

Who is God?

Welcome back to 2 Kings! The sequel.

Originally one long epic, it's continuing the story of the people of God, through the histories of the kings of Judah and Israel and the people that were around them. Chapters 1 and 2 have been getting back into the story of Elijah - the most important prophet to the nation of Israel.

Today we'll be looking at the story of Elijah's death and Elisha taking over Elijah's position as God's messenger to Israel. There's some flashy stuff here, with miracles and fire and water and bears. But I'm mainly going to concentrate on the last part with the bears, because that's a passage that some people like to get excited about.

Before that, I want to set the theme of what's going on in this passage. The push from both Elijah and Elisha to Israel is; who do you think God is? So before we dive into the passage, we're going to do a little thought experiment.

God is...

We'll do some imagining, so if it helps, shut your eyes and those of you who don't will share some awkward glances with people on their row. I want you to think about how you imagine God. Got a picture? Good. What does he look like, what does he do, what is your imagining of the character of God?

You can open your eyes, but keep that idea in your head.

There are lots of different ways about thinking of God, I'll list some for you to compare your own ideas to. Some of them will be biblical, gathered from what God has told us about himself. Some of them will have nothing to do with what God has said about himself.

I think that the classic idea is the one of the old man with the lightning bolts. Grumpy, cantankerous and possibly hard of hearing. But he has a temper and a big bolt of lightning for smiting people with. Not really biblical, but you can see where it's coming from. God does sometimes get angry with people and punish them. We'll return to that later.

Another classic idea is that God created the world, got bored and wandered off. He's just left us alone to our own devices and what we do or don't do isn't interesting at all to God. Certainly he doesn't want to know about his creation, or have a relationship with us! That's been a popular view of God for the last few hundred years. But it's definitely not God as he's told us about himself in the bible. God in the bible is all about knowing people and having a relationship with them.

An idea that seems to be popular right now is God as the slot machine. You put enough money in the pokie, lump enough good deeds into the device and pull the lever. And God will probably reward you with a jackpot in life. And you can understand why it's popular. The idea that God wants to give you a jackpot right now, and all you have to do is be good enough or have enough money. But a jackpot right now isn't what God wants for you. It's not the story of the bible. We'll get back to this later, too.

God as a hopeless romantic is another common view of God. God loves everyone so much, that there is nothing you can possibly do to upset him. That everyone and everything that they do are acceptable to God, with no reservations. And you can see where this comes from, God does really love his people. It's not the full story, but there's some truth there.

Another view of God is the weak God, who really wants us to be better and do things better, but just can't get things right. That there's evil in the world because God can't get rid of it. We'll get back to this one later, as well.

Perhaps your view of God is one of a King, on a big heavenly throne. That God's primary 'job' is one of being a far away king of the universe. There's something to that, isn't there, God calls himself the King of Kings.

I've given you some ideas about how people think about God and you've got your own which will no doubt touch a little on some of these, and in the passage we've read today, the question that is asked of the Israelites of the time, and the question that we should go away with is, "Who is God to me?"

Elisha follows Elijah

The passage itself continues the story of Elijah. In 2 verse 1, we read that God is ready to take Elijah up to heaven. As he and his disciple Elisha walk alone, Elijah attempts to dissuade Elisha from following his path, telling Elisha to "stay here", instead. In verse 2, Elisha replies, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you."

And we have an echo in this from the company of prophets at Bethel. They slightly mockingly ask "Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?" As if Elisha were not already aware of this information. It's an odd question to ask Elijah's disciple, and shows that the people at Bethel, even the prophets, didn't hold Elisha in much regard. Elisha has an abrupt response, "Yes, I know," he replied, "so be quiet."

Elisha will not be stopped from following Elijah, and we see this play out a second time. Elijah tells him to stay in verse 6, but Elisha again replies, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." Elisha is not put off by the difficulty or harsh reality of what is to come. He knows that Elijah is going to die, but not how and is determined to follow his master to the end.

Elijah's promptings to stay aren't a hard and fast command, but a request that would make Elisha's life easier. It's for Elisha's comfort and security. Because it soon becomes clear that God has chosen Elisha to take over Elijah's ministry. And if you recall from last week and earlier in 1 Kings, Elijah's had a pretty hard time of it. He's struggled with famine and threat of execution and faced death several times. Elijah putting off Elisha with more and more difficult tasks then comes to a climax. Elijah says in verse 9, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?", and Elisha asks for an inheritance of God's spirit which is on Elijah. Not fame or wealth, or security or anything else, but the spirit. As an aside, we know

that it's God's Spirit that Elijah had being talked about here, because of the way Elisha addresses God in verse 14.

Elijah says that it's difficult, but "if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours" This is Elisha's last test of perseverance.

And then we have the famous scene of Elijah being taken up to heaven. They're walking along the road, when fiery horses and chariots appear and take Elijah to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha is there for the whole event.

Elisha doesn't seem to be sure if he's received the Spirit.

He takes Elijah's coat and says, in verse 14, "Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" Where is God's spirit? Who has God chosen to be the bearer of his message to his people?

Elisha as a prophet

When we see miracles in the bible, most of the time it's about demonstrating who God is. In both the Old and New Testaments, God takes certain people and really emphasises that he is working through them by the use of miracles.

Here, in the story of Elijah and Elisha we've already seen plenty of miracles, pointing to Elijah being God's special prophet. The man with the message to God's people. We've seen God showing his power and authority to his people Israel. And in the story of Israel, there are some pivotal moments. One of those moments is being replayed here.

When God's people Israel escaped Egypt, there were two moments when God split water so that his people could walk across on dry land. The first was the Red Sea, when the people escaped, and then saved from the Egyptian army. The second was the river Jordan, when Israel first entered the promised land. These two moments are very important to the story of Israel.

Elijah comes to the river, takes off his cloak and strikes the river. God parts the water and Elijah walks across on dry land. Here is a significant echo of the original crossing of the Jordan. God's chosen, miraculously walking across. In the original story, it was God's chosen people, knowing that they were really entering God's promised land. A powerful demonstration of God's power.

For Elijah, it was a powerful demonstration of who is God's chosen prophet, something that was demonstrated again and again in Elijah's life.

And when Elijah dies, the question remains; Has God left his people without a prophet? Will God leave his people to their own rebellion against him? That was the mission of Elijah - to point out the rebellion of God's people against God. Their sin against him.

And it seems to be the question that Elisha had on his mind when he asked, "Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?". Elisha, having torn his clothes when Elijah is taken in a conflagration, takes up Elijah's hairy cloak and strikes the water. And God demonstrates to Elisha, and to those watching that this is God's chosen prophet. Elisha will continue Elijah's mission to point out the rebellion of God's people against God.

And the watching group of prophets all agree, in verse 15, “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.”

The men from Jericho seemed to have remembered that at other times Elijah had been miraculously transported to where God wanted him. And so they offer to send 50 men to find him. Elisha, tells them not to, but spends three days in Jericho waiting while the men fruitlessly search. Elisha is proved right.

While he is in Jericho, there is another miracle that God performs through Elisha. Jericho has evidently had problems with poor quality water for some time. The spring that provided them with drinking water and was irrigating their fields was bad. Elisha took a bowl and some salt, tosses it into the spring and the spring is “healed”.

Again, there are echoes of a previous important miracle. You might remember that Moses did something very similar for the people of Israel when they were travelling to the promised land and came across a bitter spring at Mara. Moses healed the water at the spring and Israel was able to continue crossing the desert. This history of Israel was very important to them and these miracles that Elisha is performing aren't random. They are very specifically recalling the important times in Israel's past and replaying them to shine a giant spotlight on who Elisha is. Elisha is God's chosen prophet, to point out the rebellion of God's people against God, and to tell them to turn around and repent.

This is the context we have when we reach the incident with the bears. One of my favourite sayings is: “When you take a text out of context, it leaves you with a con.” Here the context of Elisha taking over as God's prophet to the people Israel is really, really important. To take the story of the bears out of this context is to leave us with a con. So again, “When you take a text out of context, it leaves you with a con.”

Bears.

Let's then reach the story of the bears. Let me read verses 23 and 24 again for you:

23 From there Elisha went up to Bethel. As he was walking along the road, some boys came out of the town and jeered at him. “Get out of here, baldy!” they said. “Get out of here, baldy!” 24 He turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the Lord. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys.

There are a few things I want to point to here. The first is that Elisha doesn't enter Bethel, the kids see Elisha walking along the road and form a mob to go out to harass him. The forcefulness of the jeering here isn't a gentle mocking, either. It's not like someone at the Christmas dinner table pointing out how much you've grown in the last year. Particularly in the midsection.

This is more than even the mean spirited and nasty bullying that we occasionally experience in life. This is a large mob, who have formed with the specific intent of abusing God's prophet.

And this is a society where respecting your elders is paramount. There were harsh penalties for disrespecting your parents, or elders of the town. So this incident would have been much more shocking to the people of the time.

More so, when you consider the numbers involved. 42 is the number of the injured. In all likelihood, there were many more.

These are kids, and they're kids who are doing something that is utterly foolish and evil. The bible tells us that people are sinners from the start. That even kids rebel against God and do things that they shouldn't do. I'm sure if you're a parent or ever been around kids before, you'll recognise that kids can be very nasty. Of course, if you're a teacher, you've probably met parents that are very sure that their child is never nasty. Maybe you've been to school with that kid and know what the kid was really like! Maybe you were that kid. I think it's no mistake that the Psalmist says in Psalm 51, "Surely I was sinful at birth".

You may remember from last week, the punishment that God gave to 2 groups of 50 soldiers who refused to give Elijah the respect that he was due as God's chosen prophet. They were destroyed by fire from heaven.

What the kids are doing here was worse, but the punishment is more limited. 50 are injured. I don't want to minimise the mauling received. It was bloody and painful and involved significant injury.

But this is the result of the kids directly rebelling against God.

Who is God to them?

So who was God to them? Who was God to the people of Bethel?

Here, God has put this bright, shining spotlight on Elisha. He has very clearly and purposefully said "Here is my prophet".

The people at Bethel seemed to think nothing of God at all. Not powerful, that they can mock him. Not a King that they can disobey him. Not even a rich relative to gain favour from.

The idea that the people of Bethel had about God was one of someone who didn't matter, who wasn't in charge.

Again and again the city of Bethel had ignored the words of Elijah and the miracles that God used to demonstrate who he was. And here, they are ignoring who Elisha is and the miracles that God has just used to demonstrate who Elisha is.

It is the culmination of rejecting God again and again and again. And again and again and again God has warned them and reminded them of the good things he has done and the penalty of rejecting him. These are the miracles that Elisha has just done! Remember when God saved your ancestors from the Egyptians? Remember when God provided for your ancestors in the desert?

They rejected his warning and promises. And they were God's chosen people. It's a sad ending to Elisha's first week as the prophet of God.

Who is God to you?

This is who God was to the people at Bethel. But who is God to us, now?

Is God weak and just unable to deal with the evil in the world? Or maybe he's just got bored with creation and wandered off? God tells us again and again that he is powerful and will deal with the evil in the world, but that he is also patient before he punishes. The classic refrain that is repeated is "The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love". In the New Testament we're told in 2 Peter 3, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

God showed the people of Bethel many times over the lives of Elijah and Elisha who he is, and that he will deal with rebellion. God is powerful and will judge evil, but he is patient and desires that we ask forgiveness for our own rebellion.

So is God just sitting on a cloud, waiting to hit us with lightning bolts?

The miracles of Elisha here aren't ones to remind the people of Bethel about the anger of God, but of the goodness of God. A God who saves and provides. God doesn't want us to turn to him merely out of fear, but because he promises to give us life now. Jesus tells us in John 10, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full". A life where God gives us all of the spiritual blessings in Christ, from Ephesians 1. And just as importantly, eternal life with all the riches of heaven to come.

Is God just the slot machine, then? You do the right thing and out comes blessing? God does love us, it's true, he's patient with us and has brought us into his family and will give you all the spiritual blessings through Jesus. An eternal inheritance with him and all the church family. But his plan for us isn't one of unbounded earthly greed. He loved Elijah and Elisha dearly, but their lives weren't easy. God works through us and for our glory and his. But the blessings he promises are so much more than a comfortable middle class lifestyle. What we have in Jesus is much more valuable. We can enjoy those blessings on earth now when God gives them to us, but don't let your focus wander from God, because in Jesus you have something so much more than trinkets now.

Is God the hopeless romantic that he will ignore rebellion? I think that the lives of Elijah and Elisha tell us again and again that God will judge evil and those who do evil. God wants us to turn to him, not to rebel against him. And we know that if we turn to him, he will wipe away all the evil that we've done, he will take the punishment for that on himself, as Jesus on the cross. God suffering for our evil. I love 1 John, chapter 1, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.."

If we turn to God, he will clean us from all the wrong things we've done and will do. But we do need to turn to him. We cannot insist on taking the punishment on ourselves. Because there is a punishment for rebelling against God.

There are lots of ways to think about God, and I've only touched on a couple today. There are many more. The one I want to leave you with God is the King. He is not a king who lets evil go unpunished. He is not a king who sits unmoved on a heavenly throne. He is a King who is patient, but is actively involved in his world. His ambassadors the prophets, and finally his son - Jesus - has been sent into the world. Don't ignore God the King. Don't mock him, but come to him as saviour and provider.