

OT LESSON 29

“HE TOOK UP . . . THE MANTLE OF ELIJAH”

By Ted Gibbons

INTRODUCTION: As I have read and taught these chapters in the books of Kings, I have found what I think are some worthwhile insights on following prophets. These principles will form the outline for this Old Testament Lesson. Once again I offer this disclaimer. This lesson is not meant to replace the one in the Old Testament Gospel Doctrine Manual. Its purpose is to give some additional insights into the lesson and to illustrate with Old Testament examples some great principles taught here. I call these

PRINCIPLES FOR FOLLOWING PROPHETS

This all started at Mt. Sinai where Elijah fled to get away from a death sentence pronounced by Jezebel, the queen of Israel (2K19:1-3). The Lord gave Elijah some great counsel about true conversion and told him to go back to Israel.

And the LORD said unto him, Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus: and when thou comest, anoint Hazael to be king over Syria: And Jehu the son of Nimshi shalt thou anoint to be king over Israel: and *Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room* (1K 19:15,16, emphasis added).

PFFP #1: GOD CHOOSES HIS PROPHETS

In thy room means “in thy place.” Not even the present prophet picks a successor. The Lord makes those choices now as he did in ancient Israel.

“In our own dispensation when the Lord took the Prophet Joseph Smith from this life, the mantle of leadership fell upon Brigham Young. Documents of Church history are replete with examples of the divine confirmation of this fact. And after Brigham Young

passed away, John Taylor wore the mantle—and so on in turn with each president. The established orderly pattern of succession dictates that the Lord has conferred the keys of presidency upon each apostle who is set apart as a member of the Council of the Twelve; and that when a quorum of First Presidency is dissolved (which occurs at the moment of the death of a president of the Church), the entire leadership of the Church and kingdom devolves upon the Council of the Twelve—their senior member presiding. In a general sense, every member of the Council of the Twelve has received the mantle already—the mantle of authority, light, revelation, direction, and the keys of presidency. However, in a specific sense the man who has seniority in that council receives the mantle at the death of the president of the Church, and he alone becomes the mouthpiece for the entire Church. He succeeds the prophet before him. Therefore, at the moment when President Harold B. Lee passed away, President Spencer W. Kimball stepped forth to preside over the Council of the Twelve and, therefore, over the entire Church.” (Reed C. Durham Jr., “Q&A: Questions and Answers,” *New Era*, Sept. 1975, 15–16)

PFFP #2: CALLS FROM THE PROPHET (AND OTHER CALLS) MAY NOT BE CONVENIENT

So he departed thence, and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth: and Elijah passed by him, and cast his mantle upon him. And he left the oxen, and ran after Elijah, and said, Let me, I pray thee, kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow thee (1K19:19,20)

I was sitting at my computer on Sunday morning, August 5th at 8:34 when the phone rang. Dennis Pratt, the stake executive secretary, said, “Why aren’t you in the Stake President’s office?” The obvious answer is the one I gave. I did not know I was supposed to be. Bro. Pratt had called the evening before and left a message on my answering machine, but no one had listened to it. He said the Stake Presidency was waiting for me and my wife at that moment. Withing fifteen minutes of that phone message, I had been called to be a bishop.

Someone the other day said he thought such callings *always* came with a premonition. Not mine. I had no clue until the words were spoken. And even when premonitions come, they do not usually come with much advance notice. *“In four months you will be called to be a Stake President. Get ready.”* I have a friend you learned from the Spirit that he would be called to be the bishop of his ward when the changes were made the following week. He took off for California and stayed for a month. The Stake President waited. The week after his return he was called.

Elisha was plowing with 12 yoke of oxen. He clearly comes from a wealthy family. It is seed time. He has work to do, crops to plant, a family to support. If he can't do that, at least he wants to say goodbye. Elijah said to him, “Go back again: for what have I done to thee?”

This is reminiscent of the teaching of the Savior:

“And it came to pass, that, as they went in the way, a certain man said unto him, Lord, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest. And Jesus said unto him, Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head. And he said unto another, Follow me. But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. Jesus said unto him, Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God. And another also said, Lord, I will follow thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house. And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:57-62).

Elijah's response to Elisha's concerns seems to mean, *“You are not under any compulsion. A call has been issued. Decide what you will do about it.”* Which brings us to the next fundamental.

PFFP#3: I WILL MAKE ANY SACRIFICE TO FOLLOW A PROPHET

So Elisha went back, but not to bid farewell to his parents.

And he returned back from him, and took a yoke of oxen, and slew them, and boiled their flesh with the instruments of the oxen,

and gave unto the people, and they did eat. Then he arose, and went after Elijah, and ministered unto him (1K19:21).

Elisha's break with the past was complete. His slaughtering of the oxen (not all 24 animals) and his destruction of the farming implements necessary to carry on with his past vocation are a clear indication that he will not be looking backward but forward. He built the fire with the plowing equipment, killed the animals, and went after Elijah to become his attendant and to wait on the will of the Lord.

Does this story make you think of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19 who also had lots of stuff? The Savior told him to sell it all and give the money away and follow him.

Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions.

Our prophet has asked many sisters to sacrifice extra earrings; young men have been encouraged to forgo tattooing or other body piercing. Young men have been asked by prophets to sacrifice a couple of years, but Ammon and his companions were asked to sacrifice 14 years. No sacrifice is too great.

The next principle requires a bit of introduction. Ahab, the apostate king of Israel, invited Jehosaphat, King of Judah, to join him in an attack on Syria in an attempt to regain territory lost in a previous war. Jehosaphat was willing but wanted to know that the Lord thought about it. "And Jehosaphat said unto the king of Israel, Enquire, I pray thee, at the word of the LORD to day" (1K22:5)

Ahab called in four hundred prophets, false prophets of course, and they all assured him of resounding victory: "Go up; for the Lord shall deliver it into the hand of the king." (1K22:6)

Jehosaphat was not impressed. "Is there not here a prophet of the LORD besides, that we might enquire of him?" (1K22:6)

Ahab knew of one; a prophet named Micaiah.

“There is yet one man, Micaiah the son of Imlah, by whom we may enquire of the LORD: but *I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil*” (1K22:8, emphasis added).

This statement of King Ahab contains the next fundamental.

PFFP #4: IF I DON'T LIKE IT, I PROBABLY NEED TO HEAR IT

Our spiritual sensitivity ought to alert us when we hear things from the pulpit of the Conference Center that we do not like. Our discomfort—our hatred—is almost certainly a warning to us that we need to repent. We are not bothered by explanations of doctrines we believe or by directions to activities that we are already performing. People who are bitter about the constant warnings regarding R-rated movies, for example, are those people who like to go see R-rated movies.

PFFP 5: I WILL FOLLOW YOU ANYWHERE

I am pretty sure that this lesson is not one the writer of Kings meant to teach, but it is in the text and worth an observation or two.

Elijah knew he was about to be translated, and tried to get away from Elisha for the ceremony. But Elisha refused to leave him. Three times, Elijah explained that he had been called by the Lord to a certain place, and asked Elisha to tarry. And three times Elisha said, “I will not leave thee” (2K2:2,4,6) and traveled by his side.

Finally they came to Jordan.

“And Elijah took his mantle, and wrapped it together, and smote the waters, and they were divided hither and thither, so that they two went over on dry ground . . . And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven” (2K2:8,11)

PFFP#6: SUSTAIN THE PROPHET WITH YOUR ACTIONS, NOT JUST WITH YOUR HAND

While all of this was happening, there were spectators about.

And fifty men of the sons of the prophets went, and stood to view afar off: and they two stood by Jordan. (2K2:7)

They saw the river divided and Elijah translated, and they saw Elisha then as he picked up the mantle that had been dropped by Elijah, smote the waters of Jordan, and crossed back over on dry ground. And they knew something. God had shown Israel that Joshua was the successor to Moses by the division of the Jordan, and how the Lord had identified the successor to Elijah in the same way.

“And when the sons of the prophets which were to view at Jericho saw him, they said, The spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha. And they came to meet him, and bowed themselves to the ground before him” (2K2:15)

Their bowing is much the same as our raising of hands. They thereby acknowledged that he was the prophet of Israel, the divinely appointed replacement to Elijah, But they had a concern.

And they said unto him, Behold now, there be with thy servants fifty strong men; let them go, we pray thee, and seek thy master: lest peradventure the Spirit of the LORD hath taken him up, and cast him upon some mountain, or into some valley. And he said, Ye shall not send. And when they urged him till he was ashamed, he said, Send. They sent therefore fifty men; and they sought three days, but found him not. And when they came again to him, (for he tarried at Jericho,) he said unto them, Did I not say unto you, Go not? (2K2:16-18)

Can you see the lesson here? If they were willing to admit that he was the prophet, and if they were willing to bow before him, then they should have been willing to believe his words and leave Elijah in the care of the Lord.

PFFP #7: STAND AS WITNESS OF THE PROPHET

The next story comes from 2K5, and the story of Naaman the leper. A little maid served the wife of Naaman in the house of Naaman. She was an Israelite slave, captured in a military action and dragged away from home and family and church and country and friends to serve the woman who was married to the commander of the forces that had captured her. Under such circumstances, no one would have blamed her for forgetting all about Elisha and his prophetic and powerful calling.

But when she learned that her master had leprosy, she stood as a witness:

“And she said unto her mistress, Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! for he would recover him of his leprosy” (2K5:3)

Her testimony in such adverse circumstances thrills me. It also reminds me of my duty to

“stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death, that ye may be redeemed of God, and be numbered with those of the first resurrection, that ye may have eternal life—“(Mosiah 18:9).

I remember vividly a time when I did not stand.

In 1968 I enrolled in a sociology class at Utah State University. The class was a required undergraduate credit and filled to the last seat in the last row. The experience was only saved from unbearable dreariness by a delightful instructor who taught students in preference to lessons, and who was flexible enough to explore almost anything we cared to mention.

One afternoon talk turned to Mormon History, and a question from a non-member about an event someone had mentioned called the Mountain Meadows Massacre. I sighed and slumped in my chair, hoping the subject would either change quickly or be dealt with fairly. I had been studying this very event in a Church History class at Institute, and had made it my business to read some of the literature

available. I knew the tried and tired charges that had been flung so often at the church over the years. I hoped not to hear them again.

The event at Mountain Meadow was an indefensible atrocity, but it was the work of individuals and local leaders. In spite of the endless exertion of our enemies, no single shred of reliable evidence has ever linked the massacre to the authorities of the church. But class members brought up the old accusations and tried once again to make the connection. The discussion simmered and then boiled.

The instructor moderated brilliantly, his questions and insights moving class members to emotion, frustration, anger. Many raised their hands and their voices to speak, to question, and to condemn. Time passed, and not one single student had spoken one single word in defense of the church.

The instructor himself, after announcing himself as a member of the church and Gospel Doctrine teacher in his ward, declared his certain knowledge that the outrage had been ordered by Brigham Young himself. I knew he was wrong. I knew the facts. I was armed with ammunition enough to make a stand and a defense, and I had just returned from two years in South America doing that very thing. But I sat, still and silent, unwilling to risk the ridicule.

Suddenly, she was standing, a lovely, young girl with long brown hair. Her hands gripped the back of the chair before her; her knuckles were white with the strain. Her voice shook and there were tears, but she was more than a sociology student for a moment. She was, like Jeremiah of old, “a defenced city, and an iron pillar, and brasen walls.” (Jeremiah 1:18) She said, “Dr. Forsburg, I have been a member of the church for less than a year, and I have never heard of the Mountain Meadows Massacre. I don’t know what you are talking about. But I know you are wrong!” That was all. She finished and she sat, surrounded by sudden and absolute silence.

I have forgotten all of Dr. Forsburg’s lessons, but I will never forget hers. She was a witness, standing in defense of the Lord and his prophet, because the one who should have been standing would not.

I am impressed that Naaman trusted this girl sufficiently to journey to the land of his enemies to seek a blessing from the prophet. International protocol took him first to the King of Israel with a letter from his king about the anticipated miracle. The Israelite King, who was a pauper in faith compared to the maid in Syria, nearly had a heart attack when he read the letter asking him to heal Naaman.

“And it came to pass, when the king of Israel had read the letter, that he rent his clothes, and said, Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man doth send unto me to recover a man of his leprosy? wherefore consider, I pray you, and see how he seeketh a quarrel against me” (2K5:7)

Elisha heard what had happened and sent for the Syrian General, who came expectantly to the door of the man of God to receive a miracle and a blessing from him.

PFFP #8: WHETHER BY THE VOICE OF THE PROPHET OR THE VOICE OF HIS SERVANT, IT IS THE SAME

And Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean. (2K5:10)

There were at least a couple of reasons why this directive did not please Naaman. One of them was the messenger.

Naaman was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper (2K5:11).

Who are you willing to take direction from? The Bishop? The Quorum President? The Stake President? I was set apart from my mission by a General Authority. My sons were all set apart by their Stake Presidents. Does it matter? Not if your great concern is the leprosy. If the message is the prophet's message, does it matter at all who delivers it?

PFFP #9: I WILL DO THE LITTLE THINGS AS WELL AS THE BIG THINGS

Naaman had another concern about the directions received from Elisha through Gehazi. Why did it have to be the Jordan River?

“Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? may I not wash in them, and be clean? So he turned and went away in a rage” (2K5:12)

In response to this blast, Naaman’s servants (more than one) counseled him.

“And his servants came near, and spake unto him, and said, My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean? (2K5:13)

Surely if Naaman had been told to travel to Mt. Hermon, climb to the very top, dig an eight-foot hole and look for a blue stone to rub on the leprous spots, he would have done it. But bathing? Seven times? In a muddy river?

If a letter came from the office of the First Presidency asking all High Priests to settle their affairs and raise as much capital as possible in preparation for an August move to Jackson County, most of us would become instantly involved in the business of getting ready. But what if one of the Prophets said something like this?

“Let us be good people. Let us be friendly people. Let us be neighborly people. Let us be what members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day saints ought to be” (Pres. Gordon B. Hinckley, Ensign, May 2001, p. 6)

For the prophets to have real power in our lives, we must hearken to everything they say; not just the most exciting and unusual things they say.

PFFP #10: I WILL DO WHAT YOU TELL ME TO DO UNTIL I HAVE DONE IT ALL

“Then went he down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean” (2K5:14).

What would have happened if Naaman had quit after only six dips in the river? What if Nephi had given up and gone back to the valley after only two attempts to get the plates. What if Peter had refused to let down his nets one more time (see Luke 5:4-11)? What does Alma say will happen if we fail to nourish the tree even after it has sprouted? (Alma 32:38)

I can imagine someone saying, “I tried reading the scriptures. I read them almost every day for a week and a half. Nothing happened, so I quit.” Or this: “I paid my tithing last week, and I’ll tell you what I got. I got ten percent less enjoyment out of my income. Where are all these promised blessings?”

PFFP #11: I WILL REMEMBER THAT THE PROPHET CAN SEE THINGS I CANNOT SEE

This fundamental and the one that follow are related, but there is a significant difference. The context was a continuing warfare between Israel and Syria. But each time the King of Syria made an incursion, the King of Israel knew in advance and was able to take defensive measures or else avoid the conflict altogether. The Syrian Monarch was mad! He called a staff meeting:

“Therefore the heart of the king of Syria was sore troubled for this thing; and he called his servants, and said unto them, Will ye not shew me which of us is for the king of Israel?” (2K6:11)

He suspected a spy, but one of his servants knew better. My guess is that it was Naaman.

“And one of his servants said, None, my lord, O king: but Elisha, the prophet that is in Israel, telleth the king of Israel the words that thou speakest in thy bedchamber” (2K6:12)

King Ben-Hadad wanted Elisha, either to destroy him or to employ him, and he

servant saw the enemy, he ran to Elisha in a panic: “Alas, my master! how shall we do?” (2K6:15)

Here is the lesson.

“And he answered, Fear not: for they that be with us are more than
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eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was
full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha” (2K6:16,17).

We often refer to priesthood leaders, including the prophet, as watchmen on the tower. We need watchmen because we are often afflicted with the same deficiency of vision people suffered in the days of Enoch: “their eyes cannot see afar off . . .” (Moses 6:27). The awareness that prophets can see afar off gives a special emphasis to prophetic teachings about getting out of debt and supporting the Perpetual Education Fund and paying an honest tithe. Some things we can see, like the horses and chariots of fire, only with prophetic help.

And speaking of the usually invisible horses and chariots of fire, Jeffrey R. Holland said this:

“In the gospel of Jesus Christ you have help from both sides of the veil and you must never forget that. When disappointment and discouragement strike—and they will—you remember and never forget that if our eyes could be opened we would see horses and chariots of fire as far as the eye can see riding at reckless speed to come to our protection. They will always be there, these armies of heaven, in defense of Abraham’s seed” (Jeffrey R. Holland, “For Times of Trouble,” *New Era*, O

PFFP #12: IWILL BELIEVE THE PRO SAY SEEMS IMPO

Elisha smote the Syrians who had come to capture him with blindness and led them into the center of Israelite strength in Samaria. The king, finding them in his power, wanted to destroy them. “Shall I smite them?” he asked Elisha. Elisha

refused to give permission. Instead the King made a great feast for his enemies and sent them home (2K6:21-23).

But then (in the very next verse) the Syrians come again and besiege Samaria. Famine followed, as you can imagine, and people were so desperate for food that

an ass's head was sold for fourscore pieces of silver, and the fourth part of a cab of dove's dung for five pieces of silver” (2K6:25)

These folks were hungry enough to pay about two pounds of silver for a donkey head. And donkeys were unclean under the Law of Moses. They also were willing to pay 5 pieces of silver (five shekels, or about two ounces) for a half pint of dove poop.

But things got worse than that (see 2K6:26-29), and the king blamed Elisha for this scourge of famine, probably because Elisha had refused the king permission to destroy this very army when it was in his power to do so. After he had heard the exchange in the verses above, the king cried:

God do so and more also to me, if the head of Elisha the son of Shaphat shall stand on him this day. (2K6:31)

When the king's servant came for Elisha, Elisha gave him a message.

“
about this time shall a measure of fine flour be sold for a shekel, and two measures of barley for a shekel, in the gate of Samaria” (2K7:1)

Now you must remember that Elisha is talking to a man who may have been eating donkey heads garnished with dove poop. The man was understandably skeptical.

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thing be? And he [Elijah] said, Behold, thou shalt see it with thine eyes, but shalt not eat thereof. (2K7:2)

The siege showed no signs of ending. And even if it did, food would have to be shipped in. This is reminiscent of another prophecy from Utah's history. The year was 1848.

The year 1848 in Utah--the year following the advent of the pioneers into Salt Lake Valley--was a very trying one. The people were threatened with famine, and it was only by the exercise of the most rigid economy and putting the people on scant rations that they could hope to make the meager supplies of provisions last until the next harvest. The settlers were but half clad as well as half fed, and such clothing as they had was in tatters, and in many cases consisted of the skins of wild animals. It was in the midst of these conditions that Heber C. Kimball in a congregation of the saints made the following remarkable prophecy:

"It will be but a little while, brethren, before you shall have food and raiment in abundance, and shall buy it cheaper than it can be bought in the cities of the United States."

"I do not believe a word of it," said Elder Charles C. Rich, a member of the Council of the Apostles; and perhaps nine-tenths of those who had heard the astounding declaration were of the same opinion. Even the prophet Heber himself was heard to say "that he was afraid he had missed it this time." His biographer, however, relates the fulfillment of the prophecy in the following passage:

The occasion for the fulfillment of this remarkable prediction was the unexpected advent of the gold-hunters, on their way to California. The discovery of gold in that land had set on fire, as it were, the civilized world, and hundreds of richly laden trains now began pouring across the continent on their way to the new Eldorado. Salt Lake Valley became the resting-place, or "halfway house" of the nation, and before the Saints had had time to recover from their surprise at Heber's temerity in making such a prophecy, the still more wonderful fulfillment was brought to their very doors. The gold-hunters were actuated by but one desire: to reach the Pacific Coast; the thirst for mammon having absorbed, for the time, all other sentiments and desires. Impatient at their slow progress, in order to

lighten their loads, they threw away or "sold for a song" the valuable merchandise with which they had stored their wagons to cross the plains. Their choice, blooded, though now jaded stock, they eagerly exchanged for the fresh mules and horses of the pioneers, and battered off, at almost any sacrifice, dry goods, groceries, provisions, tools, clothing, etc., for the most primitive outfits, with barely enough provisions to enable them to reach their journey's end. Thus, as the Prophet Heber had predicted, "States goods" were actually sold in the streets of Great Salt Lake City cheaper than they could have been purchased in the City of New York. (B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, Vol.3, p.243, 244)

The scriptures contain a promise, often repeated to prophets, that may help understand this matter. These two examples were from promises made to Samuel and Enoch.

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his words fall to the ground” (1 Sam 3:19).

“Behold my Spirit is upon you, wherefore all thy words will I justify”
(Moses 6:34)

CO Surely in the list of the 12 principles above are one or two things that we ought to work on individually. I had a friend how had a dream of a heavenly council in which names were being considered for an important service in part of the Lord’s kingdom. Someone said, “Let’s call _____ [and here he mentioned the name of the dreaming friend]. He listens to the Spirit and the prophets.”

‘Yes, he listens,’ another replied, “but he doesn’t do anything about it.”

May that never be true of us. Let us be hearers and doers (see James 1:22).

Karl G. Maeser was taking a group of missionaries across the Alps. As they reached a summit, he stopped. Gesturing back down the trail to some poles set in the snow to mark the way across the glacier, he said, “Brethren, there stands the Priesthood. They are just common

sticks like the rest of us ... but the position they hold makes them what they are to us. If we step aside from the path they mark, we are lost." (Boyd K. Packer, "The Spirit Beareth Record," Ensign, June 1971, 88)

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