

"By faith..."

18. Elisha

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IT IS BOTH SADDENING and thought-provoking when you are with an elderly brother or sister nearing the end of their life within days. You feel grateful to God for their faithful example and constant witness to the hope that was in them. To you they are a finished product of faith, a loyal disciple of Jesus Christ. You share their fervent belief in bodily resurrection, even though they will fall asleep in their Lord. How we take stock of our own lives! Life really is the time to serve the Lord.

Did similar thoughts go through King Joash's mind concerning the elderly Elisha during his final days (2 Kgs. 13:14-20)? Elisha had made an impression on both monarch and people, a living sermon of godly wisdom and faithful deeds. God's prophet had lived through the reigns of three other kings. Fifty years previously, as a young ploughman, he had been plucked from his livelihood by the great prophet Elijah. Today we look back and see how well he succeeded that other giant of faith. He also performed miracles, which included resurrections. Two of the three Old Testament resurrections were at Elisha's hands, God's hand at work.

Let us join the king and the elderly prophet. Had Elisha told the monarch why Jehu and Jehoahaz, Joash's grandfather and father, had been a disappointment? They allowed calf worship to continue in Dan and Bethel. At least Jehoahaz did redeem himself and eventually prayed for help from the Almighty. That prayer was answered, an unnamed saviour was raised up, and the people were delivered.

Jehu's grandson was allowed by God to be alone with his prophet during Elisha's final hours. This was God's forth-teller, who had been a shining lamp amidst the darkness of gross idolatry. The lamp could not burn for ever; soon it would be extinguished in the sleep of death. Then where would the king find illumination?

The prophet was soon to die, most probably just from old age. This was the man who, in his younger days, courageously stood up to the king and his court, witnessing against their wickedness. Perhaps thoughts like these suddenly compelled the king to cry aloud, "O my father, my

father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof" (v. 14). These are the very words a young Elisha uttered at the beginning of his ministry (2:12). The king seems determined to quote them as a mark of respect for his elderly companion.

But Elisha did not respond, seemingly preoccupied. He then told the king to take up a bow and arrows, and open a window facing east. He placed his hands on the king's. They pulled the bow back. The arrow streaked eastward. Now the prophet chose to speak: 'That is the Lord's deliverance' (from Joash's enemy, Syria).

What an amazing incident! Although he was frail, this elderly prophet could still test the monarch's resolve. He ordered Joash to strike the ground with arrows. The king did so, but perhaps in a manner which told the prophet he was merely humouring the old man. Immediately Elisha was angry. Partial trust by this king meant only a partial victory in future over his enemies. Abruptly the narrative ends. Neither man speaks another word. Instead the text continues: "And Elisha died, and they buried him" (v. 20). What a life! Once called by Elijah in a dramatic incident, now ending his journey in more drama, this time involving a king.

In the days leading up to his death, it is quite possible that Elisha's long-term memory was razor-sharp, but his short-term memory not so good. The elderly still have these problems. He would recall his prosperous upbringing in Abel-meholah. His faithful parents believed in the one true God despite ever-present Baal worship. Was he right to leave them? Yes. He abandoned his comfortable lifestyle. All his life God's will came first. He was rewarded. He had asked Elijah for a "double portion" as that prophet was about to leave him (2:9), and went on to perform twice as many miracles as Elijah.

Did Elisha sometimes recall highlights of his life, such as how Naaman learned humility at the River Jordan, and was cured of leprosy by him? Only the Messiah would also cure lepers, even being baptized in that same river.

Elisha sleeps, a giant of faith to Israel and to us. God moved in mysterious ways then and will do so until His Son returns.