



# New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

## MARKERS OF MATURITY

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We're now in our fourth week of looking at the lives of Elijah and Elisha. They are two of the most influential men in the Bible, powerful prophets who lived in an age when standing up for God was a challenge.

Last week we looked at Elisha's calling, and we talked about what it means to be called. God has us here to stand out for him, to be counter-cultural voices that say "This is what the Lord says" even when nobody's listening and everybody's pulling a different direction.

Sometimes a calling can be pretty unglamorous. We saw how Elisha left his job as a supervisor on the farm to pouring water on Elijah's hands as his assistant. God's call on us is a call to service. His big assignment for us may be much smaller than we think.

Elisha was completely willing to fill that role. He became quite attached to Elijah during the years they were together. But Elijah's days on earth were winding down. God had not told him to just choose an assistant in Elisha – he told him to anoint a successor. Elisha was going to replace Elijah, and the day finally came when the transition had to happen.

For several years, I had this painting hanging on a wall in my old office. I had a roommate in college who was an art major. Karin and I had always admired his work, so he painted this picture for us as a wedding gift. It's called "The Ministry of Birds." I like it. I like the texture and color in it a lot. I think it's a very interesting and unusual piece. I don't know if it's good art – I just like to look at it. But I have absolutely no idea what it means. Who's the guy in the picture? Why is he asleep (or is he praying)? Who do the birds represent?

Who really cares? You can enjoy art without really understanding it.

The story we'll be looking at today reminds me of a work of art. Elijah and the whirlwind, taking him up to heaven. Chariots of fire. You pay attention to how this story was crafted and you can tell it was written by a great storyteller. I can just imagine that it was a favorite around the campfires at night in Israel. It's dramatic and has a lot of color. It's full of emotion and action and suspense. It's just a great story all around – one of the

most interesting ones in the Bible. I like it every time I hear it or read it. But what does it mean? It's one thing to enjoy it; it's something else to understand it.

This is Elijah's swansong, his grand exit from the stage. But I'd like to view these events through the eyes of Elisha, because I believe to understand the meaning of this story, we need to see how God used these extraordinary circumstances in Elisha's life.

## **2 Kings 2:1-18**

*When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah 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.*

Sometimes more is communicated by what's not said than by what is said. We're dealing with a couple of guys here. They don't want to get all mushy in front of each other. You can tell that neither of these men wants to talk directly about what's coming. There's a goodbye on the horizon but neither of them wants to face their feelings head-on. Elijah wants to avoid the scenario altogether by leaving Elisha behind and pretend it's just another trip, and Elisha wants to delay the goodbye by sticking to Elijah until the last possible moment. So while the actual words don't come right out and say it, you can still tell that they're both thinking about this coming event.

As I said earlier, Elisha has now spent several years working under Elijah's supervision. He's become a father figure to him. Elisha has so much respect for Elijah. He's the man. He's the one who had the direct communication with God. He's the one that saw his prayers answered. It's hard to think of ever filling his shoes.

But it's time for Elisha to come into his own. God is wanting to grow Elisha up. He's wanting him to gain some spiritual independence.

One of God's goals for each one of us is to gain some spiritual independence. Maybe we've always connected with God through our parents. Maybe we've relied on a spouse to be the spiritual one in the family. Maybe we've depended on church to take care of our Bible fix and we've never done any reading on our own. In fact, maybe we're like Elisha and we can't even imagine taking over for ourselves.

But our relationship with God can't truly grow if it hangs on somebody else's relationship to God. God calls us to spiritual maturity, spiritual independence.

## **Ephesians 4:15**

*...we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ...*

The road there will look different for each of us, but there are some markers along the path that Elisha walks, and I think they translate well into our lives and of how we can grow up our faith.

Elijah and Elisha walk together until they reach the town of Bethel.

*The 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, "but do not speak of it."*

It's always fun when somebody states the obvious. "Elisha did you know you're never going to see Elijah again? EVER?" It is too much for Elisha emotionally. He doesn't even want to talk about it. It's too painful. This is the big day he has been dreading for some time.

If I were Elisha, two big fears would be going through my mind.

### **1. How will I ever move past this loss?**

My friend and mentor isn't going to be here for me anymore. How can I handle that kind of grief? Am I ready to say goodbye in person? And how will I be able to keep going?

### **2. How will I ever take the lead?**

Knowing that I'm expected to take Elijah's spot – that's a lot of pressure. He brought fire from heaven. He stopped the rain for three years. I'm nobody. I'm not qualified to follow that. I need more time. Just a few more lessons from the master, a few more examples of how to do it.

Elisha couldn't even speak about what was coming, he dreaded it so much. And yet that dread and fear didn't stop him from doing what he had to do. He didn't stay behind in Bethel – he kept going.

One of the biggest inhibitors to growth is our own fear. Elisha demonstrated how **pushing past fear** is part of becoming more spiritually independent.

The idea of being spiritually mature sounds good, but if we're honest, I think it also raises some fears for us as well. We can have hidden anxiety about pursuing our faith, because that means changing the status quo. It means moving beyond my comfort zone. If I get serious about God, it might involve giving something up for him. I might experience some loss like Elisha. Maybe it's my freedom, my time, a favorite sin, credibility with my non-Christian friends. Sometimes the attractiveness of growing our faith is outweighed by our fears of what it will mean.

We can also fear spiritual independence because the thought of taking the lead in our own growth seems impossible. I don't know enough. I need another class. I don't understand my Bible. I'm no good at praying. I need somebody else to guide me.

Those are all legitimate, rational fears. The question is whether we will let our fears become an excuse for not growing, or if we will push past them like Elisha.

Elisha stayed right with Elijah on his walk to Bethel. But as it turns out, Bethel isn't the end of the road for Elijah.

*Then 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.*

*The 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, "but do not speak of it."*

The scene repeats itself. A new town, a new batch of prophets, the same question. "Hey Elisha – guess what?" "I know, I know. Stop talking already." But the day is wearing on and time is running out. Maybe this will be the final stop of the journey? You can feel the suspense written into the story.

It turns out to be another false alarm. Jericho isn't the final destination either.

*Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to the Jordan."*

*And he replied, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So the two of them walked on.*

This is it and Elisha knows it. The Jordan is a river – not a town. There's no community there to say goodbye to. This destination can only be the final one. Something big is going to happen there and Elijah will leave him for good. Yet Elisha persists and hangs on to his teacher like a pit bull.

Here's another observation about the path to spiritual independence: Elisha knew he wanted to **go the distance with instruction**

He was going to soak in every last minute he could with Elijah. He was going to pay close attention to all he said and did right up until the end.

### **Proverbs 4:13**

*Hold on to instruction, do not let it go; guard it well, for it is your life.*

I don't know that I can say I live that. So often when I was in school, I learned to pass tests. Then after the test was gone, I quickly forgot what I had learned. And I rarely pursued further knowledge on those subjects.

When I got into a job, instruction took on new importance. I was motivated to learn certain things because the future of my career hinged on it. Something was at stake. Proverbs tells us life itself is tied up with our spiritual instruction. We are to hang on to it and gain as much strength from it as we can, because that's what sustains us.

We live in a time and place when our resources for spiritual instruction are unlimited, and yet those resources are powerless to help us unless we're utilizing them.

We need to develop a spiritual hunger that drives us to go deeper.

### **1 Peter 2:2**

*Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.*

Working from home is a dangerous situation when you have cravings. The kitchen is always there, and I crave snacks. The bag of pretzels is never more than a few steps from my reach. If there are Otis Spunkmeyer cookies in the freezer, I'm only 17 minutes away from satisfaction. I have to go find myself a piece of gum or something to take my mind off it, because when you crave something, that hungry voice keeps calling until you answer it.

Peter says we should cultivate a healthy craving for spiritual instruction, a voice we can't turn down, because that's the food we need for our growth.

I've been reading a book by Ernest Gordon about his time as a prisoner of war in Japan during World War II. It was a horrendously brutal camp. The men were dying left and right and had very few of the basic necessities. Ernest himself had contracted multiple diseases and sat on the brink of death for weeks. They survived on scraps of rice and did forced labor during the day.

But even in those conditions, the men had this hunger to learn the Bible. The need to find meaning and hope became much more important in that setting. Ernest barely knew the Bible himself, but the other prisoners so much wanted to know more about it that he agreed to lead a Bible study with them.

He wrote, "At each successive meeting, the numbers grew. There were new faces, more pairs of eyes looking questioningly into mine. I kept one lesson ahead of them... Through our readings and discussions, we gradually came to know Jesus. He was one of us... As we read and talked, he became flesh and blood... We arrived at our understanding of God's ways not one by one, but together. In the fellowship of freedom and love we found truth, and with truth a wonderful sense of unity, harmony and peace."

The line that struck me was when he said it was through their study that they came to know Jesus. The value of spiritual instruction isn't information; it's to help us know Jesus. As we pursue truth as an idea we meet Truth as a person. Our craving for instruction is to be a craving for Jesus himself.

### **Colossians 2:2-4**

*My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*

Elisha went as far as he could with his instructor, gaining everything he could from him right up until the end. That end was approaching very quickly as they reached the river.

*Fifty men of the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. Elijah 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.*

*When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?"*

*"Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied.*

I love it how Elijah sneaks in one last miracle, parting the Jordan for he and Elisha. Finally, the two of them can talk privately. They have left the other prophets on the far side of the river and now it's just them. There's no more putting off the inevitable, and Elijah finally turns to Elisha and asks him what he most wants.

It's a big request: A double portion of Elijah's spirit. Elisha isn't saying he wants twice as much as Elijah has. The double portion refers to the inheritance amount that was given to firstborn sons. It's a comparison to what other heirs received.

Elisha knows that Elijah's legacy is spiritual. What he most wants is to follow in Elijah's steps, and he knows his own charisma and skill set won't be enough. He needs the Spirit of God to fill him the way it did Elijah. That's been the source of Elijah's power, and Elisha hadn't seen anything like that in his own experience.

Elisha's spiritual independence came in part because he was able to **ask for the Spirit**.

It was such an insightful request, because nothing else mattered. Without God's Spirit, a prophet is spouting nothing but their own opinions.

The same is true for Christians. In our quest for spiritual maturity, nothing matters more than the genuine presence of God's Spirit. Without him, we're just doing self-improvement exercises.

We've said many times that everyone who puts their faith in Jesus is given the Holy Spirit. But that doesn't mean we're all taking advantage of this fact.

Do any of you have one of those fancy refrigerators that let you fill your glass with ice? Lucky. That would have been nice this week. Imagine we all had a refrigerator like that, but we never used it. On hot days we just toughed it out and tried to think cool thoughts.

Having the Holy Spirit is like having that refrigerator. Just because we have him doesn't mean we're going to him and getting filled up. Paul encouraged his readers to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Look what God said through the prophet Joel:

**Joel 2:28-29**

*I will pour out my Spirit on all people.  
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,  
your old men will dream dreams,  
your young men will see visions.  
Even on my servants, both men and women,  
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.*

We don't have to settle for just a little sip of the Holy Spirit – God is pouring him out. We're to seek the double portion, just as Elisha did. That means asking God to fill us up with the Holy Spirit. We become willing to give more control to him. To again use the cup of ice analogy, if we want more ice, we may first have to dump out what's in the cup. We have to make room for it. If we want a double portion of the Holy Spirit, we may need to make room for him in our lives, dumping out whatever would get in his way.

Elisha wants to be full of the same Spirit Elijah had, so he asks boldly for what he wants.

*"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."*

It was a difficult request, because it was out of Elijah's control. It was totally up to God. So Elijah just gave Elisha the indicator of whether or not it would happen, which is whether or not he was able to see Elijah as he was taken away.

*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. Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!"*

Can you imagine? Talk about sensory overload for Elisha. The spectacular sight of a dazzlingly bright chariot from heaven. A brilliant horse that looks like it's made of fire. Just as Elijah's taking that in, a whirlwind blows in out of nowhere, and the next thing he knows, Elijah is caught up in it. Then he's hit by the emotion of the moment everything has been leading to as Elijah leaves him forever.

But what was it Elijah had told him just before all this happened? “If you see me when I’m taken from you, you’ll know your request has been answered.”

Elisha hadn’t seen a chariot from heaven before, and now suddenly he’s able to perceive spiritual realities that Elijah also could. He has a glimpse of spiritual truth he didn’t know existed. It had to be the Spirit that had opened his eyes to see a **new view of reality**.

That’s a key in our spiritual development – being able to look and take in what God is doing. So much of the time we see the day to day events going on with no thought of any orchestrated plan behind the scenes.

Then every once in a while, God gives us a little peek into his amazing ability to use anything. I saw that this week through a black lab.

Some of you have met Mogli – Kae Pilo’s dog. With just Kae and Grace in the house, Kae has depended on Mogli to be a good security system, as well as a good playmate for Grace. I don’t think he’s started babysitting yet.

Well this week, Mogli ran away. Since we don’t live very far from Kae, she called us and asked us to keep an eye out for him. She was worried about him, because he’d never run away before, and a neighbor just down the street had had his labs stolen.

The day went by with no sign of him. That evening, Kae’s in-laws were coming down for a visit. They stopped in the Kent Humane Society and were told that the Federal Way branch had just picked up a black lab. Sure enough it was Mogli. They picked him up and everyone had a very happy reunion.

Before he ran away, Kae had been concerned, because Mogli needed his shots, and Kae just didn’t have the extra money to spend on it. Well it turns out that the first thing the humane society does when they pick up a stray is give it its shots to protect the other dogs. Mogli was there just long enough to get free shots before being discovered and sent home.

To the rest of the world it looks like another runaway dog. But I think God was giving a demonstration of the depth of his care for Kae. Isaiah 40 says that God gently leads those that have young. He showed his gentle care, his creativity and how easy it is for him to work in the smallest details of our lives.

I like those moments where God’s hand seems easy to recognize, but God is at work on far more levels where I’m less inclined to look. Is something blocking my ability to see who he is or what he’s doing? We can ask him for a new view of reality, to show us what he’s doing that we may never have seen before.

It was a brief moment of insight for Elisha, then Elijah was gone.

*And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart. He picked up the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. Then he took the cloak that had fallen from him 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.*

*The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha." And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him.*

You can picture this whole scene, can't you? Elisha is so distraught over seeing Elijah taken away. He rips his clothes as a sign of mourning, showing the way he feels a piece of him has been ripped away. He watches intently until the whirlwind isn't even a speck. The sky is empty once again. He drops his eyes to the ground. And then he sees it. Somehow in all the activity, Elijah had dropped that now famous coat.

Elisha looks at it for a moment. Then he reaches down and picks it up. He takes it back with him to the edge of the Jordan. Now I'm assuming that at this point, people had developed alternate ways of getting across the river besides parting the water. There had to have been bridges and boats and stepping stones and shallow spots.

But Elisha needs to know for himself. Had the power of Elijah been all about Elijah? Or was it God at work? Would God do the same things through a different messenger? So he took that coat and struck the water with it to see what God would do.

It was a bold move, but it was exactly what Elisha needed to move toward maturity. He had to **take a risk – a risk that forced him to depend on God's faithfulness**. Nobody would have blamed him if he hadn't tried. But think what he would have missed. This was a huge confirmation for him that God would be as true and as real in his life as he had been for Elijah.

God invites us to stake our reputations on his faithfulness, to step out in faith, to ask, "Where is the God of Elijah?". Those are the moments we have the greatest opportunities to see what he can do.

At one point, the Israelites as a community started to hold back the money and gifts they normally gave to the Lord. They started to play it safe and worry that they wouldn't have enough if they gave the usual amount. God encouraged them to risk bringing their full offering to him. Then he said this:

**Malachi 3: 11**

*Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it."*

When we test God on his ability to provide for us, he always comes through. When we risk making ourselves dependent on God even when it might seem foolish, he opens the

floodgates. That's not a promise of financial wealth – it's a promise of a Father always taking care of his children.

God did open the floodgates for Elisha. Parting the water was nothing compared with some of the other things he did, which we'll see in the coming weeks. As he came into his own spiritual independence, the Lord did mighty works through him.

What's your Jordan River this morning? Maybe you're standing on the banks, trying to decide whether or not to strike. Are you ready to risk believing God can still answer prayer?

Elisha picked up that cloak that he had seen Elijah use so many times, a cloak that represented truth and power. What coat are you going to pick up on the banks of your Jordan River this morning? What truth about God do you need to grab hold of?

Claim God's forgiveness to strike down your guilt. Claim God's faithfulness to clear a path through your worry. Claim God's compassion to heal up your wounds. Hold on to God's wisdom to show you where to go. Take God's courage and strike down your fears. Count on God's peace to get you through your crisis. Trust in God's goodness to be in control of your circumstances. Have faith that God's power will work in your weakness. Believe God's word to be truth for your life.

Where is the God of Elijah? Where is the God of Elisha? He's right here. And he's still ready to open floodgates and do mighty works. What might he want to do through you?