

ELISHA'S LAST SHOT

2 Kings 13:14-21

At the beginning of our reading today we learn that Elisha is ill, indeed we are told that he is fatally ill. Now Elisha has not been mentioned in the narrative of 2 Kings since the anointing of Jehu, described in 2 Kings chapter 9 verses 1-10, some 40 or 50 years before (we're not sure of the precise timing as the exact chronology of this period is a little confusing). We don't know what Elisha has been doing in this interim period, perhaps there was nothing important to report, although that seems unlikely. But now Elisha is going to make one last significant contribution to the Israelite nation, so let's turn to the text of our reading starting with verse 14:

"Now Elisha was suffering from the illness from which he died. Jehoash king of Israel went down to see him and wept over him. "My father! My father!" he cried. "The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" (2 Kings 13:14 NIV)

Apparently Elisha and Jehoash, the then king of Israel, had a good and close relationship as Jehoash goes to visit Elisha on his sickbed and weeps over him. This is a little surprising as verse 11 of this chapter 13 tells us that Jehoash did evil in the eyes of the Lord and followed in the ways of Jereboam. But our reading today makes it clear that Jehoash must have had some reverence for Yahweh. Here, Jehoash is calling Elisha his father and the weapons of Israel. The use of the word 'father' shows true humility – because by using the word "father", Jehoash is acknowledging Elisha as his superior.

The Hebrew verb translated "went down" can be used in relation to a visit to a person of lower social standing, or a visit to a sick person. Jehoash's exclamation "My father! My father! the chariots and horseman of Israel!" is partly a commentary on the sad state of Israel's military forces expressed in verse 7 of this chapter: "Nothing had been left of the army of Jehoahaz except fifty horsemen, ten chariots and ten thousand foot soldiers, for the king of

Aram had destroyed the rest and made them like the dust at threshing time.” (2 Kings 13:7 NIV)

So, Aram, that’s Syria for us today, has been conquering Israel and indeed decimating their armed forces. Also as we learn from Josephus’s Antiquities (9.179), whilst they followed Yahweh, Israel had never had to use it’s military forces against its enemies but had overcome its adversaries by means of Elisha’s prophecies. Jehoash is acknowledging that the Lord is the true protector of Israel. Now Elisha was departing and leaving Israel unarmed before its enemies, especially Aram or Syria.

But Elisha still has one more prophecy to make before he dies, look at verses 15-19:

“15 Elisha said, "Get a bow and some arrows," and he did so. 16 "Take the bow in your hands," he said to the king of Israel. When he had taken it, Elisha put his hands on the king’s hands. 17 "Open the east window," he said, and he opened it. "Shoot!" Elisha said, and he shot. "The LORD’s arrow of victory, the arrow of victory over Aram!" Elisha declared. "You will completely destroy the Arameans at Aphek." 18 Then he said, "Take the arrows," and the king took them. Elisha told him, "Strike the ground." He struck it three times and stopped. 19 The man of God was angry with him and said, "You should have struck the ground five or six times; then you would have defeated Aram and completely destroyed it. But now you will defeat it only three times.” (2 Kings 13:15-19 NIV)

On his deathbed Elisha performs two symbolic actions. This kind of symbolism has already arisen in the stories of Elisha. For example, in 2 Kings chapter 4 Gehazi, a servant of Elisha, fails to revive a dead boy by the use of Elisha’s staff, so Elisha replaces this symbol of the staff with his own body, which produces a successful revival of the dead boy. Here the first symbolic action is to have Jehoash fire an arrow, the Lord’s arrow of victory, over Aram and the second symbolic action is for Elisha to place his hands on the king’s hands. The hand is symbolic of the will of a person and here Elisha is identifying himself with the actions of the king and the king was

acknowledging himself as an agent of Yahweh's power, a power that was coming to him through the prophet Elisha.

Elisha then tells Jehoash to shoot the arrow through the East window which has been opened, thus firing it towards Aram (as Syria lies to the East of Israel), and Jehoash does so. Elisha says that this is the Lord's arrow of victory, the arrow of victory over Aram – or Syria. The accompanying prophetic word, in which Elisha tells Jehoash that Israel will “completely destroy the Arameans at Aphek”, predicts, in spite of the oppression of Israel by Syria, that Israel will prevail over her enemy. Israel will revive.

Elisha then tells Jehoash to strike the ground with his arrows. Probably this means that the king was to shoot the arrows one at a time into the ground rather than hitting the ground with a bundle of arrows. Jehoash does so, striking, or shooting into, the ground three times and then stopping. Elisha is angry that the king has stopped, rather than firing all the arrows, as each arrow was in effect symbolising a victory. In his failure to fire all the arrows, Jehoash has possibly spoken of his lack of faith that Yahweh will or can do so much for him, or perhaps Jehoash lacked the zeal to accomplish his task. I wonder if we in the church today possess the zeal to do what needs to be done in these times and I'm not sure that we trust God to play His part. Returning to OT times, Elisha tells the king that he should have struck the ground five or six times because this would have led to the defeat of Aram and indeed its complete destruction. Now Elisha tells the king Aram will only be defeated three times.

Let's move on to look at verse 20:

“Elisha died and was buried. Now Moabite raiders used to enter the country every spring.” (2 Kings 13:20 NIV)

Elisha is not taken directly into heaven as his predecessor Elijah was, indeed we are told that he died and was buried. Probably he would have been buried in a cave or a tomb hewn out of the rock with his body wrapped in linen cloths. We're then told that Moabite raiding

parties entered into Israel every spring, setting the scene for the very unusual events recounted in verse 21:

“Once while some Israelites were burying a man, suddenly they saw a band of raiders; so they threw the man’s body into Elisha’s tomb. When the body touched Elisha’s bones, the man came to life and stood up on his feet.” (2 Kings 13:21 NIV)

This miraculous revival of the corpse is completely unlike anything else in the scriptures. Since only the bones of Elisha are left, the incident clearly took place some time after the prophet’s death. Josephus (*Antiq.* ix.183) refers to this incident, but rewrites the story and omits any reference to raiding parties, making the men involved robbers attempting to get rid of the body of their victim. This colouring, indeed rewriting, of the story is hardly historical and doesn’t honour God’s word.

No doubt the story of this miraculous revival was told far and wide and probably came to Jehoash’s ears. I think the Lord intended this miracle primarily for Jehoash. Such a sign of the power of God working even through His prophet’s corpse may have both encouraged the king as he anticipated his battles with the Arameans and rebuked him for his lack of faith in not firing more arrows for more victories.

I think that the revival in the tomb also has a deeper significance. It is a foretaste of the revival of the Israelite nation recounted in the following chapter. Whether or not Jehoash was encouraged by the miraculous revival, Verse 27 recounts the fulfilment of Elisha’s prophecy as Jehoash defeats Aram three times.

So what significance does this story of Elisha’s last prophecy have for us today? I think we are being told that we can depend on God’s promises as recorded in his word, but we must do our part by carrying out the actions God tells us to perform as a part of His promise. Let’s not fail to get the full benefit of these promises by failing to fully play our part as Jehoash did. We can depend on our mighty God who can

do far more than we ever ask or imagine as Paul tells us in his letter to the Ephesians:

“20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.” (Eph 3:20-21 NIV)

Let us give God the glory as we depend on him through these difficult time of coping with the Covid 19 pandemic and the long period of confinement this has brought. Let's not be like Jehoshaphat who lacked zeal and doubted God's power and faithfulness. Our God will bless us when we show our zeal for him and He will empower us when we turn to him in faith. Let's make sure we do that in these difficult times.