

Elisha: Symbol of the Remnant, Sign of the Gospel

“Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit.” 2 Kings 2:9

If we are to stay in the story and not get bogged down in details we need to follow the lead of the biblical writers. What we find in the biblical record is instructive on how we are to approach this history. Kings and Chronicles edits and compresses this historical record in such a way as to underscore what is important. In some cases it seems that just enough is said to satisfy the record. Reference is repeatedly made in 1 & 2 Kings to “the book of annals of the kings of Israel,” (see 1 Ki 11:41; 14:19,29; 15:7,23,31; 16:5,14,20,27; 22:39,45; 2 Ki 1:10; 8:23; 10:34; 12:19; 13:8,12; 14:15,18,28; 15:6,11,15,21,26,31,36; 16:19; 20:20; 21:17; 21:25; 23:28; 24:5; 1 Chron 27:24). The “annals of the kings” are, to the best of our knowledge, no longer in existence but that does not distract from the message of the Bible.

The Word of God weaves together the testimony of the prophets (Kings), the perspective of the priests (Chronicles) and the record of two kingdoms mired down in idolatry and apostasy, racked by political upheaval and violence, and endangered by surrounding states and cycles of drought and famine. The impact of Kings and Chronicles is lost if our main concern is to line up the kings in consecutive order. To the casual reader skimming the text, this record may seem confusing and irrelevant, but upon closer examination the biblical narrative exposes the tragedy of spiritual apostasy and reveals the tenacity of God’s grace. This helps to explain why multiple chapters are devoted to telling the story of Elisha, but kings and battles are often only briefly noted. The passion of the biblical text is found in the survival of God’s salvation history. Sometimes that storyline wears thin and the remnant of God’s people appears very small, but God is faithful, keeping his message alive through the prophets and sustaining the remnant by his grace.

Israel and Judah

Like his predecessor, Elisha ministered in the northern kingdom of Israel. He was not only God’s spokesperson, but he symbolized the faithful remnant. In his obedience to the word of the Lord, Elisha represented the people of God through the reign of five kings: Ahaziah (853-852), Jehoram (variant of Joram, 852-841),

Jehu (841-814), Jehoahaz (814-798), Jehoash (798-782). All five of these kings “did evil in the eyes of the Lord” (1 Ki 22:52; 2 Ki 3:2; 10:31; 13:2; 13:11). Four of the five kings, succeeded their fathers. Jehu obtained Israel’s throne by conspiracy and assassination. Their accomplishments were few, if any, and their failures were many. Nothing was said of Ahaziah apart from his idolatry. Jehoram (Joram) was a terrible military strategist (2 Ki 3:9). Jehu was known for his betrayal and brutality (2 Ki 9:24; 10:25). Jehoahaz sought the Lord’s favor as a last resort when the power of Aram (Syria) threatened to overwhelm Israel, but he was left with only fifty horsemen, ten chariots and ten thousand foot soldiers (2 Ki 13:7). Nothing was said of Jehoash apart from his idolatry and his weakness in the face of Aramean oppression (2 Ki 13:11, 19).

In the southern kingdom of Judah, the line of royal succession during the time of Elijah and Elisha included Jehoshaphat (873-848), Jehoram (), Ahaziah (), Athaliah (), Joash (). The book of Chronicles gives a fuller description of the kings of Judah than does the book of Kings because it focuses on the perspective of the priests and the temple in Jerusalem. The story of faithfulness and spiritual renewal is found in Jehoshaphat and Joash, because they did what was right in the eyes of the Lord (2 Chr 17:6; 24:2), while Jehoiada was chief priest. In spite of close ties to Ahab, king of Israel, Jehoshaphat distinguished himself as a reformer. He got rid of the Asherah poles and set his heart on seeking God (2 Chr 19:3). He commissioned judges, saying, “Now let the fear of the Lord be upon you. Judge carefully, for with the Lord our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery” (2 Chr 19:7). In Jerusalem, he appointed “some of the Levites, priests and heads of Israelite families to administer the law of the Lord and to settle disputes” (19:8). He charged the leaders, saying, “Act with courage, and may the Lord be with those who do well” (19:11).

When the Moabites, the Ammonites and the Meunites made war against Judah, Jehoshaphat “resolved to inquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah.” His prayer before the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem at the temple of the Lord acknowledged the Lord’s universal rule and covenant promise to Abraham. Jehoshaphat distinguished himself by humbly declaring Judah’s dependence upon the mercy and justice of God. He concluded, “We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you” (20:12). The king did not have to wait long for a word from the Lord. The Spirit of the Lord, came upon Jahaziel, a Levite and a descendant of Asaph, who announced, “Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the Lord says to you: ‘Do not be afraid

or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's" (20:15). These words are strikingly similar to the words of David when he faced Goliath (1 Sam 17:47). This was Jehoshaphat's finest hour, he rallied the people, "Listen to me, Judah and people of Jerusalem! Have faith in the Lord your God and you will be upheld; have faith in his prophets and you will be successful." He appointed singers "to sing to the Lord and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness" (20:21). They went before the army singing the Psalms, "Give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever" (see Ps 136). The victory that the Lord God gave and the ensuing peace was a high point to Jehoshaphat's reign (20:30).

Jehoshaphat's major weakness was his repeated attempts to strike an alliance with Israel. He tried to do this through marriage (2 Chron 18:1), military alliances (18:3), and joint business ventures (20:35-37), but all of these efforts failed. The marriage of his oldest son, Jehoram, to King Ahab's daughter (21:7), had disastrous consequences. In the true spirit of Jezebel, his wife's mother, Jehoram established himself by murdering all his brothers and some of the princes of Israel (21:4). Whatever spiritual renewal Jehoshaphat had encouraged was wiped away by his son. In what must have been one of Elijah's last divine pronouncements, the prophet confronted Jehoram in a letter. He accused him of leading Judah and the people of Jerusalem "to prostitute themselves, just as the house of Ahab did." The Lord's judgment against Jehoram resulted in the rebellion of Edom, the revolt of Libnah, the hostility of the Philistines, and "an incurable disease of the bowels" (2 Chr 21:18), and when the 40 year old king died, no one mourned his death.

The corrupting influence of Israel continued to impact Judah. Ahaziah, Jehoram's youngest son reigned for only a year before his fateful visit to King Joram at Jezreel when Jehu went on his murderous rampage, killing both the king of Israel and the king of Judah in the same day (2 Ki 9:24, 27). Upon Ahaziah's death, his mother, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, Athaliah, went on her own killing spree, assassinating "the whole royal family of the house of Judah" (22:10). The only one to escape was Ahaziah's one year old son, Joash, who was hidden in the temple by his aunt, Jehosheba, the wife of Jehoida the priest. For six years the little boy remained in seclusion within the temple, until Jehoiada, the priest, "showed his strength" (23:1). He formed an unprecedented coalition of leaders to back the Levites and priests in reestablishing a descendant of David on Judah's throne and ending Athaliah's Baal-worshiping reign of terror. Jehoiada proved successful, not only in defeating Athaliah, the granddaughter of Omri king of Israel (2 Ki 8:26; 11:16), but in restoring the covenant between the Lord and his

people. The temple of Baal was torn down, its altars and idols smashed and its priests killed (2 Chr 23:17). Jehoiada was definitely the power for good behind Judah's boy king. Temple worship was restored with integrity and Baal worship was held at bay as long as the chief priest, Jehoiada, remained alive (2 Chr 24:15-16).

Tracking this phase of God's Salvation history from the perspective of the prophets, priests and kings, provides collaborative evidence of pervasive spiritual apostasy as well as dramatic testimony to God's faithfulness. In Kings, the prophetic perspective of the northern kingdom of Israel keeps the reality of the remnant and covenant faithfulness alive. Whereas in Chronicles, the priestly perspective of the southern kingdom of Judah keeps the true story of spiritual renewal front page news.

Elisha's Calling

The succession of Israel's kings is noted for the record, but the passing of the mantle of prophetic responsibility from Elijah to Elisha is told so dramatically that we are bound to take notice. Make no mistake, the Lord's work through Elisha is the real story in Israel. When the Lord renewed Elijah's call on Mount Horeb, he charged him to do three things. He was to anoint Hazael king over Aram, Jehu king over Israel and he was to call Elisha to succeed him as prophet. Elijah wasted no time fulfilling his third assignment. He immediately went from Mount Horeb and found Elisha son of Shaphat plowing with twelve yoke of oxen. The number of oxen appears to indicate that Elisha and his family were economically well off. Elijah went up to Elisha and threw his cloak around him. The call must have been obvious, because Elisha left his oxen and ran after Elijah, saying, "Let me kiss my father and mother good-bye, and then I will come with you." Elijah's seemingly curt response, "Go back. What have I done to you?" helped to clarify that it was the Lord's call. Elisha was not reluctant, but eager to follow the prophet. He slaughtered the oxen, burned the plowing equipment, cooked the meat and gave it to the people. As far as he was concerned there was no turning back. Elijah's mandate to anoint Hazael king over Aram and Jehu king over Israel would fall to Elisha, who would take the better part of his fifty year prophetic career to carry it out (1 Ki 19:15-21).

The suspense that surrounded Elijah's dramatic departure gave public notice to the school of the prophets that this strategic transition was imminent and affirmed

Elisha's passion for the prophetic call. Three times Elijah tried to dissuade him, saying, "Stay here; the Lord has led me to Bethel," and then to Jericho, and then to the Jordan. Each time Elisha responded, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you" (2 Ki 2:2,4,6). By the time the pair reached the Jordan there were fifty men of the company of the prophets witnessing Elijah's conclusion and Elisha's commissioning from a distance. After Elijah took his cloak and struck the Jordan, the waters divided allowing them to cross on dry ground. The old prophet asked Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?" Elisha replied, "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit." This should not be read as a selfish request for power and fame, but as a humble request. Elisha felt he needed a double portion of Elijah's spirit if he was to fulfill his ministry. "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." Elisha had already shown he was not about to let the prophet out of his sight, and sure enough, "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" (2 Ki 2:11). For a brief moment, the power and glory of heaven was unveiled and "the universe next door" was revealed. Elijah's ascension to heaven in a whirlwind brought to a climactic conclusion a prophetic ministry that could only be explained by the power of God. Elisha's final words to his mentor, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" testify that the true source of power in Israel was not in its kings and armies, but in the word of the Lord.

Elisha proved his readiness to assume the mantle of prophetic responsibility in three ways. First, he demonstrated his dependence upon the Lord by insisting on remaining in the presence of Elijah. He knew that the office he was called to assume was not a throne to be ruled by his independent judgment, but a life to be lived in complete obedience to the word of the Lord. Secondly, his request for a double portion of Elijah's spirit underscored his personal inadequacy, as well as his personal commitment to follow whole-heartedly in the Spirit-empowered tradition of Elijah. Thirdly, his farewell exclamation to Elijah showed that he placed his confidence in the saving power of God rather than in the visible political and military power structures. Israel's only hope must be in the Lord God. The way in which Elisha aspired for his calling is a good illustration of spiritual ambition, and a worthy example for the disciples of Jesus to follow: a abide in Christ, depend upon his power and seek first his Kingdom.

Elisha picked up Elijah's mantle and struck the Jordan. "Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" he asked, and the water divided and he crossed over. The company of prophets who had been watching from a distance affirmed what had happened and said, "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha" (2 Ki 2:15). In spite of this, they overruled Elisha's objections and sent out a search party to find Elijah's body. It is interesting to observe that the waters of the Jordan could be divided more easily than human opinion could be changed. As Elisha had predicted, the fifty man search party came back after three days without a trace of Elijah and he told them so, "Didn't I tell you not to go?"

Elisha's Hidden Work

The Lord used Elisha more than anyone else in this era to keep his people in the story. The prophet gave identity and voice to the remnant of God's faithful people, who had not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Ki 19:18). His life testified to the sustaining, saving grace of God. He not only symbolized the remnant, but he pointed forward to the Incarnate One. It is not too much to say that he was a sign of the Gospel to come. The manifestation of God's power, the character of the prophet, the nature of the miracles, and the recipients of God's blessing, form a striking parallel to the work of Jesus. Sometimes we may be struck by the contrast, but more often we are impressed by the similarities between Elisha and Jesus. Elisha's work is a precursor to Christ's work and best understood in the light of its fulfillment. The record of miracles in 2 Kings is not a miscellaneous collection of legendary tales, but rather a description of the scope and significance of God's miraculous power through his prophet.

Elisha's first miracle, like Jesus' first sign, was a nature miracle that involved transforming water (Jn 2:1f). Elisha began by symbolically throwing salt from a new bowl into a spring of polluted water and praying, "This is what the Lord says: 'I have healed this water. Never again will it cause death or make the land unproductive'" (2 Ki 2:21). Empowered by God, Elisha began his ministry by lifting a curse, purifying water and restoring the land. Jesus began his public ministry at the wedding feast of Cana of Galilee by transforming the water used for ceremonial cleansing into wine, a symbol of the coming Kingdom. Both Elisha's miracle and Jesus' miracle emphasize the power of God to overcome the curse of the Fall and to signal a new age of God's blessing.

On his way to Bethel, Elisha was confronted by a mocking gang of young people,

who jeered at him, saying, “Go on up, you baldhead! Go on up, you baldhead!” (2 Ki 2:23-25). Rather than interpret this as an isolated incident of juvenile delinquency in which Elisha overreacted by calling down a deadly curse, it should be seen as an act of defiance against the Lord’s prophet, typical of the hostility of the people toward Yahweh in Jeroboam’s cult city. Elisha’s action was in keeping with the Law of God (Deut 21:18-21). The narrative stresses that Elisha’s judgment was deliberate. “He turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the Lord.” Judgment was swift and it came in the form of two bears that “came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the youths” (2 Ki 2:24). The size of the gang and the severity of the judgment would indicate how serious this situation was.

The first two miracles that establish Elisha’s ministry underscore the blessing and the curse that God put before the people. In the case of the miracle of judgment, we are struck with the dissimilarity between Elisha’s ministry and Jesus’. No one can read the New Testament without acknowledging that Jesus said a great deal about the future judgment. He taught that the Final Judgment would be perfect in justice, universal in scope, and everlasting in duration. However, the thrust of his Gospel was that now was the time to turn to the Lord. “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (Jn 3:17). Jesus endured mocking condemnation, especially from the religious leaders, without calling down a curse. He experienced their anger and malice right up to the Cross. He fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that states: “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth” (Isa 53:7). Elisha’s ministry occurred some eight hundred years before Christ and the outpouring of the Gospel, and involved immediate judgment in order to sustain the witness of God’s justice.

With this important difference noted, there is a similarity between Elisha’s second miracle and Jesus’ aggressive action against evil. In the Gospel of John, the temple cleansing occurs immediately after the miracle at the wedding feast in Cana when he turned water into wine (Jn 2:12-25). As in the Elisha narrative, the Fourth Gospel places the blessing of a positive miracle side by side with a deliberate judgment against evil. Both actions are perceived as establishing the ministry of Jesus. Like the prophets, Jesus set before the people a blessing and a curse.

Elisha saw the nature of God's miraculous work in much the same way that Jesus did. Miracles were a sign of Yahweh's power, rather than a personal validation of Elisha's ministry. The prophet defied the King of Israel in much the same way that Jesus defied the ruling authorities. "What do we have to do with each other?" is an attitude that Elisha conveyed throughout his ministry to those who thought they could co-opt him (2 Ki 3:13;). Just as Jesus obeyed the will of the Father, Elisha obeyed the will of God. "As surely as the Lord Almighty lives, whom I serve," expressed the reason for his life and ministry (2 Ki 3:14). From military victories, like the one against Moab (2 Ki 3:1f), to a floating axhead, Elisha witnessed the full range of God's compassion (2 Ki 6:1f). It was "an easy thing in the eyes of the Lord" to save the combined armies of Israel and Judah and yet not too little to retrieve a borrowed axhead (2 Ki 3:18). Nothing was too big nor too small to be used by God to make himself known.

The recipients of God's miraculous blessing through Elisha remind us of the people helped by Jesus' ministry. Elisha rejoiced in the revelation of the power of God, which was often hidden from kings and armies but revealed to the poor, the humble, the hungry, and the foreigner. It was this hidden work that appears to have given Elisha the most joy and satisfaction. Jesus often told those who had been healed to keep quiet about it (Mt 8:4; 9:30), as if to say that the grace and power of God needed no publicity. Elisha shared that reserve. He told the prophet's widow, who was about to lose her sons to creditors, to collect all the empty jars she could find in the neighborhood and then "go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons" (2 Ki 4:3). Then he instructed her to take her little oil and begin to pour it out into the jars. The oil never ran out until she had finished filling all the empty jars she had collected. Elijah told her, "Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left" (2 Ki 4:7).

When the Shunammite woman's son died of apparent heat stroke, she told no one, not even her husband. Instead she quietly laid her son on the bed in the room reserved for Elisha, and hurried off to meet the man of God. In her effort to hide her pain, she reminds us of the woman who touched Jesus' cloak in order to be healed (Mt 9:20-21). When Elisha saw her coming in the distance, he sent his servant Gehazi to inquire if everything was all right. She answered, "Everything is all right." But when she finally got to Elisha she was distraught. She fell at his feet bitterly revealing her secret. Elisha immediately sent Gehazi with instructions to go directly to the boy's bedside and to lay the prophet's staff on the boy's face. Gehazi did as he was instructed, but to no avail. When Elijah got there, "he went

in, shut the door on the two of them and prayed to the Lord” (2 Ki 4:33). He stretched himself out on the boy’s body twice before the boy came back to life. The real story never made front page news in Jezreel or Jerusalem but God was at work on behalf of a poor widow and a distraught Shunammite.

Even public miracles took on a hidden quality, as if it were enough to know that God was working behind the scenes to meet people’s needs. When a thoughtful man gave twenty loaves of fresh baked bread to Elisha, the prophet told his servant to give the bread to the people to eat. “How can I set this before a hundred men?” the servant asked. Elisha answered, “Give it to the people to eat. For this is what the Lord says: ‘They will eat and have some left over.’” The servant did as he was instructed and some bread was left over, “according to the word of the Lord” (2 Ki 4:44). There appears to be an obvious connection between Elisha’s miraculous feeding and Jesus’ miracle of feeding the multitudes, right down to the fact that many of those who ate seemed unaware that a miracle was even taking place (Mt 14:13f; 15:29f).

Elisha’s miracles and Jesus’ miracles share not only a subdued, hidden quality, but they share a similar group of recipients. We see God’s blessing extended to those who least expected it and few noticed. When Jesus raised the widow’s son (Lk 7:11f) he reminded the people of the prophets. Luke reports, “They were filled with awe and praised God. ‘A great prophet has appeared among us,’ they said. ‘God has come to help his people’” (Lk 7:16). The story of Naaman, the Syrian army commander, was a sign of things to come. It reminds us of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman (Jn 4) and the Roman Centurion (Lk 7). The good news of Jesus Christ was meant for all people and Elisha’s dealings with Naaman anticipate and testify to that marvelous truth.

When Jesus spoke in the synagogue at Nazareth he referred to Naaman the Syrian to illustrate the Jewish congregation’s resistance to the truth. He compared Elisha’s ministry in Israel to his own ministry. “There were many in Israel with leprosy (skin disease) in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian” (Lk 4:27). The people in the synagogue knew immediately what Jesus was saying and they rose up and drove him out of town. They would have thrown him over a cliff if they could have, “but he walked right through the crowd and went on his way” (Lk 4:30).

The story of Naaman reveals a fascinating behind the scenes perspective on the

spiritual state of Israel and of God's dealing with the nations. The first surprising news we read is that Naaman's success as a Syrian army commander was from the Lord (2 Ki 5:1). The second is that an Israelite slave girl, serving Naaman's wife was more confident in Israel's prophet than the king of Israel. The young girl said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy (skin disease)" (2 Ki 5:3). Her faith was in sharp contrast to the king of Israel, who tore his robes when the king of Aram approached him on behalf of Naaman. "Am I God?" cried the king. "Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!" (2 Ki 5:7). When Elisha heard that the king had torn his robes he sent him a message, which read, "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel" (2 Ki 5:8).

By now Naaman must have felt that he was getting the run around. It did not help matters to be greeted by a servant when he arrived at Elisha's house, and told to go and wash in the Jordan seven times, "and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed" (2 Ki 5:10). This was apparently more humiliating than he could bear and not at all what he expected. So he stormed away in a rage. That would have been the end of the matter if his servants had not reasoned with him, saying, "If the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed'?" So Naaman did what he had been told to do and dipped himself seven times in the muddy Jordan river and much to his surprise, his skin was miraculously restored.

Naaman and his entourage returned to Elisha. He stood before the man of God and declared, "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel." It was a remarkable confession that was by no means automatic even with the miracle. Naaman had interpreted the *sign* as he should have and followed through with an integrity unique in Israel. Naaman accepted Elisha's refusal of a gift on condition that he could take an ox cart load of dirt back to Syria upon which to build an altar to Yahweh. This kind of exclusivity was rare in Israel, even the king of Israel paid homage to Baal and worshiped at the Asherah pole. Yet Naaman was so sensitive to the truth of God he sought Elisha's approval and the Lord's forgiveness in advance for accompanying the king of Aram in his official capacity to the temple of Rimmon (2 Ki 5:18). Elisha simply said, "Go in peace."

One of the strangest and most hidden miracles attributed to Elisha's ministry came

after the prophet died. A Moabite raiding party was spotted by an Israelite funeral procession. In their panic they threw the dead man's body into Elisha's tomb, and as soon as his body touched Elisha's bones, "the man came to life and stood up on his feet" (2 Ki 13:21). It is the kind of story legends are made of, but for two good reasons it should not be written off so easily. First, it may have been the Lord's way of drawing attention to Elisha's passing away, as he had done with Elijah, to affirm his prophet's testimony. Second, it may have been a precursor to one of the most unique and seldom mentioned miracles in the New Testament. Jesus' death on the Cross was accompanied by an earthquake and a truly remarkable event. "The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people" (Mt 27:52-53). Elisha died from illness and Jesus died on the cross, but because of God's action, death was not the final word. Even in death, God declared life.

Elisha's Perseverance

In many ways Elisha's life is a tale of disappointments and heartache. His story is told with an insider's perspective on the man and his ministry. At the outset of his work, Elisha was pressured to withdraw his objection when the school of prophets wanted to send out a search party to find Elijah's body. The prophets, we are told, "persisted until he was too ashamed to refuse" (2 Ki 2:17). Well-meaning people wanted Elisha to approve an action that he knew was useless, but convincing them otherwise appeared self-serving, so he gave in. Anyone who has been in ministry can identify with the pressure that Elisha felt. It is always a challenge when those closest to us in the ministry don't understand how the Lord is working. The narrator chose to give us an insight into the burden of Elisha's work, his character and how he felt about it.

Even the amazing story of Naaman ends on a tragic note. Elisha's refusal to receive a gift from the wealthy Syrian commander was countered by his servant's deception and greed. Gehazi ran after Naaman and claimed that Elisha had changed his mind and wanted a gift to support two young prophets. When Gehazi returned with his gifts of money and clothes, he tried to cover up his actions with more lies. But Elisha confronted him with a question, "Was not my spirit with you when the man got down from his chariot to meet you? (2 Ki 5:26). Did Gehazi honestly believe that he could fool Elisha and get away with it? (see Josh 7; Acts 5). If he did, he was sadly mistaken. Elisha judged him on the spot, saying,

“Naaman’s leprosy will cling to you and your descendants forever” (5:27). In a special moment of triumph and testimony, Elisha was reminded of Israel’s resistance to Yahweh and his mercy through the actions of his servant.

Elisha was given a tough assignment. It would have been far easier for him to minister in Judah under Jehoshaphat than in Israel under Joram, son of Ahab. Elisha left little doubt as to how he felt about king Joram when he said, “As surely as the Lord Almighty lives, whom I serve, if I did not have respect for the presence of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, I would not look at you or even notice you” (2 Ki 3:14). Israel’s kings preferred to ignore Elisha. They were reluctant to call upon him when he was needed (3:10-11) and quick to reject him when things turned bad. Even though Elisha was used of God to defend Israel (6:8-23), he became a lightning rod for the fury of the king when the nation was besieged by Aram. He was an easy target for the king to curse. “May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if the head of Elisha son of Shaphat remains on his shoulders today!” (6:31). Although at times he was treated more like public enemy number one than God’s representative, Elisha never lost his love for the Lord or his love for the people of Israel. After Elijah died, it fell to Elisha to inform Hazael that he would succeed Ben-Hadad king of Aram. As he was about to do that, we are given a picture into Elisha’s heart. The text reads that Elisha “stared” at Hazael, “with a fixed gaze until Hazael felt ashamed,” and then “the man of God began to weep.” Hazael asked why Elisha was weeping. “Because I know the harm you will do to the Israelites. You will set fire to their fortified places, kill their young men with the sword, dash their little children to the ground, and rip open their pregnant women” (2 Ki 8:11-12). It must have been terribly difficult for Elisha to look into the eyes of a man whom he knew was about to commit horrible atrocities against the Israelites.

There was nothing in Elisha’s half century of prophetic ministry that was easy, but the glimpses we have of his heart show us a man who was committed to doing what the Lord asked him to do, even when he found it difficult to do. His perseverance was based on a perspective memorialized in one of the best known incidents in Elisha’s life. He and his servant were surrounded by the Aramean army. His servant panicked, but Elisha reassured him with a line that pointed forward to Jesus’ ministry, “Don’t be afraid.” There was no reason to fear, because as Elisha explained, “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them” (6:16). Then the prophet prayed, “O Lord, open his eyes so he may see,” and his servant saw “the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around

Elisha” (6:17). Elisha embraced sorrow on numerous occasions (how could he do otherwise?), but he never gave in to despair. No matter how desperate the situation, Elisha remained confident in the Lord. His name meant, “God is my Deliverer,” and he lived his life in the spirit of that unconquerable truth. What the apostle Paul said of himself and others could well be said of Elisha, “We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us” (2 Cor 1:9-10).