

Unwrapped by Freedom, Empowered by Mantle

6/29/2025

Rev. Daein Park

As many of you know, I was ordained at the last Annual Conference. When I first passed the final exam to become a full member, I felt a profound sense of freedom—freedom from interviews, psychological evaluations, written doctrinal exams, and theological reflection papers. I thought, “Finally, no more tests!” But as the conference drew near, that feeling of freedom quickly gave way to a long list of responsibilities: send in a photo and biography, record a video introduction, confirm which sponsoring clergy would stand with me, meet with the bishop, and rehearse for the ordination service.

And then came an unexpected moment. I was to be the first in line to receive the mantle from the retiring pastors—as a symbolic representative of those entering ordained ministry. At first, it felt like just another task in the flurry of preparations. But when Rev. Balderas placed his hands gently on my shoulders, looked into my eyes, and began to pray with tears and trembling, and when he took off his mantle and wrapped it around me, something sacred happened. It wasn’t a performance. It was a passing on of calling, love, burden, and blessing.

That moment—unexpected and unplanned—has remained with me as I read today’s Scripture. It brings to life the journey of Elijah and Elisha in 2 Kings and the Spirit-filled freedom Paul writes about in Galatians. In that sacred gesture, I felt both *unwrapped*—freed from fear and isolation—and *empowered*—clothed with purpose and presence.

In 2 Kings 2, we find a story thick with farewell, fear, and fire. Elijah, the great prophet of Israel, is preparing to leave this earth, and his apprentice Elisha won’t let him go. Three times Elijah says, “*Stay here,*” and three times Elisha responds, “*As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.*”

This isn’t just loyalty. It’s longing. Elisha longs not only to be with Elijah but to receive the spirit that guided him—the mantle, yes, but more than that, the mission.

When Elijah is finally taken up in the whirlwind, Elisha cries out, tears his own clothes, and picks up Elijah's mantle. The symbol of prophetic authority now rests on new shoulders. But Elisha doesn't just put it on and pose. He steps forward. He approaches the Jordan River and cries out, *Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?*" (v. 14). Then he strikes the water, and the waters part.

Elisha's ministry begins not with triumph but with a question. The mantle may be on his shoulders, but he knows that true power comes not from fabric but from the living presence of God.

Friends, whether you are a pastor, a parent, a teacher, a caregiver, or simply someone trying to live faithfully—there comes a moment when the mantle is passed to you. Not necessarily a literal one, but a spiritual one. A time when someone who has walked with you steps aside, and you're left with their blessing, their example, and your trembling hands. And in that moment, like Elisha, we cry out, *"Where is God?"*

But here's the truth: God is already there. The Spirit does not stay with the mentor only. The Spirit moves forward with the student. The calling moves with the next step.

It is easy to forget that Elijah himself had once stood broken and exhausted under a broom tree. After his victory on Mount Carmel, he was pursued by Jezebel and fled into the wilderness, wishing to die. It was in that moment of vulnerability that God gently restored him—not with fire or earthquake, but with a still small voice. And what did God do then? God gave him a new mission: to anoint kings and to pass the prophetic calling to Elisha. Elijah may have wanted to retire or retreat, but God wasn't done with him yet. Sometimes, when we think our time is over, God is preparing us to pass on something greater.

Now, let's take a turn to Galatians. Paul writes, *"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."* At first glance, this seems like a celebration speech after passing the exam. Freedom! Finally free from legalism, from old burdens, from the weight of performance!

But just a few verses later, Paul writes something that sounds paradoxical: “*You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.*”

We’re free... to become servants? Yes. But it’s a different kind of servanthood. Not slavery to systems, laws, or guilt—but a joyful surrender to love. Paul is redefining freedom—not as the absence of responsibility, but as the capacity to love without fear. Not freedom from others, but freedom *for* others.

The world often tells us freedom is about escape. Escape from rules. Escape from obligation. Escape from difficulty. But Paul tells us freedom in Christ is different. It is the Spirit-empowered ability to live in love, even when it costs us something. It is not running away from others, but walking alongside them. Not just “freedom to rest,” but “freedom to serve.”

That’s why this sermon is titled *Unwrapped by Freedom*. Christ frees us not just from sin but from the small cages we build for ourselves. From the need to perform. From the shame of our failures. From the fear that we are not enough. In Christ, we are unwrapped—and what we find underneath is someone capable of loving others through the Spirit.

I thought I was being unwrapped from a season of testing and waiting. But what I discovered is that true freedom is not an escape from expectations—it is a liberation into holy purpose.

Paul’s closing words today are these: “*Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.*” This isn’t about hating your body or suppressing all joy. “Flesh” here means the part of us that resists love, the part of us that wants to live on our own terms, isolated and defensive.

But when we live by the Spirit, something else happens. Our steps begin to echo with the rhythm of grace. We develop spiritual muscles for patience, kindness, generosity, and self-control. These aren’t burdens—they’re the fruit of freedom.

Elisha didn't receive the Spirit to build a monument to Elijah. He received it to continue the mission. And so do we. The Spirit gives us courage to pick up the mantle, not to keep it clean and folded in a drawer, but to wear it, to use it, to walk into the Jordan of our own time and strike the waters.

We don't always feel ready. We often feel too young, too old, too tired, or too ordinary. But the Spirit isn't impressed by résumés. The Spirit moves where there is willingness. And remember this: the fruit of the Spirit is not something we manufacture—it is what blooms when we are rooted in God. It is not a “to-do” list but a “look-what-God-did” list. It's not about trying harder but about staying close to the One who transforms.

And so, we are *empowered by the mantle*. Not because it's glamorous. But because it's Spirit-woven. It carries stories, struggles, hopes, and healing. It is not heavy with expectation but saturated with grace.

So, what about us? Maybe someone once laid their hands on your shoulders. Maybe it was a mentor, a Sunday School teacher, a parent, a grandparent, or a friend. Maybe they prayed for you, guided you, encouraged you, or quietly lived out a faith you admired.

Their mantle—visible or invisible—now rests in your life. What will you do with it? We are called to step into the river, friends. We are called to live as Spirit-led people in a world desperate for love. And we are not alone. The same Spirit who hovered over the waters of creation, the same Spirit who whispered through the prophets, the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead—that Spirit walks with you.

For Christ has unwrapped us from the past. And the Spirit now empowers us with a mantle of purpose. So today, let us receive again the call. Let us pick up the mantle that has been passed to us—from mentors, from saints, from Christ—and let us move forward, clothed not in fear but in faith.

And when we find ourselves standing at our own river's edge, unsure of what comes next, may we remember: The Spirit still parts the waters. And the journey continues. Amen.