

## 2<sup>ND</sup> KINGS

### Lesson 2, chapters 1 and 2

As we left off in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings chapter 1 last week, the greatest prophet of the Bible, Elijah, has resurfaced and of course it is to bring a message of warning and doom to the latest king of the northern kingdom, **Achazyah**. **Achazyah** has taken over the throne of Ephraim/Israel from his father **Achav** (Ahab); but this new king is sickly and weak and is now critically injured from an accidental fall from the second story of his home.

As he lay in bed, broken and near death, King **Achazyah**, in the customary way of all people of that era, sought a prophet or a seer to divine the future and tell him whether he would recover from his injuries or die. But in an admission that he was of the same spirit as his father, he shunned going to a prophet of the God of Israel and instead sought an oracle from the Philistine god **Ba'al Z'vuv**, the Lord of the Flies. So he sent messengers to the Philistine city of Ekron to inquire of the Fly god on his behalf. But along the way they were intercepted by **Eliyah**, who (dressed in typical prophets clothing of hairy animal skins) in obedience to God's instructions told them that they should go back to their dying king with this message: "Is it because there is no God in Israel that you should inquire of **Ba'al Z'vuv**? Therefore you shall surely die".

In other words the Lord says, you have determined that I, Yehoveh, am not your god, and therefore you shall surely die. The implication is NOT that God is going to kill **Achazyah**, rather the Lord is merely going to allow the king to die as a natural result of the terrible injuries he has sustained. However at the same time, whereas God in His limitless power over life could rescue him and order his body to heal, He will not intervene because **Achazyah** has renounced Yehoveh as his god.

When the bed ridden king hears this message from his messengers, and quickly ascertains that it was that old trouble maker Elijah who has prophesied his death, he orders his soldiers to go and seize Elijah and bring him to the palace. While the wording doesn't say so, the common understanding of the times was that a prophet could speak a curse onto someone and then the god that the prophet served would do his bidding and bring that curse about. So **Achazyah** hoped he might either bribe or intimidate Elijah to retract his curse of death and instead call down a blessing of healing on him. Let's re-read part of chapter 1 to get our bearings to start today's lesson.

**RE-READ 2<sup>ND</sup> KINGS CHAPTER 1:9 - end**

So in chapter 1 verse 9, a company of 50 soldiers is sent to arrest **Eliyahu**. It is said that they went to a mountaintop where he was sitting. How did they know where he would be? The Sages of old say that one of the peaks around Mt. Carmel was Elijah's home, and that it was well known. And as the company arrives, the captain shouts out to **Eliyahu**, "Man of God, the king says to come down". In Hebrew the words for man of God are "**Ish Elohim**", and no doubt the formal name of Elijah's God (YHWH) is intentionally not spoken as a not-so-subtle insult. The manner in which Elijah was addressed was impudent and disrespectful; and since Elijah was God's prophet, and because the cause of this confrontation was God's divine message of doom to the king, the affront was really more directed at God than Elijah whether that captain fully realized it or not.

Elijah replied that if he actually is an **ish elohim**, then the captain and the king know full well that they have no right to address him in such a manner or to issue such orders. Thus **Eliyahu** calls down fire from heaven (meaning from the sky) and instantly the captain and his 50 men become cinders.

When **Achazyah** heard of this, he displayed the same kind of destructive stubbornness as the Pharaoh of the exodus, and so he dispatched another company of 50 men. The captain of the 2<sup>nd</sup> group repeated the arrogant command of the now deceased 1<sup>st</sup> captain, but astoundingly even multiplied the disrespect by adding the word "quickly" to his order for Elijah to come down. The results, not surprisingly, were the same.

Notice that in the killing of the 2 groups of 50 men and their captains that the old Elijah seems to have re-emerged. Elijah calls down fire upon these men in the same way that some years earlier he called down a drought on Israel (something God eventually overturned to show mercy on His suffering people). We should remember that Elijah was of a status not far removed from Moses in some respects, and given even greater authority than Moses in other respects. The Lord had given Elijah discretion to take action that the Lord had not directly ordered him to do; and if Elijah ordered it, the Lord would bring it about. Of course, there were limits, and the Lord wasn't ever forced into a box having to do something He was against. And ending the drought before **Eliyahu** had determined it was time is one example of this.

Yet not that long ago, as Elijah fled from Queen Jezebel to Mt. Horeb, Yehoveh had shown him that gentleness, mercy and patience was the Lord's preferred way to handle those who were reluctant to do His will. Divine wrath was more or less a last resort and was used sparingly. But Elijah seems to have been quite stiff necked and equipped with a volatile temper and militant attitude; thus he was often too quick-on-the-trigger to call down calamity upon those who, from his perspective, didn't do God's will quickly enough or to the extent he thought it ought to be done.

Let's understand that while Elijah was often wrong minded in his use of his incredible authority loaned to him by the Lord, he thought he was acting properly to protect God's holiness. There is no evidence that Elijah was concerned with being personally shamed or insulted. And that is why God went to the trouble on Mt. Horeb to show Elijah that while He appreciated Elijah's zeal and loyalty, Elijah's actions ought to reflect God's character. And God's character is not to anger quickly or to destroy before offering substantial opportunity to repent.

However here we see Elijah almost immediately have these 2 groups of soldiers burned up due to their insulting behavior. So when the hard-hearted King **Achazyah** heard that the 2<sup>nd</sup> group was now also turned into ashes, he sent a 3<sup>rd</sup> with the same instructions! But the captain of the 3<sup>rd</sup> group was not so arrogant as to have no regard for his own life or that of his men. He approached Elijah humbly and bowed down with respect, virtually begging Elijah to not do to him what he had done to the others. It is interesting to me that it is at this point that we hear from God again; God tells Elijah to do as this man asks and to go with him but not to fear him. So when the first 2 groups of 50 soldiers were burned up, we should recognize that it was at Elijah's typically harsh judgment and there was no command from God whatsoever to do that (but it seems it must have been within the Lord's permissible will to permit it). But when the 3<sup>rd</sup> group arrives and shows humility before Yehoveh, the Lord quickly jumps in indicating that He will not go along with a possible 3<sup>rd</sup> incineration and essentially orders the great prophet NOT to harm these men but rather to comply with their request.

There is a story in the New Testament that connects hand in glove with this one, and I want to make that connection for you. Turn your Bibles to the Book of Luke.

### **READ LUKE 9:49 – 56**

Almost 900 years after the time of Elijah, Yeshua and some of His disciples were in the hill country of Galilee, and He was teaching them various principles. And as He did, He was revealing His character (which of course is exactly the same as His Holy Father's) that operated from a foundation of gentleness, patience and mercy. These disciples were on fire for God; passionate, sold-out to Yeshua's leadership and teaching, and (much as with **Eliyah**) their human instincts instantly wanted to start dishing out consequences for all those who opposed their Master or in the case of the narrative of verses 49 and 50, on those who didn't necessarily hold to the same pure doctrines about Yeshua that the 12 disciples did.

So in verse 51, as Yeshua knew that His time on this earth was growing short, He decided it was time to go to Yerushalayim. But he also decided to take a route to Jerusalem that went through Samaria. In those days, Samaria was so despised by most Holy Land Jews that many would take a longer route to travel from Galilee in the north to the south (usually to Jerusalem) that took them on the east side of the Jordan River, through Perea, rather than take the considerably shorter and more direct route through Samaria.

When Yeshua's messengers arrive at the city of Shomron (the actual city of Samaria located within the Roman province of Samaria) to arrange for hospitality for their Master Yeshua, the village people made it clear that Yeshua and his entourage were not welcome there. And they said that it was NOT because of **who** He was, but because of **where** His destination was: Jerusalem. You see, the Jews of Samaria had at this time separated themselves from the Jerusalem Temple authority. They had set up their own rival Temple, established their own rival Priesthood, and even had their own rival Torah (although in truth it was very nearly identical to Moses' original Torah).

This refusal of hospitality by the people of Samaria was seen by two of Jesus' disciples as a great insult that brought shame upon their Rabbi Yeshua. All that is happening here is typical

Middle Eastern behavior operating within their shame-honor culture that always requires hospitality when it is asked for. But since it was refused, which culturally brings shame upon the one requesting it, the offended disciples inquired of Jesus if they should order down fire from heaven to kill them in retribution. In their thinking this would restore Yeshua's honor. But Yeshua rebuked them and would not allow such a thing.

No doubt the disciples were recalling Elijah and this incident in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 1 when they suggested bringing down fire upon the people of Samaria. They of course made the connection with what was going on with Yeshua because it was standard Jewish Tradition that before the Messiah came, Elijah would return to herald Him. The Jewish society of that day, so oppressed by the Romans and many feeling that they were living out the days of Jacob's Trouble (what Christians call the Tribulation), was therefore engulfed with Messianic fervor and so most of what happened to them was viewed through the lens of the many Messianic prophecies in the Bible; and they were impatient for the expected Messiah to reveal Himself. And that Messianic revelation necessarily involved the return of Elijah.

But the disciples were confused. They had only recently learned that they had authority given to them by Yeshua to do things like expel demons and heal the sick (we see this in the first verses of Luke 9). But, just like for Elijah, there were limits to what they could order, which God then in-turn would bring about. Elijah had been given great authority to even call down calamities upon people; however Yeshua's disciples were not. Also recall that Elijah had been judged by God as too harsh on His people (because of his quickness to employ severe punishment) as related back in 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 19. So here God (in the form of Messiah Yeshua) was also judging the disciples as being too harsh (it says Yeshua rebuked them) in their wanting to destroy the townspeople of Samaria simply for insulting them for not offering the expected Middle Eastern hospitality.

Yet there is an important fundamental difference between the scenarios of 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 1 and Luke 9. These people of Samaria were **not** like the 2 groups of 50 soldiers who were burned up near Mt. Carmel; rather the Samaritans did not connect Yeshua with Yehoveh. However the soldiers and their captains who came to arrest Elijah knew full well who Elijah was and that he represented Yehoveh, God of Israel. Further the folks of Samaria, were not out to get Yeshua or to arrest Him, or to harm Him or His disciples. They were mainly just irked that their city was located along the main thoroughfare for people who were passing through on their way from the Galilee and north to Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. And the Jews who came through Samaria thumbed their noses at the despised Samaritan Jews and they were sick of it. Frankly, there were scores of self-professed Messiahs and Prophets running amuck throughout the Holy Lands, most of them either hanging around Jerusalem or on their way through Samaria to Jerusalem, and for these Samaritans Jesus and His gang was just another one.

So, while it is important for us to make connections between the New Testament and the Old, and from this learn about our obligations to God and how to behave as followers of Christ, we must not become too caught up in our zealotry and make rash decisions about how to deal with people who oppose us, like happened with these 2 disciples whom Yeshua rebuked. And we are to study and understand both Testaments well, so that we can see what is actually occurring rather than making false assumptions. We are not to adopt either Elijah's attitude or

the attitudes of these 2 disciples of Yeshua. Rather we are to adopt Yeshua's attitude of gentleness and patience.

Back to 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 1. Elijah accompanies the 3<sup>rd</sup> group of soldiers (who were no doubt greatly relieved not to have become like charcoal bricketts) back to the king's palace and Elijah repeats directly to the king what he said to **Achazyah's** messengers some days earlier. Apparently the fear of God had been instilled in the king's royal court and no one tried to harm Elijah, and equally apparently the king must have accepted his fate because in verse 17 we're simply told that shortly thereafter he died.

This chapter ends with some synchronization between the reigning kings of Judah and of Ephraim/Israel. And this allows me just a moment to hopefully straighten out what can be a very confusing situation. Unfortunately for Bible students, we have an anomaly occur in which BOTH kings have the same name. This is NOT a Scriptural error. It just so happened that **Achazyah's** brother was named **Y'horam**, and Jehoshaphat's son was also named **Y'horam**. Since King **Achazyah** died without an heir, his brother **Y'horam** took over the throne of the northern kingdom of Ephraim/Israel. And for awhile he ruled at the same time that Jehoshaphat's son **Y'horam** ruled in Judah.

And, by the way, modern English Bible scholars have tried to help us out a little bit, by assigning slightly different ENGLISH names to these kings. Often King **Y'horam** of Judah is called Joram, and King **Y'horam** of Israel is called **Jehoram**. Just know that this was contrived not to harm the text but to help us distinguish one king from the other.

Let's move on to chapter 2.

### READ 2<sup>ND</sup> KINGS CHAPTER 2 all

Here we have one the strangest stories in the Bible: the story of Elijah being taken away by God via a storm wind, or in Hebrew a **searah** (NOT a whirlwind). Many (perhaps most) modern Christian scholars now take this story as but a Jewish fairytale, mostly because the entire concept of miracles is becoming politically incorrect within especially the liberal wing of the modern church. That is, everything written in the Bible must be accounted for rationally and naturally, if not scientifically, or it is considered myth. But there's more to this story of 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 2 than only Elijah being "translated" to Heaven (as is the usual viewpoint). To begin with (and we'll touch on this again at a later time), the English term heaven is in Hebrew **shamayim**. And it can mean Heaven (as where modern Christians view that God lives), or it can mean the cosmos where the stars and the planets hang in space, or it can mean the sky where our atmosphere is and the clouds float. So the question here is just which one of these was in the author's mind.

The first words of this chapter begin: the time came for Yehoveh to take Elijah up into heaven. The underlying meaning of this is that Elijah's imminent disappearance marks the end of an era just as with Samuel anointing the 1<sup>st</sup> King over Israel (Saul) and then more or less retiring into the shadows marks the end an era. Or better, I think we should see these two events as transitions from one era into another.

When **Eliyahu** was alive, there were so many prophets in Israel that they actually formed guilds and lived in prophet colonies. But when he was miraculously removed by God, the era of the spirit of prophecy for Israel vanished along with Elijah. His protégé Elisha carried on, but otherwise prophecy became rare in Israel. What separated Elisha from the hundreds of other legitimate prophets in Israel? The ancient Rabbis say that it was his fierce commitment to Elijah and because he instantly gave up everything in order to carry out his commission. They say that he was like Joshua, who completely dedicated himself to Moses and so deserved to be the next leader of Israel.

The story opens with Elijah and Elisha on their way from Gilgal to Bethel. They will wind up in Jericho. All 3 of these places had substantial prophet colonies and no doubt that was the reason they were traveling there. **Eliyahu** asked Elisha to remain in Gilgal as he left for Bethel but Elisha insisted on going. When they arrived at Beit-El the guild prophets greeted them and asked Elisha if he was also aware that Elijah was soon to be taken away from him. Elisha responded that yes, he already knew, but that they should speak no more of it. While speculative, I think the Rabbis are correct in saying that the reason for Elisha wanting this knowledge to be kept quiet is that Elijah had made it clear to him that this was a private matter and what was about to occur wasn't for public viewing.

Then as Elijah readied to leave for Jericho, he again asked Elisha to stay behind. Elisha refuses and vows that he will never leave **Eliyahu's** side. Some Sages say that this was a loyalty test for Elisha, but that hardly seems realistic. Elisha had stayed close to Elijah for a long time now, and there is no hint of Elisha being anything but steadfast. Rather it is more likely that Elijah felt he needed to do this alone; that while his future was unclear, Elisha's place was clearly as **Eliyahu's** replacement. And just how this "going up into the heavens" would happen was also uncertain. Not only that but obviously God had revealed that He was going to take Elijah, and had also revealed to him the day and the place. Apparently the Lord had not included spectators in His instructions to Elijah and so Elijah was reluctant to allow any.

Upon arrival in Jericho the guild prophets who lived there also approached Elisha and wondered if he had been told of what was about to happen. He answers them the same way he did the Bethel guild prophets by telling them to keep silent about it. But I think that inherent in their question to Elisha is a hope that he, as **Eliyahu's** anointed apprentice, might have more details about what was coming.

Elisha apparently knew of the planned journey from Gilgal, to Beit-El, to Jericho, but once in Jericho Elijah surprised Elisha by telling him that he was now going to walk to the Jordan River (which was just a short distance east from Jericho) and that Elisha should stay in Jericho. Again Elisha refuses to leave **Eliyahu's** side. We need to grasp what a momentous (if not scary) day this must have been for Elisha and the many guild prophets. Elijah had been their inspiration and their unquestioned leader for many years. Now their leader was going to just walk into the Wilderness and never come back. What was really going on here? Was Elijah going to merely die? If so how? Violently? Mauled by wild animals? Peacefully lying down and going to sleep? Was he going to be bodily lifted up and deposited at another location by God?

I cannot help but notice how similar in nature what was predicted for Elijah's disappearance (verse 1 says that Elijah would go up to heaven in a storm wind) is as compared to the so-called Rapture that is spoken of in 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians.

CJB **1 Thessalonians 4:17** *then we who are left still alive will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and thus we will always be with the Lord.*

There is a never ending debate within Christianity as to just what this event is going to look like or what it really is. Some point to the Book of Matthew as speaking of the same event and therefore adding a bit more information about it.

CJB **Matthew 24:40-41**

<sup>40</sup> Then there will be two men in a field- one will be taken and the other left behind.

<sup>41</sup> There will be two women grinding flour at the mill- one will be taken and the other left behind.

However as the many scholarly views of tribulation, Christ's return, the Millennial Kingdom, etc., show us, there is no consensus on exactly how this Rapture will go down because there is only the faintest of Scriptural reference to it and the barest of information about it. Despite many books written by supposed experts about the Rapture (probably the best known being Tim LaHaye's Left Behind series) each author proposing extensive details about how (if not when) this will happen, we are realistically left in the same position as Elisha and the many guild prophets were: something miraculous is definitely going to happen that removes **Eliyahu** from their presence, but what is it?

Thus in verse 7 as Elijah said his farewells and struck out for the nearby Jordan River, 50 of the guild prophets couldn't stand not knowing and so followed at a distance hoping to catch a glimpse of the mysterious events about to unfold. In some strange way it seems they even wanted to be there to perhaps rescue Elijah if needed. When **Eliyahu** and Elisha arrived on the west bank of the river, Elijah removed his prophet's mantle from his shoulders, rolled it up to mimic a staff and struck the waters of the Jordan Moses-fashion, and behold it parted! They both crossed over on dry land into the Trans-Jordan region and no doubt walked a bit farther.

Elijah seemed to know that whatever was coming was imminent and so told Elisha to tell him now whatever he might want of him. And Elisha responded that he wanted a double portion of the same spirit that Elijah possessed (meaning the spirit or gift of prophecy). Elijah said that this was a "hard thing" for him (and this is because he had no control over the amount of spirit that anyone could receive) but that if it was granted to him by God, the sign of it would be Elisha's ability to observe Elijah's departure.

Here is a good point to pause and speak about something the ancient Sages and Rabbis refer to as the many levels of prophetic inspiration. Even in our story of **Eliyahu** and Elisha we see at least 3 levels of prophetic inspiration: that of the ordinary guild prophets, then the next level up with Elisha, and then the highest level with Elijah. But the Rabbis say that the highest level

of prophetic inspiration ever was contained in Moses (a whole other level) and this is indicated in many ways in the Torah with the most obvious being that he was the only man who ever spoke to God face to face and lived.

I think these various levels of prophetic inspiration are quite real and still, to a considerably lesser degree, in operation today. However we are told that as the end-times approaches the spirit of prophecy will begin to return in abundance.

**CJB Dan 12:4 <sup>4</sup> "But you, Dani'el, keep these words secret, and seal up the book until the time of the end. Many will rush here and there as knowledge increases."**

And this:

**CJB Joel 3:1 "After this, I will pour out my Spirit on all humanity. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions;**

I don't think this predicted era has begun yet because when it does, as it was with Elisha and Elijah, the prophets will prophesy and it will happen precisely as they tell it, and the world will hate them for it. Right now we have some Christian people who prophecy very broad general things, without times, without details, and then when something vaguely similar happens they claim credit, and when it doesn't happen they just adjust their prophecy and continue on with more. Or more often they see current events happening, offer their opinions (or claim the Lord told them) on where this will lead, and call this prophecy. That is stretching the matter considerably.

Rather the level of prophecy actually occurring in modern times is probably a bit like those guild prophets of old in the sense that for the northern kingdom of Israel at least, there was no functional priesthood and the people of the northern kingdom weren't allowed to visit the Temple in Jerusalem. So the guild prophets were the teachers of God's Word in Israel at that time; however there is some implication that perhaps a few were occasionally given true prophetic insight. So the New Testament type of prophecy that seems to be the level of prophetic inspiration operating shortly after Messiah's death and in our time, is that a teacher of God's Word is said to be prophesying, even though the intent is not to say that that teacher sees the future or that they are getting a direct oracle from the Lord. However someone like Paul, or John, or Peter were on the next level up from a teacher when they were given a deeper level of inspiration and were considerably more than teachers of the Word; they were given additional divine understanding that forms part of our Bible today.

Let me close with this thought. What right did Elisha even have to ask Elijah for a double portion of his spirit of prophecy? In fact, what did he mean by this? I think it is quite clear when we remember that in the Bible we're dealing with a Hebrew culture, so that Elisha was thinking in terms of the rights of the firstborn receiving a double-portion of inheritance from his father, when compared to what all others in the family would receive. In fact we'll notice that in verse 12 as Elisha watches Elijah go up, that he shouts out, "**Abba, Abba** (my father, my father)"!

Elisha was asking to take over from ***Eliyahu*** all the rights, privileges and heavenly authority that ***Eliyahu*** had possessed and displayed. Such would put him at the highest level of prophetic inspiration on earth, above all other remaining prophets.

We'll continue with the translation of Elijah into the heavens next week and look at a surprising New Testament connection to it.