

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Elisha: Mixed Results”

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2 Kings 9:1-13

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We continue in this series exploring the life and ministry of the prophet Elisha as a guide to mission and ministry in following the Lord. I'm grateful to Pastor Mark last week diving into how God uses people, just regular people like you and me, as vessels of his grace, even if we don't see it.

Today we come to a challenging passage with some harsh words and commissions, but within them, I think we find a glimpse of how complicated things can seem when a life committed to serving the Lord butts up against the harsher realities of how the world too often operates. Let's go to God's Word together. 2 Kings 9:1-13:

Then the prophet Elisha called a member of the company of prophets and said to him, “Gird up your loins; take this flask of oil in your hand, and go to Ramoth-gilead. When you arrive, look there for Jehu son of Jehoshaphat son of Nimshi; go in and get him to leave his companions, and take him into an inner chamber. Then take the flask of oil, pour it on his head, and say, ‘Thus says the Lord: I anoint you king over Israel.’ Then open the door and flee; do not linger.”

So the young man, the young prophet, went to Ramoth-gilead. He arrived while the commanders of the army were in council, and he announced, “I have a message for you, commander.” “For which one of us?” asked Jehu. “For you, commander.” So Jehu got up and went inside; the young man poured the oil on his head, saying to him, “Thus says the Lord the God of Israel: I anoint you king over the people of the Lord, over Israel. You shall strike down the house of your master Ahab, so that I may avenge on Jezebel the blood of my servants the prophets and the blood of all the servants of the Lord. For the whole house of Ahab shall perish; I will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel. I will make the house of Ahab like the house of Jeroboam son of Nebat and like the house of Baasha son of Ahijah. The dogs shall eat Jezebel in the territory of Jezreel, and no one shall bury her.” Then he opened the door and fled.

When Jehu came back to his master's officers, they said to him, “Is everything all right? Why did that madman come to you?” He answered them, “You know the sort and how they babble.” They said, “Liar! Come on, tell us!” So he said, “This is just what he said to me: ‘Thus says the Lord, I anoint you king over Israel.’” Then hurriedly they all took their cloaks and spread them for him on the bare steps, and they blew the trumpet and proclaimed, “Jehu is king.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Almighty God, we come to you praising you in your sovereignty, for there is no brokenness you cannot heal and no wickedness you cannot turn to good. We pray for your peace to be with us, that you would give us patience to wait and to trust in your will for our lives and within our world. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

On a dusty hillside in Mexico, I saw a man tramping up toward our group, working on the construction of small house, and he would not have it. It turns out this man was a local official who oversaw things like permits and property, and he was not happy that a house was being built without his approval, or so he told us.

We in our group were out of our depth in this one, but as best we could we spoke with him, hoping some kind of answer would emerge, until we started getting the strong impression that this official was looking for some kind of payout there on the spot. I don't know that for sure. It's entirely possible that some paperwork got missed. All I know is that he started hinting at how things could get approved right then and there. Before long a ministry representative showed up and took the official aside. Before long we realized that the official had left, and that was the last we saw of him.

I think back on that from time to time, but I do wonder just how that conversation actually went. Maybe the ministry rep just showed the right paperwork, and that was that. Or, and this is what makes me think longer, maybe the ministry rep paid him off, so that the build could continue and the family could get a new house without further harassment. Maybe that's just how things worked.

It gets me thinking. What would've been the right thing to do? Take a principled stand against corruption, and endanger the construction of this new home for that family? Or, pay him off, and get this family a new home, but all while reinforcing a corrupt system?

This kind of quandary is something that faces missions, ministries, even just secular aid. Even now, the issue of food and medical shipments into Gaza are surrounded by suspicion of whether, say, weapons could be smuggled in at the same time. Say you're trying to bring food and medical supplies to a town across a border struggling with famine and disease. But to do so, the commander at the crossing demands money and weapons shipments. What do you do? Do you take a stand against corruption and violence, endangering the lives of the people in that town? Or do you pay him off and bring the guns, saving lives in the town, but knowing you're perpetuating further violence? Questions like that have troubled ethicists and policymakers for a long time, and something like that gets raised in this passage today.

2 Kings 9 begins a sequence featuring a new commander named Jehu. And at Elisha's prompting, Jehu is anointed king. Isn't it interesting that Elisha doesn't go himself? He instead sends another prophet, telling him "Gird up your loins." Maybe that meant, "Hey, this will be dangerous," which it was. Or maybe it meant, "Hey, this won't be perfect, but it's what God is calling us to do."

What made it so dangerous is that Jehu was being anointed king while there was a whole other dynasty in power. You ever heard of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel? Nasty folks. It's their line in power. Ahab's dead by now, but it's his son in power, and Jezebel is still alive. So anointing Jehu as king could be seen as an act of treason. Kind of like what happened when the prophet Samuel anointed the young David as king, even while there was another king, Saul, in power.

The prophet seeks out Jehu, takes him aside, anoints him, and more or less empowers him to cut off the line of this King Ahab. Then the prophet gets out of there as quick as he can. Maybe he's afraid. Or maybe on some level he knew just what sorts of things Jehu would do, because Jehu was no David. He was ruthless, deceptive, and bloodthirsty.

Here's just one example. After he had cut off Ahab's line completely, he says, "Let everyone who worships Baal come out, all his prophets and priests, everybody." (Baal was a foreign god that had been widely worshiped under King Ahab's line.) "Ahab offered Baal small service," Jehu said, "but Jehu will offer much more." This anointed instrument of the Lord is saying he would worship Baal greater than those nasty folks who had just been wiped out!

So all the worshipers, prophets, and priests of Baal came out together, gathered in the temple of Baal together, thinking, hey it's safe, and they prepare to offer sacrifices and burnt offerings. Jehu himself presented a burnt offering to Baal. But after he did, he orders his men to kill every last person there in that temple. It had all been a lie to draw them out.

That's that kind of man, the kind of king that Jehu would become. And on one hand, through him, the worship of Baal was, at least for a time, wiped out of Israel, but it was done through a bloodthirsty and duplicitous king.

Begs the question: should Elisha and his prophets have had anything to do with him? Anoint him and it deposes a ruthless, idolatrous dynasty and wipes out Baal from the kingdom, but begets further violence and civil war within the kingdom. Don't anoint him, though, and it leaves that ruthless, idolatrous dynasty in power even longer. What do you do?

It's interesting that in this whole sequence with Jehu, the prophets (and Elisha in particular) are oddly not mentioned very much at all. After Jehu is anointed, Elisha doesn't show up by name again until his death a few chapters later. What are we to make of that?

This is reading between the lines, but my read is that Elisha continued on in his ministry of healing, or proclaiming the word of God, of calling the people to faithfulness, even while all this was swirling around. He dove in when the Lord called him to, but then he was just as happy to go back to his daily ministry and not swim in the affairs of kings and generals any more than he was called upon to by the Lord.

Maybe that's the message here. It can be great to have the ideals of a righteous kingdom and to seek that righteousness and faithfulness in the realm, but what happens when that mission butts up against reality, up against the harsh ways the world often operates? Well, what often happens are mixed results. You have someone like Jehu who, yes, is anointed by a prophet to carry out the Lord's mission, to depose an evil regime, but he does so in a way that is absolutely bloodthirsty and deceptive and is less about faithfulness to God and more about consolidating his own power. What are those who follow the Lord to do?

It's the same quandary that faced the disciples of Christ there in Gethsemane the night he was betrayed. In came the guards to take him away, and Peter thought, wouldn't it be better to fight now, to resist this obvious farce of an arrest, so that Jesus could continue on freely in his ministry? But to him Christ said, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will die by the sword."

Maybe that's the way forward. For the servants of the Lord to enter into that world only as directly called upon, but ultimately not to presume to know the will of the Lord, to take up the sword to bring about the Lord's will more swiftly. This takes trust, and it's harder to follow the one who came into the city on a donkey, not a chariot.

I was told a little while by a missionary of a troubling situation. I can't offer names or specifics just for the missionary's safety. But he shared how in his ministry in a particular community, he had to engage to a degree with the local cartel.

It was a poor community, in part because the cartel would siphon off large chunks of the community's resources and revenue just to enrich itself and ensconce itself in power.

So one would think, surely, a servant of God, a disciple of Christ, would seek to do anything to break this grip of violence and corruption on a community. But the missionary doesn't. He maintains friendly—or at least cordial—relationships with cartel members and even brushes off inquiries from other authorities to be an informant against them, even though what they're doing is horrifying. And he shared that he did so for the sake of the longevity and the integrity of a presence and ministry that would take a long, long time to build.

Is that right or wrong? Some might say that makes him complicit in what the cartel was doing. Maybe he is. Others might say, he's not doing that out of principle or faithfulness—he's just scared. Maybe that's true. I didn't get the impression of fear, but I know I'd be scared.

But he did share how in one encounter, because he had taken the time to be a presence of peace in the community, he had spoken firmly with an older cartel member, a higher up within the ranks, about how Christians resolve conflict, addressing how the cartel had killed two friends of his. He sat there in that room, an audience he was given by virtue of his longstanding presence in the community, and condemned the manner in which his friends had been killed to the face of the man responsible for their killing. He shared that he feared that he himself might have been harmed as a result, even killed.

But at that point, the cartel member's son, who himself was also in the cartel, spoke up and affirmed the missionary's words, in essence granting him cover and ensuring that he would not be harmed as a result of his words that day.

A word of peace had been strongly spoken, and there were signs of change in a heart of violence, a change that would otherwise not have taken place had this missionary sought singlehandedly to bring down the cartel in the first place.

Is that right or wrong? I don't know. But I know it took trust for the missionary, trust that God could use an imperfect instrument and admittedly mixed results to bring about a sign of peace. And there must be trust in the long game of the Lord.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.