



One of the realities of life are transitions. Sometimes we call this the process of succession. Let me give you a little quiz on this topic. I'm sure most of these question you could answer:

In the world of sports, who succeeded Joe Montana? *Steve Young*

Who succeeded John Wooden? *Gene Bartow*

In the world of business, who succeeded Steve Jobs? *Tim Cook*

Who succeeded Lee Iacocca? *Robert Eaton*

In the world of politics, who succeeded George Washington?
John Adams

Who succeeded Abraham Lincoln? *Andrew Johnson*

In the world of the Bible, who succeeded Moses? *Joshua*

Who succeeded Solomon? *Rehoboam*

Here's one for you to think about: Who will succeed you? You may be thinking, "Well, I'm not a Joe Montana or a George Washington, so it doesn't matter." But it does matter. As a Christ-follower you have a calling. You're part of the body of Christ. As Paul said, *"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you'"* (1 Cor. 12:21). Every part is needed. When you're gone, who will take your place?

Or you might think of this from the other side. Maybe you're someone who will succeed someone else. Maybe you have some big shoes to follow. Maybe you wonder sometimes if you have what it takes.

Our study today focuses on the transition of spiritual leadership in Israel. We've been studying the life of the prophet Elijah. He was a towering figure. Who could replace him? But he was human and like all of us he'd get old and he'd need to make room on the stage for someone else. Who would that be? His name was Elisha.

Elijah Calls Elisha

We've already met Elisha in 1 Kings 19. Elijah was out in the wilderness, depressed and complaining to God. God gave him some instructions. He told him to do three things, one of which was to anoint a man named Elisha his successor. He went and found Elisha plowing his fields. When he saw Elisha he took his cloak off and threw it over him. He didn't say a word, but his actions said, "You're the man. You're the man who will succeed me as Israel's lead prophet." Elisha got the message. He went back and said good-bye to his parents and burned his plows and cooked his cows and fed the whole village. The Bible says, *"Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his servant"* (1 Kings 19:21). He

didn't take Elijah's place right away. There were years where he did little but *"pour water on the hands of Elijah"* (2 Kings 3:11). But he listened and learned.

Elijah and Elisha Journey to the Jordan to Prepare for His Departure

Then finally the time came. Look at 2 Kings 2:1-6.

When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the Lord has sent me to Bethel."

But Elisha said, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel.

The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, "Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?"

"Yes, I know," Elisha replied, "so be quiet."

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here, Elisha; the Lord has sent me to Jericho."

And he replied, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went to Jericho.

The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, "Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?"

"Yes, I know," he replied, "so be quiet."

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; the Lord has sent me to the Jordan."

And he replied, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So the two of them walked on.

Elijah is about to be taken up to heaven. For some reason, he'd not go out like the rest of us; he'd be taken up in a whirlwind. This puts him in a very rare category. There are only two people in all recorded history who've exited this planet without dying. Enoch was the first (Gen. 5:21-24); Elijah was the second. Next in line will be all those believers who are alive at the time of Christ's return (1 Cor. 15:51-54).

In preparation for his departure, Elijah and Elisha embark on a journey. They go from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho to the Jordan River. These are all important places in Israel's history. They're reminiscent of the people of Israel coming into the promised

land, led by Joshua. But this was more than a sightseeing tour. Notice there was a group called “the company of the prophets” at both Bethel and Jericho, and later we’ll see them at the Jordan as well. It appears both of these places had a kind of school where young prophets were trained. No doubt these young men saw Elijah as their leader, and they’re very aware he’ll soon be gone. It makes sense Elijah would want to pass through these communities and offer some final words of encouragement to them before he was taken. Remember how he complained to God about being the only one left but God said there were still 7,000 in Israel who hadn’t bowed down to Baal? These men were part of that 7,000. Even though Elijah hadn’t seen a national revival, he’d started a movement. This was his legacy. We all leave a legacy. A legacy is defined as “anything handed down from the past, as from an ancestor or predecessor.” Here we’re not talking about property or money; we’re talking about character and faith.

Notice something else. Three different times the same thing happens. Elijah tells Elisha to “Stay here,” but Elisha stubbornly refuses. We’re not exactly sure why Elijah keeps telling him to stay. Maybe he knows what’s coming and he just wants to be alone, or maybe he was testing Elisha. The command to “Stay here” is worded in such a way that it’s not a command, but rather permission. It’s like, “It’s okay if you want to stay here.” The important thing to see here is Elisha’s dedication and commitment to Elijah. He’ll stick with him to the very end. He covets his time with his master. He’s “in his shirt” as we say. By the way, we all need a few people like that in our lives, don’t we? We need a few people that won’t let go of us. We need a Ruth who says, *“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay”* (Ruth 1:16). I love how it says at the end of verse 6, *“So the two of them walked on.”* I wish I could have been there. I wish I could have listened in.

Elijah and Elisha Miraculously Cross the Jordan

Finally, they came to the Jordan River where they stopped.

Fifty men from the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground (verses 7–8).

They’re not alone any longer. Fifty men from the company of prophets in Jericho watch from a distance. What a contrast these 50 godly men are to the squads of 50 who we read about in the previous chapter and were sent by Ahaziah to arrest Elijah! And there’s that cloak again. Elijah takes the very same cloak he’d thrown over Elisha years earlier and he rolls it up and strikes the water with it, just as Moses did with his staff when the waters of the Red Sea parted. Imagine Elisha’s starstruck look as they walked across on dry ground. “Wait a minute! What just happened? Did you see that? He parted the Jordan just like Joshua.”

Elisha Requests a Double Portion of Elijah’s Spirit

Then Elijah turns and asks him a question.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?” (v. 9a).

Here’s a wide open door; a blank check! “You just witnessed me part these waters, now what else can I do for you? You name it!” That’s not a question you ask someone you don’t trust. Elisha didn’t seem to hesitate. He knew exactly what he wanted.

“Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha replied (v. 9b).

He doesn’t ask for wealth, fame or success but he asks for spiritual power and influence. When he talks about inheriting a double portion, this was normally what a firstborn son would inherit from his father. Later in verse 12 he even calls him “My father!” But Elisha doesn’t want a double portion of land or money, he wants a double portion of his spirit so he can continue the work of revival Elijah started. I think he felt as we often do: inadequate, unqualified, fearful of not living up to expectations. “How can I possibly follow in those footsteps? I don’t have what it takes. I can’t be him.” And so he asks for the one thing he knew he lacked—Elijah’s spirit; his ability to manifest the power of God. And if you read the life of Elisha you’ll see this is what he got. Elisha does about twice the miracles that Elijah did; a double portion.

Elijah’s response indicates it’s not really up to him to grant this kind of power, but he lays out a kind of condition.

“You have asked a difficult thing,” Elijah said, “yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not” (v. 10).

I think Elijah was confident Elisha would meet this requirement. He’d stuck with him like glue throughout this final journey. You have to wonder why just seeing this happen would ensure the transfer of power. What’s the big deal about seeing? Maybe this was another test. In 2 Cor. 4:18 the apostle Paul wrote, *“So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”* That was the secret of Elijah’s life and ministry. Had Elisha learned that secret? Indeed, he had. Look what happens next.

As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two (verses 11–12).

What a moment! Imagine that? You’re just walking along, chatting, and all of a sudden, whooosh! This whirlwind sweeps up your friend and he vanishes.

You know, there’s a whole world out there we don’t see. *“A chariot of fire and horses of fire...chariots and horsemen of Israel.”* Sounds like a battle. Sounds like war. The unseen world is a battlefield, and Elisha had eyes to see it. Do you? F.B. Meyer

wrote, "No mere mortal eye could have beheld the fiery cortege. To senses dulled by materialism the space occupied by the flaming seraphim would have seemed devoid of any special interest, and bare as the rest of the surrounding scenery." Elisha saw the invisible hosts of God. He'd learned from his master the secret of his power. He'd learned to put his eyes on things unseen. Psalm 34:7 says, "*The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.*" We can't see those encampments with our physical eyes, but they're there. Psalm 68:17 says, "*The chariots of God are tens of thousands and thousands of thousands.*" The earth is crammed with squadrons of angels. Do you see them?

Elisha Inherits Elijah's Cloak and Re-crosses the Jordan

Charles Swindoll writes, "When a man or woman of God dies, nothing of God dies." And that truth is displayed in this story. Look what happens next.

Elisha then picked up Elijah's cloak that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and struck the water with it. "Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over (verses 13–14).

I guess you could call this a do-over. Elisha picks up the cloak. That cloak was the symbol of Elijah's prophetic office and power. Just like he'd seen his master do, he struck the water. Guess what? It's not clear in our English translation, but the Hebrew indicates he struck the water twice. The first time nothing happened, and so he cried out to God, "*Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?*" He struck the water again and then it happened. You see, the first time he wasn't depending on God; he was depending on Elijah's methods. The power isn't in the cloak; the power is in the Lord of Hosts. This happens all the time in the church. We admire a leader and want to be like him. We try to imitate what he's done to be successful, thinking we'll have the same result. But we need to understand it's not the method or the man, it's the Spirit and power of God.

When I was a kid I spent a lot of time fishing with my grandfather. He taught me how to tie my hook onto my line. He said to take the line and pass it through the eyelid of the hook; then wrap the tag end of the line around the line nine times; then put it through the opening created by wrapping it around; and then back through the loop you just created and pull it tight, making sure the hook comes off the line in a natural way, because those fish are smart. Finally, don't forget to snip off the end of the tag line. To this day, that's how I tie my hook. It has to be nine times! But here's what I've learned: it doesn't matter how well you tie your hook, you still have catch the fish, and that's a whole other story.

Elisha had to learn it didn't matter if he held the cloak exactly like Elijah did, or hit the waters with the same force; he had to depend on God. He got it right the second time and the waters parted and he passed through.

Elisha is Reluctantly Confirmed by the Company of Prophets

What he didn't know is he had an audience.

The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha." And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him (v. 15).

So these guys clearly recognize Elisha is the man; Elijah's successor. They bow down not in worship but in respect. Transition completed. Well, not quite. They're not quite ready to let go of Elijah.

"Look," they said, "we your servants have fifty able men. Let them go and look for your master. Perhaps the Spirit of the Lord has picked him up and set him down on some mountain or in some valley."

"No," Elisha replied, "do not send them."

But they persisted until he was too embarrassed to refuse. So he said, "Send them." And they sent fifty men, who searched for three days but did not find him. When they returned to Elisha, who was staying in Jericho, he said to them, "Didn't I tell you not to go?" (verses 16–18).

It appears they didn't know what Elisha knew. They didn't know Elijah had been taken up to heaven. They just thought he got transported somewhere else, so why not go look for him? He might be stuck on a mountain or in a valley, but Elisha knew better. He says it's not worth the trip; he's gone. But they insist and he finally lets them go. They look for three days, but when they come back empty-handed, he just says, "I told you so." You can't really blame them for trying though. It's hard to let a strong leader go. Transitions are hard. We want to hold on to that man or that woman who has meant so much to us. We've seen God use them in our lives and the lives of others in such powerful ways. Why do they have to go? I'm afraid there are churches and ministries that are still looking for and trying to bring someone back that made a difference in the past. They can't let go. They haven't learned, "When a man or woman of God dies, nothing of God dies."

Pass It On: Prepare the Next Generation to Carry on God's Work

I think we can summarize what all this means to us today with just six words: *pass it on; pick it up*. Let's start with the first three words: *pass it on*. Elijah's ministry wouldn't last forever. Elijah was just a man. He got old, just like we all do. But just because you're old doesn't mean you're done. He had many years with Elisha between the time he called him and the time he left. In many ways, these were his best years! Age has a way of tempering our character. Time tames us. We slow down because we have to, but in slowing down we learn to listen; we learn not to overreact; we gain perspective and grow wise. As we draw nearer to things to come, the things of this earth lose their grip on us. David Roper

writes, "Tested character and God-ripened experience have a seasoned vitality and vision that busier youth cannot have." And with that you can make a lasting imprint on someone younger and less experienced. Are you doing that? Will you do that?

God gives spiritual leaders to the church. These leaders are mature Spirit-filled men and women to shepherd the flock of God, but these leaders get old. They slow down. They get sick. And, yes, they die. So there must be transitions in leadership. The cloak or mantle must be passed on. Sometimes that's hard. We don't like change. We don't want to let go of the old and embrace the new. Sometimes it's the leader himself who doesn't want to let go and everyone is like, "Would you please give it up!" At other times, it's the sheep who don't want to let go and they're still searching for him like the 50 prophets searched for Elijah. But our faith isn't in a man or a woman; our faith is in God. We trust in the power of God, not people.

Last week our elders went away for our annual elders' retreat. I looked around the room and I thought, "Man, you guys are getting old." We have eight elders. If you added up our collective age we're about as old as Methuselah was when he died (969 years old). Collectively, we've been elders for more than 100 years! We need to pass it on. We talked about how we need to invest in the next generation.

But this isn't just for elders and pastors. It's for all of us who've walked with Christ for a while. You've learned something of the doctrines of our faith. You're able to read and study the Scriptures. You have seen something of the power of prayer. You served in and out of the church and know the thrill of being used by him. May I ask how many of you here have walked with Christ for more than five years (raise your hand)? Now look around. How many of those people who don't have their hand up need someone to invest in them? Pass it on. Find someone who will stay in your shirt and teach them everything you know.

A couple of years ago I believe God gave me a verse to define the rest of my life. Here it is: "*Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come*" (Ps 71:18). So that's my purpose in life. That's what I want to do until I stop breathing or the Lord takes me up in whirlwind.

Pick It Up: Accept the God-given Call to Continue His Work

The second three words I want to leave you with are *pick it up*. In verse 13 it says, "*Elisha then picked up Elijah's cloak that had fallen from him...*" I wonder if he hesitated. "Can I do this? Am I up for this?" Think of all Elijah had been through. There had been good days like the when God showed up on Mt. Carmel

and defeated the prophets of Baal. But it wasn't all like that. There were lonely days in the wilderness being fed by ravens. There was the time the widow's son died and he wondered why. There were the death threats from Jezebel and that time out in the wilderness when he just gave up and asked God to let him die. When Elisha picked up the cloak he picked up all of that. The weight of that cloak was heavy.

One day someone may come along to you and ask you to pick up his cloak. Will you stay in his shirt for a while and then pick it up? The other day my 4-year-old granddaughter was baking cookies with her mom. She stood on her little stool and leaned over the sink and asked, "Mom, let me crack the egg." Her mom said, "You can't crack the egg because you don't know how to crack an egg." She said, "Yes I do. Noni taught me to crack an egg." Noni's my wife, and it's true, she had taught her to crack an egg. And so, Peyton picked up the egg and cracked it just like a pro. That's what we need in the church. We need a bunch of Noni's teaching a bunch of Peyton's how to crack spiritual eggs. And we need a bunch of Peyton's willing to pick up the egg and crack it.

But some of us are afraid. We're afraid we don't have what it takes to crack the egg or catch the fish. As I read this story, I can't help but think of the parallels with the story of Jesus. Elijah and Jesus both ascended into heaven. They looked for Elijah for three days; Jesus was in the grave for three days. Elijah left his cloak to his servant as a symbol of the power of God. Elisha didn't have what it takes on his own, but with the cloak he could part the waters of the Jordan. We don't have what it takes either, but Jesus sent down his Holy Spirit to the church and to each of us who believe. He said, "*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you*" (Acts 1:8). Elijah asked for and received a double portion of Elijah's spirit. In the upper room Jesus told his disciples when he left they'd receive the Holy Spirit and do even greater things than he had done (John 14:12). He didn't mean we'd do more impressive miracles or more powerful works than he; he meant we'd do more of them. It was about quantity, not quality. The question is, do we see that? Are we operating our lives based on the unseen realities or are we too preoccupied with the things of this world?

Remember all those questions I asked you earlier about who succeeded who? Well, here's another: Who succeeded Jesus? The answer: We do. We're the body of Christ. Just as Elijah called Elisha and Jesus called the disciples, we've been called to continue his work in the power of his Spirit. We're his disciples called to pick up the cloak with the same readiness we see in Elisha.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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