

The Obedience, Miracles and Legacy of Elisha

Then Elisha the prophet called one of the sons of the prophets and said to him, "Tie up your garments, and take this flask of oil and go to Ramoth-gilead. And when you arrive, look there for Jehu the son of Jehoshaphat, son of Nimshi. And go in and have him rise from among his fellows, and lead him to an inner chamber. Then take the flask of oil and pour it on his head and say, 'Thus says the Lord, I anoint you king over Israel.' Then open the door and flee: do not linger" (2 Kings 9:1-3, ESV).

Elisha is getting older and decides to ask one of the 100 sons of the prophets to do what he himself would normally do. This is the first hint that Elisha—the successor to Elijah, who did not die but was transported to heaven—might die a natural death. We have no way of knowing whether Elisha was secretly hoping that his double anointing might include being taken to heaven as Elijah was. Maybe yes, maybe no.

We have wondered whatever would happen to those 100 sons of prophets. This is the first hint that God would use them. Elisha picks one of them to stand in for him.

What an honor to do so.

We may ask: What if that one chosen to anoint Jehu never did anything again—for Elisha or in any other capacity? Answer: *it was an honor to do it once!* He would talk about this for the rest of his life—telling his children and grandchildren: "I once took Elisha's place."

Jesus said that he who is faithful in what is least is the one who will be faithful in much (Luke 16:10). It is a high honor to do *anything* the Lord tells us to do. And don't forget: this unknown servant of Elisha was anointing an Israelite king—no

small matter.

A Strange Miracle

“Now the sons of the prophets said to Elisha, ‘See, the place where we dwell under your charge is too small for us. Let us go to the Jordan and each of us get there a log, and let us make a place for us to dwell there.’ And he answered, ‘Go.’ Then one of them said, ‘Be pleased to go with your servants.’ And he answered, ‘I will go.’ So he went with them. And when they came to the Jordan, they cut down trees. But as one was felling a log, his axe head fell into the water, and he cried out, ‘Alas, my master! It was borrowed.’ Then the man of God said, ‘Where did it fall?’ When he showed him the place, he cut off a stick and threw it in there and made the iron float. And he said, ‘Take it up.’ So he reached out his hand and took it” (2 Kings 6:1-7).

Only God can turn the water into wine. In this passage we see the strangest if not funniest of all the miracles of Elisha: an ax-head floating in the Jordan River. Compared to the healing of Naaman from leprosy this is almost comical, ridiculous. This miracle does not make people well. It does not help one’s finances.

Why would God do this? We must remember that God is the explanation of what Elisha does in this story. It is not what Elisha does, although it seems like that. It is what God does.

What grips me most about this story is not only the miracle but Elisha’s availability, flexibility and kindness. Elisha was an important man. He was famous in his day. He performed miracles that defy one’s imagination. I have known some important people. But when I think of Elisha’s role in this story, I am reminded of how some people think—or at least give the impression—that they are too lofty to be bothered with small things.

The sons of the prophets make two suggestions to Elisha: 1)

Could we move elsewhere? Elisha says yes. 2) Will you go with us? Yes. Then comes the accident of a man's ax-head falling into the water, and Elisha gets it back for the man.

When that man lost the ax-head it was a horrible moment for him—"it was borrowed."

Had it not been borrowed, he would not possibly have thought twice about it. It meant more to this man to retrieve it than if it had been his own.

This miracle, by the way, is the type of miracle that cynics—especially those who don't believe in miracles—would seize upon to make Elisha look ridiculous.

God loves to choose what some are likely to call foolish or silly. Yes. He chooses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise (1 Cor. 1:27). I sometimes reckon that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have a council and ask, "What is the next thing We can do to make people sneer or dismiss what We do?"

The Bible reports the floating ax-head as a fact, but it would be the perfect sort of miracle that cessationists and liberals would dismiss—or laugh at.

A miracle could be defined as an extraordinary event that blesses people but is beyond what is natural or explained scientifically. A "miracle drug" will have a scientific explanation; a miracle such as gold teeth being created in someone's jaw does not.

There are probably at least three levels of miracles:

Creative miracle—such as new eyes, a stretched arm, not to mention someone being raised from the dead. It is my opinion that last-day miracles accompanying the Second Coming will bring these.

The healing of a headache or feeling of being unwell.

Sometimes God steps in on things like this.

Natural or scientifically originated miracles. These do have a natural explanation. Penicillin is an example. It is what scientists do. God, by common grace, or "special grace in nature," as John Calvin put it, is the explanation for good medicine. We still give the glory to God.

It is hard to categorize this ax-head floating miracle. No one's health is at stake; no one's financial security is at stake; no one's reputation is at stake. Only the embarrassed man who fears facing the owner of the ax-head to say, "Sorry, but I lost your ax-head."

However, the point is: *God cared about that.*

The Strategic Man of God

Imagine having Elisha around! People like him don't show up every day. There had once been a Samuel, but no successor. Elijah showed up out of the blue, but Elisha was his successor. There was no successor to Elisha.

Those described in Hebrews 11 were strategic people. I would define a strategic person as a "sovereign vessel," one raised up by God with a specific ministry. He or she will be known for their gifting, courage, love and influence for God. Amos talked about a "famine of hearing the word of the Lord" (Amos 8:11b, NAB). What could be worse? Are we not close to such an era now?

But these men had Elisha around! They respected his authority; they wanted his approval. He respected their wish that he be with them. They would not always have Elisha. If you can get next to a true man of God, and he is willing to spend time with you, take this opportunity with all your strength and mind. "I will," Elisha said when they asked him to be near them.

The Secret Mystery of God

Accidents are going to happen. The question is: Does God cause them? Or does He merely “permit” them? I answer this way: the difference between what God causes and what God allows is holy ground. Take off your shoes. That is what God was teaching Moses at the burning bush. Don’t try to figure it out!

Why did this son of a prophet, sitting at the feet of Elisha, lose his friend’s ax-head? It fell into the Jordan River. They were cutting trees; this one obviously near the riverbank. Elisha was around. What if he had not been around? Would the man have walked into the water to search? What we do know: the loss of the ax-head gave this man extreme anxiety. “It was borrowed.”

Let us pray for the day of big things. A test could be that you and I are willing to accept a strange miracle—and let people laugh at us—if that is what God chooses to do.

Elisha’s End and Legacy

“So Elisha died, and they buried him. Now bands of Moabites used to invade the land in the spring of the year. And as a man was being buried, behold, a marauding band was seen and the man was thrown into the grave of Elisha, and as soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his feet” (2 Kings 13:14-21).

Elisha apparently died an unhappy man. His final opportunity to influence the immediate future of Israel was thwarted by the king’s failure to do what Elisha hoped he would do. But the king did not know what Elisha wanted.

Yes, Elisha had double the anointing of Elijah. He asked for it and got it. Some of Elisha’s miracles are so beyond imagining that I have thought maybe Elisha did have double Elijah’s anointing in quality. But probably not. By the accounts in 1 Kings and 2 Kings, Elisha accomplished double

the number of Elijah's miracles—the last being after Elisha died.

I would therefore reckon the double anointing Elisha had in terms of quantity. We know that Elisha was an ambitious man; only an ambitious person would have the audacity to ask for double the anointing of Elijah.

However, Elijah and Elisha were different. Elisha did not have Elijah's charisma—his rather flamboyant personality. Elisha did not boast of being the “only” prophet left. Elijah's self-pity—“I am no better than my fathers,” wondering about his place in history (1 Kings 19:4c, ESV)—was not mirrored in Elisha. As for the 100 prophets, they were around in Elijah's time but hung around Elisha after Elijah was transported. Elisha was willing to be “one of the boys.” He did not show fearfulness as Elijah did when Jezebel vowed to come after him. Elijah was just like us, as James 5:17 says.

The last several passages regarding Elisha show three things:

- 1. He was beginning to slow down.**
- 2. He did not have a spectacular end.**
- 3. Nor did he have a successor.**

Perhaps he thought one of the 100 sons of prophets would do this. To think very much on this would be, I believe, unprofitable speculation.

Elisha was a truly great man. I think of his refusal to meet Naaman at first showed this. He did not try to impress the Syrian general. As I said too, Elisha's not making sure that Naaman found out about Gehazi's lie showed his greatness. Elisha knew that God knew the truth, and that was enough for him. This is to say nothing about the other miracles. But he died a disappointed man. We cannot be sure what he hoped to accomplish that he did not accomplish.

The transparent truth is that they were both ordinary men. It

was the Spirit of God on them that made them great. As I said, James wants all people to know that Elijah—the one who would be remembered in history far more than Elisha—was an ordinary man!

Although Elisha had twice the miracles, Elijah was the prophet people would remember. The Old Testament closes with a reference to Elijah (Mal. 4:5-6). It is Elijah whom the angel Gabriel mentions when he appears to Zechariah (Luke 1:17). It is Elijah who appears with Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:3). At the cross the people said of Jesus, “He’s calling for Elijah” (Mark 15:35b, HCSB).

Elisha was pretty much forgotten after he died.

Elisha did not have the spectacular homegoing that Elijah had, but God affirmed Elisha in a way that is beautiful. A nameless dead man who was thrown into Elisha’s grave suddenly came to life! It is a manifest way of God showing His pleasure with Elisha. Elisha may have been disappointed, but God was pleased; that is what matters.

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