

Elijah's *and* Elisha's Mantle



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Kings 19:1–19; 2 Sam. 10:3, 4; Ezek. 16:15, 16; 1 Kings 21:21–29; 2 Kings 2:1–18.*

Memory Verse: “For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death” (*2 Corinthians 7:10*).

Few biblical characters have had a more colorful existence than the prophet Elijah. What an incredible story of faith, of trial, and of God's overwhelming power in this world.

Today, in Judaism at least, he still looms large. In fact, in Jewish tradition he has been glorified more than perhaps any other biblical figure.

Each Passover, for instance, a special cup of wine is filled and put on the Passover table. During the Passover itself, the door of the house is opened, and everyone stands in order to allow Elijah the prophet to enter and drink. At circumcisions, a chair, “the chair of Elijah,” is set aside as part of the ceremony. Also, as the Sabbath ends, Jews sing about Elijah, hoping he will come “speedily, in our days . . . along with the Messiah, son of David, to redeem us.”

An example of Elijah's prominence in Jewish thinking is found in the Gospel of Matthew, when Peter says that some had thought Jesus Himself was Elijah (*Matt. 16:14*).

This week we'll see what spiritual lessons we can draw from Elijah and the mantle he wore.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 7.*

“A Still Small Voice”

Elijah’s life, recorded in 1 and 2 Kings, includes instances where he bravely faced kings and their threats on his life. There was, however, one notable exception—the time when, scared by threats from a nasty queen, he ran for his life.

In 1 Kings 18, he called down fire from heaven onto Mount Carmel, had the prophets of Baal slaughtered, and warned Ahab of the approaching rain. The power of the Lord came upon him, and, after he tucked his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab for the 20 miles to Jezreel.

By the next chapter, however, this same man of God appears in a whole new light.

Read 1 Kings 19:1–4. What lessons can we take from this passage regarding how, no matter what our relationship with God has been, no matter what great triumphs of faith we have experienced, none of us are immune to deep spiritual lows?

The Lord, though, wasn’t done with Elijah, not even after his rather desperate and somewhat pathetic prayer. He still gave Elijah powerful evidence of His love for him and His interest in Elijah’s life.

Read 1 Kings 19:5–19. What is the significance of Elijah’s wrapping his face in the mantle?

It’s fascinating that although Elijah saw a great wind, an earthquake, and a fire, none of these caused him to wrap his face in his mantle. It was only the presence of the Lord in “a still small voice” that brought this response from him—a response of fear, respect, and self-protection.

What Elijah needed to learn was that, mighty and moving though these forces be, they do not of themselves portray a true picture of the Spirit of God. Elijah heard the voice of the Lord in a quiet and subtle way, telling him what to do, and it was this voice that he obeyed.

How can we learn to recognize the voice of the Lord speaking to us? More important, however, is this question: do you obey what you hear, or do you squelch that “still small voice” speaking to your soul? What does your answer tell you about yourself?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *2 Kings 2:9–14*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Examine the stories of Elijah, Elisha, and Ahab for symbolic relationships between clothing and responsibility and repentance.

Feel: Sense the calling of the Spirit and the responsibility to be used of God that came with Elisha's acceptance of Elijah's mantle.

Do: Respond faithfully and wholeheartedly to the call of God.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Mantles and Robes

A What various attitudes were symbolized when Ahab and Elisha tore their robes?

B What did the sharing of Elijah's mantle with Elisha symbolize in terms of job description, responsibility, and the role of the Holy Spirit in a prophet's life?

II. Feel: The Calling

A The responsibility of leadership should not be taken lightly. How did Elisha demonstrate that he understood the high calling that the transfer of Elijah's mantle symbolized?

B What emotions did Ahab demonstrate by tearing his robe? What did those feelings reveal about his character?

III. Do: Responding to the Call

A In what ways has God called us to service and leadership?

B What has He called us to do?

C How are we responding to His call?

D What should we ask for in order to carry out His call?

► **Summary:** Tearing one's robe in biblical times usually meant deep sorrow and grief. But in Elisha's case, it seemed to symbolize not only deep emotion but also a major change in his life as he took on a role of serious responsibility in response to a call to work with God.

The Change of Garments

After the magnificent demonstration of God’s power at Mount Carmel, Elijah complained that he was the only one left who loved the Lord. The Lord, it seems, ignored Elijah’s whining, but when he finished his speech, the Lord then gave him instructions: he was to anoint two kings and Elisha.

Following the Lord’s directions to find a successor, Elijah went to the farm of Shaphat, Elisha’s father, and found Elisha plowing with oxen. Maybe Elijah waved to Elisha to get his attention, and Elisha stopped his work and waited to hear Elijah’s message.

Read 1 Kings 19:19. How was the call of Elisha demonstrated there in the field?

We aren’t given the exact words of Elijah or Elisha’s response to the call of Elijah, but we do know that he responded positively. Elijah now cast his mantle, a symbol of his responsibilities as a servant of God, on Elisha’s shoulders (*see Num. 20:28*). The symbolism is pretty obvious. Elisha was now given a sacred calling.

In other incidents of the Bible, a mantle (or cloak or some similar garment) was not always used as an indication of God’s invitation to serve Him. How is the idea of a mantle used in these verses: Job 1:20; Psalm 109:29; Jude 22, 23; 2 Samuel 10:3, 4; Ezekiel 16:15, 16?

Elijah’s mantle here meant devotion, commitment, and dedication. “As Elijah, divinely directed in seeking a successor, passed the field in which Elisha was plowing, he cast upon the young man’s shoulders the mantle of consecration. During the famine the family of Shaphat had become familiar with the work and mission of Elijah, and now the Spirit of God impressed Elisha’s heart as to the meaning of the prophet’s act. To him it was the signal that God had called him to be the successor of Elijah.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 219, 220.

Think about how a single object can have both good and bad connotations, depending on how it is used. What are you doing with the things in your own life? What kind of meanings are you giving them by your actions? What have they come to symbolize to you, and why?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: *Elijah’s prophetic gift and calling was symbolized by the mantle he wore, which was mentioned many times in the accounts given of his life in the Bible. The mantle can be seen to symbolize both God’s calling of His people to do His work and the protection and covering He will provide us as we do it.*

Just for Teachers: *Emphasize the example set by Elijah as someone who accepted God’s will for his life and undertook to represent God to the world to the best of his ability.*

Why do people wear what they wear? As seen in the story of Adam and Eve, people in a fallen state feel the need to be covered just so they won’t be naked. The garments worn by our first parents—whatever else may be said about them—were decidedly utilitarian. But we’ve come a long way since then.

In every society, different modes of clothing and ornamentation have evolved to indicate social status, gender, age, occupation, conformity to society’s norms, rebellion against those same norms, lifestyle, preferred form of entertainment or recreation, and so on. The one thing they all have in common is that they are statements about oneself: fashion statements. We make them even when we think we’re just throwing something on.

An ancient form of clothing was known as a mantle. A mantle was basically a coat or a cape, and the statement it made was that the one wearing it was either a person of temporal authority, such as a royal personage or a military leader, or someone of religious importance, such as a priest or prophet. Elijah wore a mantle to indicate the fact that he represented the highest authority. Most of us today don’t wear mantles unless we spend a lot of time at Renaissance fairs or historical re-enactments, but God still calls us to take up His spiritual mantle and represent Him to the world.

Discuss With the Class: Few of us (we’re assuming) are prophets in the way Elijah and others of his time and place were. How can we better represent God’s cause to the world? What can help us to be more attentive to the chances God gives us to serve under His authority?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: *Unlike many other prophets in the Old Testament, Elijah does not have a book wholly devoted to his writings and*

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The Wearing of Sackcloth

In the Elijah narratives, clothing comes into play with other characters, as well.

Ahab, the king of Israel, wished to purchase a vineyard that was next to the palace. It belonged to Naboth, a Jezreelite. When Naboth refused to sell it, Jezebel heard about it and she became incensed and cleverly laid a plot for Naboth's demise. After Naboth's death, Ahab took possession of the vineyard, not realizing that Elijah had been instructed to meet him there.

“ ‘You shall speak to him, saying, “Thus says the Lord: ‘Have you murdered and also taken possession?’ ” And you shall speak to him saying, “Thus says the Lord: ‘In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth, dogs shall lick your blood, even yours’ ” ’ ” (*1 Kings 21:19, NKJV*).

Elijah's mission to face Ahab on several serious issues should have produced a fair amount of stress, but he seemed strong and willing to follow the instructions from his Lord even though he knew his life could be in danger. Now he must tell Ahab what denunciations the Lord has pronounced on him besides the one about the dogs licking his blood.

Read 1 Kings 21:21–29. How are we to understand Ahab's response, especially in light of what those verses say about the kind of man he was?

When Ahab heard these words, he presented himself to the Lord in an exceedingly humble way (*1 Kings 21:27*), which included tearing his clothes, putting on sackcloth, and even refusing to eat. The rest of the chapter implies that his repentance and humility must have been genuine. The tearing of his robe, a common action in that time to represent horror and sorrow, revealed that he truly accepted the truth of what Elijah said to him. How deep, how long lasting, that repentance went, the text doesn't say; what it does say is that the rending of his robe revealed the sincerity of his heart at that time.

“Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death” (2 Cor. 7:10, NIV). Read the immediate context of that verse. What is Paul saying here, and how can we apply this warning to our own lives?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

teachings. Yet he is perhaps one of the most significant figures of the prophetic era. Note this, and perhaps prompt your class to discuss why Elijah might be so important.

Bible Commentary

I. “The Sound of Silence . . .” (*Review 1 Kings 19:5–19 with your class.*)

The phrase translated as “still small voice” (*vs. 12*) in most English Bibles actually is better translated in the paradoxical phrase “the sound of sheer silence.” It is interesting to note that the conversation Elijah has with the still, small Voice is, word for word, the same conversation he had with the Lord in the cave several verses earlier. God asks him, rhetorically, what he is doing there, and Elijah tells Him. We can assume that Elijah’s account is just as rhetorical in intent, because he would have known that God was more aware of the situation than he was.

What exactly was Elijah trying to say in 1 Kings 19:10? It is clear from the context that he was boldly reproaching God. The subtext is, “Look how You repay me for my good and faithful service!” Elijah—who has just fled in abject terror from Jezebel, a mere human monarch—rediscovers his courage when the time comes to tell God off. God could have answered in kind, or He simply could have vaporized Elijah. Instead, He ignores Elijah’s self-pitying rant and tells him to watch for His passing.

As one might expect, Elijah then witnesses some impressive natural phenomena. A mighty wind, but it’s just wind. An earthquake, a big one. And out of nowhere, a huge wall of fire. But then Elijah meets the One who commands wind, earthquakes, and fire. He has a voice. And the Voice is a lot like . . . *silence*? God repeats His question and Elijah repeats his complaint, but it is likely that it sounds different, more humble; we do know that he hides his face in his mantle. Elijah knows that he is speaking to the Power that quietly commands nature and nations.

Consider This: Have you ever been angry at God or mystified by His seeming indifference? How can we know that God continues to care for us and watch over us even when to believe so goes against all the visible evidence?

II. Wear This, Not That (*Review 2 Kings 2:12 with your class.*)

Tearing of clothes in the Old Testament was, as we have learned, a sign of

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The Taking of Elijah

Whatever one can say about Elijah, he certainly had an interesting and dramatic time of it (although, no doubt, he's having more fun now). Second Kings 1 tells a fascinating story which leads into an even more fascinating one in the next chapter. If it could be said that anyone, to use the cliché, went out in a blaze of glory, it was Elijah.

Read 2 Kings 2:1–18 and answer the following questions:

1. What reasons might Elisha have had for refusing to separate from Elijah, despite the master's three requests that he do just that?

2. Why did Elisha tear his clothes here? Was it for mourning or something else? If so, what?

No doubt Elisha's response was one of extreme excitement and gratefulness. Yes, he *did* see the chariot and the horses. Yes, he *would have* a double portion of Elijah's power. Although, generally, the tearing of clothes meant mourning, this time Elisha may have been so overwhelmed that he tore his clothes in gratitude. He had in his hands Elijah's cloak. His tearing of his clothes also could have been symbolic of his getting rid of his own clothes and putting on Elijah's.

When Elijah first put his mantle on farmer Elisha, both men knew that this act symbolized a calling to work for God (though Elisha must have given it back to Elijah at some point). Elisha now had this special garment in his own possession, signifying that he must carry on the responsibilities of leadership as Elijah had done.

Look, too, at Elisha's request of his mentor. (Of what request does this remind you?) Elisha's words reveal something of his character, showing that he was a successor worthy of wearing the mantle of the great prophet who was about "to be taken" from this world.

What broader picture of existence does this story present to us? That is, how often do we tend to hold a narrow, materialistic view of the world, forgetting the ever-present reality of the supernatural realm, which also exists in this world and which interacts with us?

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grief. It could be grief at events such as the death of a loved one, or it could be—as was the case with Ahab in 1 Kings 21:27—grief and repentance for one’s own actions that one now regrets and knows to be wrong. This gesture undoubtedly had more significance when clothing was all laboriously hand-made, and no one except kings and nobles had closets full of clothes.

When we make a decision to serve God, or to, in a sense, take on God’s mantle, the decision is probably attended by grief at the things we have done before, possibly in ignorance. Even if we do not have a particularly evil past, we may still want to make a clean break with habits and patterns that marked our separation from—or ignorance of—God. Some of these things may seem extreme to those who know us. Perhaps we purge our CD collections or our clothes closets, or we find new forms of recreation and enjoyment. Or we may make decisions as we grow in our spiritual lives, disposing of things that weren’t necessarily bad in themselves but that hindered us as individuals in some way. Maybe we recognize that God has specific plans for us that require that we drop what we’re doing and start life over. This brings us to Elisha.

Elisha surely was terrified and dismayed by the thought of Elijah moving on, just as we might be when embarking on radical new phases of our lives. But at the same time, he wanted what Elijah was leaving with him, and he was prepared to serve God in this new way. It is interesting that the text says that he tore his old garment in two pieces, meaning that he could not put it back on, even if he so desired. He had no choice but to take the new garment—and role—that was offered to him.

Consider This: Why is it necessary to do anything and everything God asks in order to serve Him better and grow spiritually?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: *Elijah was one of the more colorful, and even outlandish, figures in the Old Testament; and, yet, people of many different backgrounds and traditions continue to identify with him and his disciple Elisha. Emphasize to your class how Elijah’s struggles and triumphs in the life he dedicated to God mirror and provide an example for our own.*

Thought Question:

What is the significance of God’s voice being still and small, or, literally,

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The Cloak

“He took up also the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and went back, and stood by the bank of Jordan; and he took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and smote the waters, and said, Where is the Lord God of Elijah? and when he also had smitten the waters, they parted hither and thither: and Elisha went over” (2 Kings 2:13, 14). What story does this make us think of? What important symbolism is seen there?

Read 2 Kings 2:15–18. Try to put yourself in the place of these prophets from Jericho. Why might they have reacted as they did, trying to find Elijah, even though they knew that he had been taken?

It is obvious from earlier texts that the prophets knew Elijah was going to be taken. The text doesn't say if they themselves saw the event. In one sense, it doesn't really matter because they knew that the “Spirit of the Lord” had taken him. To where, though, was another matter. For some reason they believed that Elijah still could be found “on some mountain or in some valley” (*vs. 16, NIV*). Perhaps not prepared for the idea of someone being whisked off to heaven like that, they assumed the Lord did something else with him. And although they had the words of Elisha telling them not to bother trying to find him, they insisted on it anyway. Perhaps only then, after not finding him, did they realize what happened. Yet, even then, there was room for doubt. Maybe the Lord set him down on some mountain or valley they hadn't checked?

In the end, no matter the experiences or miracles we have seen, we still need to exercise faith, or else, sooner or later, doubt will creep in and seriously challenge our Christian experience.

Think about some powerful experience you had with the Lord. No question, at the time and right after, your faith was strong. But what happened as the experience itself started receding into the stream of time? Thus, why is it important that you, on a daily basis, do things that can help keep your faith strong?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

“the sound of silence”? What does this tell us about God? Does God always communicate in a still, small voice? If not, why might He choose to do so on occasion?

Application Question:

Like all of us, Elijah had many different facets to his character. There was the Elijah who handily and confidently defeated the priests of Baal, and there was the Elijah who fled in abject terror from Jezebel’s secret police. Discuss a time when you felt like Elijah. When have you felt most confident in God’s leading? What can help you to remember these times when the way to God seems less clear?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: *As one of the most honored and remembered prophets of the Old Testament, Elijah was someone who listened and spoke to God with an intimacy almost equal to that of the early patriarchs. Ultimately, he became one of only two human beings we know of in the Bible who escaped death and was taken to heaven before the general resurrection at the Second Coming. The following activities will emphasize the lessons we can learn from Elijah’s life and career.*

Elijah heard the voice of God in silence or stillness. One suspects it was as much a surprise to him as to anyone. How long has it been since you’ve heard the sound of silence? Ask your class for one minute or more of silence, or at least not talking. You say nothing; they say nothing. Is it uncomfortable? Did you notice anything? **Please note:** We are not suggesting that you should meditate or listen for disembodied voices. The idea is to free yourself of customary distractions for a short segment of time and adopt an approach of listening rather than talking. In the coming week, ask class members to adopt an attitude of stillness or silence before beginning to talk to God in prayer. Have class members share the impact that silence or stillness has on their prayer life.

Or:

Elijah’s mantle, at some level, was just a coat. Ask your class to cite other examples of articles of clothing that became emblematic of a given idea, lifestyle, attitude, and so on, because of the person or people who wore them. Feel free to look at the worlds of politics, entertainment, and so on.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Seth and Enoch,” p. 88, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; “From Jezreel to Horeb,” “What Doest Thou Here?” and “In the Spirit and Power of Elias,” pp. 155–189, in *Prophets and Kings*.

“Elijah, who had been translated to heaven without seeing death, represented those who will be living upon the earth at Christ’s second coming, and who will be ‘changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump;’ when ‘this mortal must put on immortality;’ and ‘this corruptible must put on incorruption.’ 1 Cor. 15:51–53. Jesus was clothed with the light of heaven, as He will appear when He shall come ‘the second time without sin unto salvation.’ For He will come ‘in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.’ Heb. 9:28; Mark 8:38.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 422.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What practical things can we do to help us hear “the still small voice”? What things do we do that make that difficult, if not impossible? How does willful sin, in a big way, make us “hard of hearing,” so to speak?
- ❷ When you experience despair and discouragement that are almost more than you can bear, how do you know, as Elijah did, that the Lord is near and watching over you?
- ❸ The mantle of Elijah symbolized the succession of his ministry to Elisha, which brings up the question of succession in the church today. How does the process work, and how can we be sure that the right people are, to use an Elisha cliché, “handed the mantle”? Or can we be sure?
- ❹ “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death” (2 Cor. 7:10, NIV). In class, talk about what this text means and what we must learn from it ourselves about what true repentance is, as opposed to a repentance that, itself, needs to be repented of?
- ❺ In this quarter’s lesson on clothing and garments, we are dealing with a lot of symbols. What are symbols, how are they interpreted, what meanings do we give to symbols, and what do those meanings tell us about ourselves?