

6. Elijah's and Elisha's Mantle (2Q 2011—Garments of Grace: Clothing Imagery in the Bible)

Biblical material: 1 Kings 19:1–19; 2 Sam. 10:3, 4; Ezek. 16:15, 16; 1 Kings 21:21–29; 2 Kings 2:1–18; 2 Corinthians 7:10.

Quotes

- Commitment unlocks the doors of imagination, allows vision, and gives us the “right stuff” to turn our dreams into reality. *James Womack*
- Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you have imagined. *Henry David Thoreau*
- Keep your dreams alive. Understand to achieve anything requires faith and belief in yourself, vision, hard work, determination, and dedication. Remember all things are possible for those who believe. *Gail Devers*
- Most of us serve our ideals by fits and starts. The person who makes a success of living is the one who sees his goal steadily and aims for it unswervingly. That is dedication. *Cecil B. De Mille*
- The only tyrant I accept in this world is the ‘still small voice’ within me. *Mahatma Gandhi*

Questions

What do the lives of Elijah and Elisha have to say to us? How should we understand “passing of the mantle” from one to the other? What is symbolized by the cloak? Why is God’s revelation of himself to Elijah so important? How is God revealed in the life experiences of Elijah and Elisha? What do we learn?

Bible summary

1 Kings 19:1-19 details Elijah running from Jezebel. Despite the incredible demonstration of the true God on Mount Carmel, Elijah in his humanity runs and hides. God understands and sends an angel to care for him, even though he is ready to totally give up. Then on Mount Horeb, God reveals himself, not in the earthquake, wind, or fire, but in the still, small voice... 2 Sam. 10:3, 4 and Ezek. 16:15, 16 simply references the use (or misuse) of cloaks. 1 Kings 21:21-29 we see Ahab apparently repenting in sackcloth—another use of clothing to show an inner conviction. In 2 Kings 2:1-18 we see Elijah using his cloak to part the Jordan. Elisha tears his own clothes apart and puts on Elijah’s cloak—the mantle has fallen on him, a sign of continuing authority and prophetic presence among the people: “The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, ‘The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha.’” (2 Kings 2:15 NIV).

Comment

Jesus comments on both Elijah and Elisha: “‘I tell you the truth,’ he continued, ‘no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed--only Naaman the Syrian.’”

All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff.” Luke 4:23-29 NIV. What is Jesus’ point here? That it’s not by belonging to any group that conveys benefit from God, but by a personal relationship—that God cares for us and relates to us individually, and that salvation goes beyond any group of people...

The cloak symbolizes a continuation of the ministry—that Elisha is now walking in Elijah’s clothes. His prayer for a “double portion” of Elijah’s spirit shows Elisha’s commitment to the cause of sharing God with the people. He wishes to be God’s man in an even more significant way, if that were possible. He is not looking to promote himself, and he is willing, eager even, to clothe himself with Elijah’s mantle, not just to show continuity but also his dedication to the God of Elijah, and to be self-effacing.

Back to Elijah, and his running from Jezebel after the amazing demonstration of God on Mount Carmel. God knows that Elijah simply didn’t trust him enough, and is scared of Jezebel, but he still wants to work with him. What does he do? Sends an angel with food. Twice. He knew that Elijah would die without his help, out there in the desert, exhausted and depressed. God sets about restoring Elijah’s trust in him. Miracles of feeding, caring first for his immediate physical needs. And then taking time out to spend time together, at Mount Horeb.

Then God and Elijah start talking together. Friend to friend. Is God angry? No, even though he may have had every right to be. Elijah had let him down. He quietly asks what the trouble is. What are you doing here. Elijah? A slight rebuke, for Elijah should have been confronting Jezebel back up at Mount Carmel. Then comes Elijah’s self-justification. The big moan. The blaming of others, including God himself. “I’ve been good. Did what I should. Nobody cares. There’s only poor little me, and they’re trying to kill me too. Woe is me!”

Maybe God sighs to himself, and smiles at Elijah, and says: “Come here with me, and I’ll win your trust back.” How? By showing Elijah himself. A fascinating demonstration of what God is like. An acted parable of how God is, and why we should trust him. Vital for all of us, especially today.

What came first? Great wind. Smashed rocks even. Was God there, a terrifying God of strength? No. Then Earthquake. Fearsome shaking of the ground, knocking Elijah to the ground maybe. Is God there? No. Then what? Fire. A burning blazing fire, destruction and danger, making Elijah afraid. Is God there? No. Then what? A still small voice, a gentle whisper. This is God.

God is not in the terrorist business. He is not trying to scare us! He wants to come and talk with us, friend to friend. He wants to reason with us, like a loving parent. He wants to show us why we can trust him absolutely.

So Elijah goes out from the cave to meet him. God asks him the same question, “What are you doing here Elijah?” Elijah says the same thing. He has not been convinced. Maybe he wanted God to be the terrifying all-powerful God of destruction—the wind, earthquake and fire—so that he could feel he could blast the heathen to pieces. But God wanted him to understand that he was not about to be seen as a vicious and vindictive god who threw thunderbolts down out of heaven. He wanted his prophet to understand him and love him and trust him, so that the people would do the same, and not serve him out of fear.

So God gives the instruction about the human instruments who will accomplish the re-establishment of the true worship of God in Israel—for a time at least. He also assures him that his own work will be continued through a successor—the prophet Elisha. But most of all God gives Elijah the assurance that he is not alone, that there are 7000 more of his servants in Israel. Elijah still has work to do, and he must trust his loving Lord so that he can work for his true people in Israel.

Despite Elijah's crisis of trust, God helps him over this so that he can continue to show others the true God. Elijah goes to his work fully confident of God, that he can do all he promises. He has seen God, he has talked with him, he has reasoned with him. He knows God is in control, that he has every reason to trust him.

Ellen White Comments

It was no great work that was at first required of Elisha; commonplace duties still constituted his discipline. He is spoken of as pouring water on the hands of Elijah, his master. He was willing to do anything that the Lord directed, and at every step he learned lessons of humility and service. . . . Elisha's life after uniting with Elijah was not without temptations. Trials he had in abundance; but in every emergency he relied on God. He was tempted to think of the home that he had left, but to this temptation he gave no heed. Having put his hand to the plow, he was resolved not to turn back, and through test and trial he proved true to this trust. . . .

As Elisha accompanied the prophet . . . his faith and resolution were once more tested. At Gilgal, and again at Bethel and Jericho, he was invited by the prophet to turn back. . . . But . . . he would not be diverted from his purpose. . . . “And . . . Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee.”

Elisha asked not for worldly honor, or for a high place among the great men of earth. That which he craved was a large measure of the Spirit that God had bestowed so freely upon the one about to be honored with translation. He knew that nothing but the Spirit which had rested upon Elijah, could fit him to fill the place in Israel to which God had called him; and so he asked, “I pray thee, let a double portion of thy Spirit be upon me.” {CC 222}

Elisha was a man of mild and kindly spirit; but that he could also be stern is shown by his course when, on the way to Bethel, he was mocked by ungodly youth who had come out of the city. These youth had heard of Elijah's ascension, and they made this solemn event the subject of their jeers, saying to Elisha, “Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head.” At the sound of their mocking words the prophet turned back, and under the inspiration of the Almighty he pronounced a curse upon them. The awful judgment that followed was of God. “There came forth two she-bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two” of them. 2 Kings 2:23, 24.

Had Elisha allowed the mockery to pass unnoticed, he would have continued to be ridiculed and reviled by the rabble, and his mission to instruct and save in a time of grave national peril might have been defeated. This one instance of terrible severity was sufficient to command respect throughout his life. For fifty years he went in and out of the gate of Bethel, and to and fro in the land, from city to city, passing through crowds of idle, rude, dissolute youth; but none mocked him or made light of his qualifications as the prophet of the Most High. {PK 235-6}