THE PROPHET ELISHA

Elisha followed Elijah as a prophet of the Northern Kingdom. He was the son of Shaphat, and lived at Abel-Meholah in the Jordan Valley. His family was reasonably wealthy. Twelve yoke of oxen ploughed his father’s fields. Elijah found him ploughing and threw his cloak over him. Elisha understood what that meant. He went home, gave a farewell feast to the people, made a complete break with his previous vocation, and became Elijah’s attendant (1 Kng 19:16-21). This was about the time of Ahab’s death (853 BC). Elisha died about 798 BC.

There were three remarkable biblical pairs. Moses’ successor was Joshua, and Joshua’s name meant “The Lord saves.” Elijah’s successor was Elisha, and Elisha’s name meant, “God saves.” John the Baptist’s successor was Jesus. The Hebrew name “Jeshua” is a later form of the name “Joshua”, and meant “The Lord saves.”

When Elijah went through the Jordan, before God took him to heaven, Elisha stayed with him. He asked for a double portion of the spirit that was on Elijah. He saw a fiery chariot separate Elijah from him, and saw Elijah going up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha took up Elijah’s cloak. Having Elijah’s cloak was a symbol that he as the successor to Elijah’s ministry. Like Elijah, he struck the Jordan with the cloak; the river divided, and permitted him to cross back to the western side. This indicated that the Lord was operating in him with the same power that had accompanied Elijah’s ministry (2 Kng 1:1-18). During his ministry, Elisha was called “the chariots and horsemen of Israel”, as Elijah had been (2 Kng 2:12, 2 Kng 13:14). As Moses had used his staff, and as Elijah had used his cloak, Elisha used Elijah’s cloak.

The miracles in the Bible are confined almost exclusively to four periods: The first group happened during the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, their journey in the wilderness, and their settlement of Canaan. The second group happened during the struggle for the true faith against Baal worship at the time of Elijah and Elisha. The third group occurred during the time of the Babylonian captivity, especially in connection with Daniel and his companions. The fourth and greatest series of miracles were performed during the time of Jesus and His apostles.

The Lord performed many miracles through Elisha. Some were miracles of knowledge, and some were miracles of power. There were miracles in nature, miracles of healing, and a raising from the dead. At the time of Elisha, the miracles had the purposes of defending the worship of the Lord against Baal, and helping people in need.

Through Elisha’s use of salt, the Lord made the waters of the spring at Jericho sweet (2 Kng 2:19-22). It indicated that, in spite of the people’s disobedience, the Lord was still being gracious to people who feared Him. Elisha cursed youths at Bethel who despised and mocked him, though he was the Lord’s representative, and two bears mauled 42 of them (2 Kng 2:23-25). It was a warning that the Lord would judge the entire nation if they continued to reject the word of their prophet. Elisha foretold the success of an expedition against Moab. Though it had not rained, water filled a valley in the desert of Edom and saved Joram and Jehoshaphat’s armies and livestock from dying of thirst. The sun on the water convinced the Moabites that the water was blood. They assumed that the armies of Israel and Judah had fought one another, and they entered the camp of Israel, looking for plunder. That enabled the Israel and Judah to defeat Moab. (2 Kng 3:11-27). Elisha arranged for a widow’s supply of olive oil to increase, and so saved her family from slavery for failure to pay a debt. (2 Kng 4:1-7). Elisha predicted the birth of a son to a pious Shunammite woman (2 Kng 4:8), and had his prayer answered for her son to be restored to life. (2 Kng 4:37). During a time of famine, which indicated that Lord’s judgment for unfaithfulness to His covenant, Elisha made poison plants in the prophets’ pot edible (2 Kng 4:3841). Elisha fed 100 men with 20 barley loaves and a few ears of corn, in accordance with what the Lord had told him (2 Kng 4:42-44). When the king of Israel was blind to the presence of a prophet in Israel, Elisha told Naaman to wash in the muddy Jordan River to cure his leprosy (2 Kng 5:1-19). The miracle was a sign to disobedient Israel that, when people become indifferent to God’s promises, God can raise up people who follow His word from outside His covenant nation. Though blind, Elisha knew about his servant Gehazi’s deception and greed, and foretold that he would be punished by leprosy (2 Kng 5:20-27). Elisha made a borrowed iron axe-head float to the surface of a river (2 Kng 6:17). At a time when Israel was too weak to prevent parties of Syrians from raiding their country, Elisha told the king of Israel about the king of Syria’s intentions (2 Kng 6:8-12). When the king of Syria sent soldiers to capture the prophet for giving this information to the king of Israel, Elisha had his prayers answered to let his servant see the horses and chariots of fire that the Lord sent to protect him (2 Kng 6:13-17). Elisha made the Syrian soldiers who came to arrest him blind, so that he could lead them into Samaria (2 Kng 6:18-23). The sparing of these soldiers’ lives brought relief to Israel from Syrian raiding parties. When the king of Israel blamed Elisha that Samaria was besieged and that the people were starving, Elisha revealed to the elders...
of the city that a messenger from the king of Israel had come to his door, intending to take his life (2 Kng 6:32-33). During a siege of Samaria Elisha predicted that plenty of cheap food would replace scarce and expensive food (2 Kng 7:1); but he predicted that an unbelieving officer would not share in the plenty (2 Kng 7:2) This was fulfilled to the letter. Elisha told Hazael that Ben-Hadad 11, the king of Syria, would soon die, and that Hazael, as the next king of Syria, would harm Israel (2 Kng 8:7-15). Elisha sent a young prophet to anoint Jehu king to carry out the destruction of Ahab’s family as had been prophesied years before (2 Kng 9:1-10:28). Elisha predicted three victories over the Syrians (2 Kng 13:14-19). His last miracle happened after he died, when a man who had been hurriedly thrown into the same tomb was restored to life as soon as his body touched Elisha’s bones (2 Kng 13:20-21).

The king of Israel was hardly even familiar with Elisha’s ministry (2 Kng 8:4). By contrast, even the Syrian king, Ben-Hadad, turned to Elisha when he was ill, and Elisha predicted that his illness was not terminal. The Lord, however, gave Elisha a clear picture of the severe judgment He was about to send on Israel through the Syrian king. The prophet Elisha, rather than the wicked kings of Israel and the apostate priests of Israel, was the Lord’s faithful representative. There were still some pious people in Israel. The Lord restored all the property to the God-fearing Shunammite woman after it had been taken over by others when she moved away during a seven-year famine. Some Israelites who were faithful to the Lord sent their first fruits to Elisha rather than to the priests.

Gauged by the sheer number of his miracles, a double portion of the spirit that was on Elijah indeed rested on Elisha. His miracles often functioned as reminders to the Israelites that deliverance from her enemies was God’s gracious gift, and that rejection of God’s word provoked His wrath and judgment. When people of our day, too, disobediently turn their backs on God, He is displeased, and punishment will eventually fall on them. Nevertheless, He remains faithful to His gracious promises. The gates of Hades will not prevail against Christ’s church. God’s grace extends, beyond those who arrogantly assume that God owes them His favour, to people like Naaman the Syrian. God still draws to Himself people who had seemed unlikely subjects of His redeeming love.