



**Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church**  
Sanford, North Carolina

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**Taking Up the Mantle**  
**2 Kings 2:1-14**

There stood Elisha on the banks of the Jordan River, wearing Elijah's cloak, or as most translations render it, his mantle.

Elisha had just crossed the Jordan on dry ground after he rolled up the mantle and struck the water with it. Just as they did for Elijah a little while earlier when he struck them with this same mantle, the waters divided to the left and right for Elisha. It kind of reminds you of how the waters of the Red Sea parted for Moses and the Israelites, or how the waters of the Jordan stopped flowing when the priests carrying the ark of the covenant stepped into them at Joshua's direction so the Hebrews could cross on dry ground into the Promised Land, doesn't it?

This wasn't the first time Elijah's mantle had been on Elisha. In 1 Kings 19, we read how after Elijah had fled to the wilderness in a deep depression to escape from Queen Jezebel's wrath, God confronted him at Horeb, the mountain of God. The LORD asked Elijah what he was doing there, and Elijah poured out his complaint to God. God told him to stand on the mountain in his presence, because he was about to pass by him.

There was a great wind, then an earthquake, then a fire. But the Scriptures say that the LORD was not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire, but rather in the gentle whisper or the "still small voice"<sup>1</sup> that followed them.

God gave Elijah several assignments. One of those was to anoint Elisha the son of Shaphat to succeed him as the prophet of the LORD (1 Kings 19:16). And that was the first thing he did (1 Kings 19:19-21). He went straight to the village of Abel Meholah and found Elisha.

Elisha was a farmer, and was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, driving the twelfth pair himself. Without saying a word, Elijah walked up to Elisha and threw his own mantle around Elisha. Elisha knew exactly what it meant—Elijah was anointing him to be his successor as the LORD's prophet! He asked for permission to kiss his parents good-by, used the twenty-four oxen he had been plowing with as meat for a farewell feast that he cooked using his farm implements as fuel, and then "set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant" (1 Kings 19:21).

***The mantle***

Now just what was this mantle?

Well, from a literal perspective, it was a cloak, an outer garment. Sometimes a mantle was more like a cape; sometimes it was more like a sleeveless coat.

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<sup>1</sup> From the *Revised Standard Version*; unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures are from the *New International Version*.

Elijah's mantle was apparently made from woven animal hair. In 2 Kings 1:8, when a messenger of King Ahaziah brings a message from the LORD for the king given to him by a man he didn't recognize, the king recognizes him as Elijah by the messenger's description of him as "a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist." In the Gospels, John the Baptist wore a similar garment made of camel's hair and a leather belt, showing that he was a prophet like Elijah (Matthew 3:4; Mark 1:6).

But symbolically, this mantle was so much more than a cloak. This particular kind of mantle seems to have been the appropriate dress for a prophet of the LORD. So for Elisha to be wearing Elijah's mantle declared that he was indeed the chosen successor of Elijah.

### ***Elijah's relationship with Elisha***

Now Elisha was not the only other prophet or prophet-in-training at this time.

During this time, there were prophetic guilds, what the *New International Version* translates as "the company of the prophets" (2 Kings 2:3, 5, 7, 15). The Hebrew is literally "sons of the prophets," and many translations render it that way. These were groups of prophets who lived and worked together, often following a prophetic leader who was considered "the man of God." Two different groups are mentioned in this story—one from Bethel and the other from Jericho. They apparently had strong ties with Elijah, although he operated completely independently of these groups. Yet no doubt they respected him, admired him, and sought to be like him.

But ever since Elijah had thrown his mantle around Elisha's shoulders, Elisha had been following him, assisting him, and learning from him. In a real sense, Elijah was Elisha's *mentor*, and Elisha was Elijah's *protégé*. Elijah was investing himself in Elisha so there would be a man of God in Israel, and Elisha was preparing himself under Elijah's leadership to assume that role someday when Elijah would no longer be there.

That's a kind of relationship that is so important. I think we've sometimes lost sight of just how important it is. I've been blessed with a number of wonderful mentors throughout my life—older pastors and professors who for some reason took an interest in me and invested in me and my ministry. Some were simple country preachers with limited education, but they gladly shared with me out of their rich experience. Others were accomplished and well-educated professors who had also been pastors, who taught me so much.

Believe me, I cherish them *every one*—a list too long to give you. But I remember when I was about to graduate from Campbell University, I was trying to express my gratitude to one of them who had been so formative in my years there, Dr. Donald Keyser. In his typical humility he told me, "When I tried to say something similar to one of my teachers, he told me, 'I'm just doing for you what someone else did for me. You go do the same thing for someone else.' Now you do the same—go do the same thing for someone else." I guess that's one reason Christian higher education has been so important to me ever since. It's so crucial for seasoned ministers to invest themselves in younger ministers, to help them become all God calls them to be.

But that's not just true for ministers—mentoring is a powerful discipleship tool as well. Think what a powerful thing it could be if seasoned saints came alongside younger disciples to encourage and guide them in their life with Christ! What if adult believers invested themselves in children and youth to help them grow to become strong disciples of Jesus?

This was the kind of relationship Elijah had with Elisha.

This last episode of Elijah's fiery life shows what that relationship was like. From the beginning, Elisha's commitment had been wholehearted. When Elijah threw his mantle around his shoulders, Elisha could use all those oxen for a feast and use his farm implements as fuel to

cook them *because he would never need the oxen or the tools again*. He would never turn back.

That faith and commitment were evident in this story. Even though Elijah kept telling Elisha to stay behind as he went, Elisha insisted on being with his master up to the very end.

Did you notice a pattern in the story? Three times Elijah says to Elisha, “Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel,” then “to Jericho,” then “to the Jordan” (2:2, 4, 6). Each time, Elisha responds, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you” (2:2, 4, 6). The first two times, the company of the prophets (first those from Bethel, then those from Jericho) ask Elisha, “Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?” And Elisha responds, “Yes, I know, but do not speak of it” (2:3, 5). But the third time, fifty of the company of the prophets from Jericho simply stand at a distance and watch as Elijah parts the waters and he and Elisha cross the Jordan on dry ground (2:7-8).

Elisha’s faithfulness and perseverance shine through here, and even more so in the conversation and events that follow.

After they cross the Jordan, Elijah asks Elisha, “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?” Spoken like a true mentor, interested in helping the one he has been investing himself in for the future!

Elisha answers, “Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit.”

What does he mean by that?

In the ancient Israelite world, the inheritance customs dictated that the firstborn son would receive a double portion. In other words, if there were five sons, the inheritance would be split six ways, with the oldest receiving two of the shares.

Elisha was asking to receive such a double portion of the spirit of Elijah. In other words, he wanted to be Elijah’s spiritual heir, the preeminent heir of his prophetic ministry. He wanted to take Elijah’s place as the leader of the prophets, the man of God. But he needed the power of the spirit that was with Elijah to be able to fill that role.

Elijah told him that was a hard thing, but it would happen if he saw him when he was taken from him. They continued walking and talking on the other side of the Jordan.

And then it happened—that part of the story we’re all most familiar with. The fiery chariot and horses appeared and separated Elijah from Elisha, taking Elijah into heaven in a whirlwind. And as he went up, Elijah’s mantle fell to the ground.

Elisha tore his own clothes, apparently in grief over his separation from his master. Then he picked up Elijah’s mantle and went back to the bank of the Jordan. He struck the water with Elijah’s mantle and said, “Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?” And the waters parted to the right and left, and he crossed over.

The prophets from Jericho were still watching. When they saw this, they said, “The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha” (2:15). In other words, they recognized that he was Elijah’s legitimate successor as the man of God.

***And so . . .***

And so what does this story from nearly 3,000 years ago say to us today at Jonesboro Height Baptist Church?

What does it say to us about following Jesus? In the Gospel passage we read this morning (Luke 9:57-62), Jesus encounters three men who are interested in following him. The first volunteers, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus warns him that it will be a tough journey with no home in this world. It will take real faith, genuine trust in him. Jesus calls the second to follow him, but the man says, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus tells him that his

call takes precedence even over sacred family duties. In other words, he calls for absolute commitment. The third man also volunteers, but first wants to say good-bye to his family, much like Elisha did. Jesus doesn't forbid him to say good-bye, but he does remind him that "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." In other words, it will take perseverance.

Let me put it this way. If we are to take up Jesus' mantle, it means denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following him. It means turning every aspect of ourselves and our lives over to him and his control, and trusting him completely.

Or from another angle of vision, what does this story say to us about taking up the mantle from a passing generation of believers who have been so dedicated to the Lord and his church? As they pass off the scene, who will fill their shoes? Who will take up the mantle?

Some people want to love Jesus but not his church. But if you really love Jesus, won't you love his church? It's his body, his bride, his temple on earth! Won't we desire to serve him as part of his people? Won't we want to be a part of his kingdom work in the world?

Look around, my brothers and sisters. Many have already gone to be with the Lord, and others are growing older.

If we don't take up that mantle, who will?

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The following commentaries and other works were helpful in my interpretation of this sermon's text: T. R. Hobbs, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 13: 2 Kings* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 13-28; Roy L. Honeycutt, Jr., "2 Kings," *The Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol. 3* (Nashville: Broadman, 1970), 229-231; Paul R. House, *The New American Commentary, Vol. 8: 1, 2 Kings* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 253-261; James D. Newsome, Jr., *The Hebrew Prophets* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 5-9; *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), various articles.