

Standing in Succession

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Preacher: David Trimble

[0 : 00] So what comes next can often be a vexing question. We ask it of ourselves all the time, don't we? When we know endings are on the horizon and something else has to follow, we have to ask, what comes next?

And this question hangs over this last story featuring Elijah, because Elijah is about to leave the stage. There's a palpable anxiety about what comes next.

To be more specific, there's an anxiety over who comes next. There's a question here of succession. When someone who has cast such a long shadow is no longer present to cast it, there's a fear that no one else can fill the void that has been left.

Those fears aren't entirely unfounded. It's often true that when important figures leave a vacuum, well, things can start to fall apart. We see this especially in politics and history.

We can sometimes see this too in the church. And the anxiety of succession, the anxiety stirred up by a paralyzing inability to conceive of what comes next, generates another danger, apathy.

[1 : 22] No one can cast the same shadow, so why even try? No one can fill the void, so why bother? And perhaps it is that the church in Scotland today feels kind of paralyzed, paralyzed by that anxiety of succession.

For generations, Scotland, as a nation, was known for its piety and its faith. Indeed, Glasgow's motto is, as we mentioned earlier in our service, let Glasgow flourish.

It's a shortened version of the phrase, Lord, let Glasgow flourish by the preaching of thy word and the praising of thy name. That reflects the view that characterized so much of Scotland for so very long.

Clearly, that no longer reflects the concerns of the average Glaswegian today. Faith in Scotland has rather evaporated, and the place of the church in culture has been obliterated.

And so there's that sense of anxiety. What comes next? Who comes next? What can we do as the church in the face of such an insurmountable cultural challenge?

[2 : 32] Can Glasgow still flourish by the preaching of the word? Is there still a God in Scotland? Or is the future going to be one of perpetual decline?

These are real questions that require real answers. We have two points this afternoon, two points which speak into the anxiety that comes when a major shift happens.

We're going to note, firstly, what happens at the end of an era. And secondly, we'll see how the story continues. Because the story never really ends, and we must find our confidence to know our place in it and God's plan for it.

Because without that confidence, we, and the church in general, is liable to fall into apathy and disillusion. Elijah, he cast a very long shadow.

God has used him mightily in his life. And we've seen that as we've worked through this series. And he has encapsulated the words of Martin Luther, which have given us our series title, Here I Stand.

[3 : 43] But now his stand is nearly done. Our story starts When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal.

So immediately, we're thrust into realizing that Elijah's story is about to end. There's no shock reveal here. This tells us the focus is not so much on Elijah's departure itself, but rather on how to come to terms with it.

At every place the prophet and his apprentice come to, and this becomes abundantly clear, the prophets say to Elisha, Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?

There's a tension in the air. Everyone knows what's about to happen. How, we're not told, but you can feel the nervous energy.

Elijah's leaving. Even Elisha himself, the apprentice prophet who Elijah called to follow him. Well, he too seems anxious as he journeys with his master.

[4 : 49] Yes, I know, Elisha replies to the other prophets, so be quiet. As Elijah and Elisha journey towards the Jordan, it's worth asking where they're going and why.

Because the details here aren't random. This is a journey of significance. To illustrate, if I was to go on a walking tour of Europe, and I told you that I'd been to Ypres, to Verdun, to the River Somme, to Arras, and to Flanders, that list of place names probably wouldn't strike you as random.

Rather, you'd probably make the assumption that I'd been touring sites of key battlefields in the First World War. There's a significant link between that list of locations.

So for a reader familiar with Israel's history, the locations of Gilgal, Bethel, Jericho, and the Jordan also wouldn't be considered random.

These locations were major flashpoints in Israel's conquest of the land when they first entered it under Joshua. And at the heart of that history, which this journey that Elijah and Elisha are taking and prompting us to recall and make links to, at the heart of that history is the idea of God waging war against sin, evil, darkness, and idolatry.

[6 : 14] And establishing his people in a land free from those evils. As we follow the two prophets, the master and the apprentice, we're led to realize that the land they're walking through is just as evil as the land of Joshua's day.

Things have gone backwards. We've seen that in the Elijah story as we've worked our way through it. The northern kingdom has rejected God and it's gone after the idols of the people who were there before Israel.

It's gone after the Baals and the Asherahs. And Bethel, one of the locations in this story, it's a national center of idol worship where a previous king, King Jeroboam, had established a golden calf for people to worship.

Jericho, it was a place that was cursed by Joshua and was never supposed to be rebuilt. Israel, in essence, has lost its way and needs to return to God.

The battlefield tour of Elijah and Elisha underlines this problem in Israel. The battle against sin, evil, and idolatry continues.

[7 : 27] However, great gains for God have been won through Elijah's stand and his faithfulness. On Mount Carmel, thousands saw that Yahweh was God, not Baal, as Yahweh sent fire down from the heavens.

And in Elijah's ministry, the dead have been raised, widows have been saved from starvation through the word of God. And where once there seemed to be no other prophets willingly to openly declare themselves for God, now there are prophetic communities, even in Bethel and Jericho, heartlands of idol worship and corruption.

But, these prophetic communities are anxious about what is to follow when Elijah is gone. Here's the thing, it's incredibly easy for Christians to be despondent when they consider the scale of their mission to follow Jesus and make disciples.

There aren't a lot of Christians in Scotland anymore, and culture feels very far from being receptive to the gospel. And by receptive, I mean willing to believe it.

I myself, in all honesty, sometimes struggle to really believe that God will use my efforts in evangelism. The cultural hurdles just sometimes seem so huge, and none of my close friends that I pray for seem even close to believing in Jesus.

[8 : 56] I want and desire a country where people know Jesus, a city that flourishes from the preaching of God's word. But in my heart of hearts, and I wonder if this is true for you, I sometimes struggle with the doubt that it could happen.

I'm forced to say, like the man who asked Jesus to heal his son, Lord, I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief. Then and now, the question is, will God continue to be present and make his name known?

That's what we desire in Glasgow. That's what the prophets desired in Israel. So Elijah and Elisha, they cross the Jordan.

The water parts in too as Elijah casts his cloak over it. And this is a significant callback to when the Jordan was parted on Israel's very first entrance into the land under Joshua.

It's a sign that Elijah's stand for God in this land is finished. There's a certain symbolism to him leaving in this way. It makes the point that he has done what he was commissioned to do and now

he must leave.

[10:12] At this point, we learn why Elisha has stayed for the whole trip. Tell me, what can I do for you before I'm taken from you, says the master. Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit, replies the apprentice.

You've asked a difficult thing, Elijah said. Yet if you see me when I'm taken from you, it will be yours. Otherwise, it will not. So what's going on here?

Well, Elisha knows that he's to be Elijah's successor. But it seems that he needs the assurance that he will have the power to follow in his footsteps.

To inherit a double portion of the father's estate was standard practice in Israelite law. So Elisha isn't asking for more of Elijah's spirit.

He's basically using a legal metaphor to ask that he would inherit the same spirit that was with Elijah, God's own Holy Spirit. Now, Elijah doesn't have the authority to grant that, but God does.

[11:19] Now, Elisha is anxious for God to continue to be present and to give him the strength to take up the mantle of his master and stand as Elijah stood.

And then, the chariot of fire and horses of fire appears, separating the two men. And Elijah ascends into heaven on the whirlwind.

God often appears in whirlwinds in the Old Testament. And the fiery chariot is an obvious sign of God's presence. It's a strange scene, but it shows us that God is present and he is powerful.

It's a little glimpse behind the curtain, if you like, at the spiritual realm to show us that this is Elijah's God and he has called his faithful servant home.

My father, my father, the chariots and horsemen of Israel, cries Elisha, he's seen the chariot, he's seen his master ascend and so the double portion will be his.

[12:26] We're told Elisha saw him no more, but he took hold of his garment and tore it in two. Elisha then picked up Elijah's cloak that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan.

Elisha is ready to take up the responsibility and continue the fight with a renewed confidence. It's worth noticing here some really key similarities to events in the New Testament.

After the resurrection, Jesus ascends into heaven in much the same way and there's a sense of anxiety once he's gone. The disciples stand looking at the sky and angels have to come and to counsel them.

And then at Pentecost we're told they were all together in one place and suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them and all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit. So Jesus, like Elijah who's very much foreshadowing him, left.

[13:39] But the same spirit who dwelt in Jesus comes to live in all of his disciples. That same spirit has come to equip us to live for Christ and in Christ and strengthens us to do all that he commands us.

That's why Jesus could say to his disciples, very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing and they will do even greater things than these because I am going to the Father.

That is the presence of the Holy Spirit enables the church to grow and brings the lost to faith in Jesus. And so if you, like me, sometimes wonder whether Glasgow can really be a place that flourishes from the preaching of God's word and be filled with people who believe that Jesus is their Lord and Savior, this is really hopeful stuff.

Though Jesus may be in heaven seated at the right hand of the Father, well, his spirit is present in all of those who believe in him and are united to him.

With the presence of the Holy Spirit, all things are possible and great renewal is never off the cards. Dare we doubt the spirit of the living God?

[15:01] Because for us and for Elisha, the game isn't up yet. The book hasn't closed. There is much more to do.

The story continues. And that's our second point. Endings are rarely easy. You're saying goodbye hurts. But endings open the way for new beginnings.

And the Bible story is clear. The story never really ends. Elijah has ascended and now Elisha, standing on the banks of the Jordan, with a newfound confidence, prepares to enter the land again

and continue the fight.

He 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. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left and he crossed over.

Elijah, in his ministry, showed that God was present and active. Is this still the case? Well, the answers are resounding yes as God parts the waters.

[16:10] God is now working through a new prophet. Elisha's work has begun. And though this series has been focused on Elijah, it's important that we finish with his apprentice taking up his mantle and his mission.

Because really, it's been clear as we've worked through that Elijah's story hasn't really been about him. Elijah's story has been about the God he served.

Hence, the writer of Kings is concerned to show us the continuity between Elijah and Elisha. To show us that though the human actors in the drama of salvation might come and go from the stage, God never does.

And this is his story. The prophets on the other side of the water still haven't quite come to terms with that. They want to go and look for Elijah. After all, God might just have picked him up and set him somewhere else.

But Elisha knows better. Now is not the time to yearn for the past. Instead, Elisha must take up the mission of the past and pursue it in the present.

[17:23] That's an attitude that we should adopt today. The history of the church is full of men and women whom God has used powerfully. We, like Elisha, stand in a long line of succession.

We owe where we are now to all the generations that have gone before us. Those who taught us the gospel, who were taught by people who taught them the gospel, and who were taught by people who taught them the gospel, and so on, and so on, and so on.

It's a line of succession that really you can stretch all the way back to Jesus and actually probably all the way back to Adam. And to see that heritage rightly, the great scientist Isaac Newton has some wisdom for us.

He said, if I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants. And that's what we do as the church. We stand on the shoulders of all the faithful people who have come before us, used by the Holy Spirit to teach us the truth and point us to Jesus.

And as we stand on their shoulders, our job is not to yearn after their past or moan at the contemporary situation we find ourselves in and the challenges that we might face.

[18:37] No, our job is to take the truths of the gospel, which remain true in every generation, and apply them to our own day and age. Our job is to learn from the past and bring that wisdom and the truth of the gospel into the present.

Our job is to proclaim Jesus, continuing his mission, just as the disciples did when he had ascended, just as Elisha did when Elijah had ascended.

We should imagine ourselves, if you like, like Elisha, standing on the banks of the Jordan. When we cross the Jordan, we ready ourselves to follow Jesus and proclaim him as the Lord of the universe and Savior of the world.

When we cross the Jordan, we are committing to the fight of faith in the whole armor of God, surrounded by the cloud of witnesses of those who have gone before us.

Have you crossed that Jordan yet? Are you ready to make that stand? Elisha crosses the Jordan and he retraces the steps that Elijah and he took on the way.

[19:52] After the Jordan, he stays in Jericho and he goes through Bethel and then he goes on to Mount Carmel and from there to Samaria. Not only does he retrace his steps along the battlefield tour that they did, but he also returns to the sites of Elijah's major conflicts, Mount Carmel and Samaria.

This is a statement of intent. Elisha has crossed the Jordan and he's picking up the same fight that Elijah had picked up from those who'd gone before him.

He stands boldly in succession, ready to show God to the people who've rejected him. And we see two very clear instances of this before he returns to Samaria.

Very clear instances that show Elisha has entered the fray. The first is in Jericho, that cursed city which should never have been rebuilt. The problem here is the water.

The language suggests that it is killing the land and causing miscarriages. The water, which should be associated with life, is a draft of death.

[21 : 02] So, Elisha pours salt into it. Now, the salt itself doesn't do anything but is a sign of God's work in lifting the curse. The power to bring restoration lies in the word of God.

This is what the Lord says, I have healed this water. Never again will it cause death or make the land unproductive. And the water has remained pure to this day according to the word Elisha had spoken.

God, in the power of his word brings life from death and blessing from curse. And that itself illustrates why the church is called to bring his word to the world.

Jesus is life itself and it's he who we bring. Now, the second instance we see is perhaps more shocking. Elisha went up to Bethel.

As he was walking along the road, some boys came out of the town and jeered at him. Get out of here, Baldy, they said. Get out of here, Baldy. He turned round, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the Lord.

[22 : 10] Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys. There's a few things to notice here. First, Bethel was a dark place.

For generations, well before even Elijah, this had been a center of idol worship. These boys are probably not young boys just having a laugh. They're probably much older boys and they're probably very involved in the idol worship at Bethel.

And there's a lot of them. If two bears managed to maul forty-two of them, that strongly implies there's an awful lot more than forty-two in total. This is a mass gathering with intent.

They know who Elisha is. They know what he stands for. And they are opposed to it. And what they shout at him is also much less innocuous than it first appears.

Whilst it is obviously insulting to attack Elisha's lack of hair, probably the more egregious element is telling him to get out of here. because what they're literally saying is go up or ascend.

[23 : 24] It's literally the same word used to describe Elijah's ascension. Go where Elijah went is what they're saying. We don't want you and we don't want your God.

Ascend to your God and never return. And perhaps they intended to ensure that he did return to his God. Indeed, the fact that he felt he needed to call down a curse on them in the name of the Lord suggests that this was in fact a very dangerous situation.

So, this is a story that is not saying that you can call down a curse on bears if anyone insults your hairline. Gratifying though it may be. This is a story about Elisha standing for the true God against dangerous opposition.

And God proclaiming who he is to a twisted culture that hates him and hates all that he has to say. In essence, what we see at the start of Elisha's long ministry is a return to the battlefield that Elijah has left.

And we don't just stand in succession, we stand on the battlefield. We stand and fight. And how do we fight? We bring the gospel to shine a light into the darkness.

[24 : 46] We bring Jesus to a world and a culture opposed to him. We bring his message of hope and salvation and his warning of justice to come.

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