 20-21).

Elisha and Israel's Later History

Elisha's ministry played a pivotal role in the history of the Northern Kingdom. During his lifetime Jezebel and the threat of Baalism that his master had struggled against was finally dealt with (2 Kings 9:30-10:30), although the people did not abandon the worship of the Golden calves (10:31). It was he who carried out Elijah's command and anointed Hazael king of Aram (1 Kings 19:15; 2 Kings 8:7-15). On his deathbed Elisha prophesied that Jehoash of Israel would defeat Aram only three more times in battle (2 Kings 14-19). Despite a reversal in their fortunes during the reign of Jeroboam II (14:25-27) the Syrians would continue to reduce the size of Israel's territory (8:12-13; 10:32-33; Amos 1:13; Hosea 13:16). In so doing they were carrying out the first installment of the Lord's judgment on Israel until both nations were swept away by the rising tide of the Assyrian Empire (2 Kings 16:9; 17:5-6; Amos 1:14).

Elisha received his call to the Lord's service out of the blue, but his response was immediate and dramatic. He severed his links with his past life, burning his plough and slaughtering his pair of oxen. Elisha remains an outstanding example of humility (3:11), who faithfully served his new master until he departed. He showed his determination to receive what he had been promised by the Lord and would let no one distract him from it (2 Kings 2:1-10). When he came into his own ministry he refused the riches that were offered to him by Naaman the Syrian (5:15-16; 2 Tim. 6:6-10) and he was able to see with spiritual insight that he was not alone in his struggle (6:18). The writer to the Hebrews alludes to his ministry as one of the Old Testament heroes that should inspire us to greater devotion, because the promises that we have received are greater than theirs (Heb. 11:35,39-40).

PRAYER FOCUS: Read Isaiah 55:6-13 and reflect on how you can seek the Lord while He can be found so that you too will be known as a faithful follower of Him.