

The Call and Commission of the Prophet Elisha

1 Kings 19:19-21

1 Kings 19:19-21 – *“So he departed from there, and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen before him, and he was with the twelfth. Then Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle on him. And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah, and said, “Please let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” And he said to him, “Go back again, for what have I done to you?” So Elisha turned back from him, and took a yoke of oxen and slaughtered them and boiled their flesh, using the oxen’s equipment, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and followed Elijah and served him.”*

Background Notes

In 1 Kings 19:15-18 the prophet Elijah was re-commissioned, and in verses 19-21 his successor, Elisha, was commissioned. Elijah had experienced a setback in faith because of his fear of Jezebel and his failure to trust the Lord completely, but he had been fully restored in his walk with the Lord, and re-commissioned as a servant of the Lord. As a re-commissioned prophet, one of his assignments was to anoint Elisha as the prophet who would take his place: *“Go back the way you came... and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet” (v15-16).*

In the meantime, there would be a transition period, when Elisha would serve and be trained under Elijah. Verse 21: *“he arose and followed Elijah and served him.”* This was the training and transition period.

Elisha came from Abel Meholah (v16). We don’t know the exact location of this town, but there’s a good possibility it was in the Jordan Valley, about 25 miles south of the Sea of Galilee. That would not be too far from Elijah’s home territory.

In obedience to the Lord’s command (which, by the way, is an indication of Elijah’s full restoration), Elijah retraced his footsteps. He went about 300 miles north from Mount Sinai. When he came to Abel Meholah, he found Elisha, who was plowing in the field with 12 teams of oxen.

As Elijah passed by, he threw his mantle around Elisha (v19). What was that all about? A mantle is a cloak, and Elijah threw his cloak over Elisha. If that were to happen to you today, you would wonder, “What is going on?!” But in that day it was a well-known gesture, if you had a position such as prophet. This gesture meant, “I want you to take my place. I want you to fill my shoes.” Elijah was indicating that he wanted to take Elisha under his wing, to train him. He was designating Elisha as his successor.

These verses indicate that Elisha came from a well-to-do family, because he was plowing with twelve teams of oxen. That would mean he had eleven servants with plowing teams ahead of him, and Elisha was driving the twelfth pair of

oxen. Today, his would be like having twelve tractors in a row in a large field, one behind another - an indication of a very prosperous and wealthy family.

Elisha was ready to follow the prophet Elijah, but he wanted to say goodbye to his folks before he left home. Then he hosted a farewell BBQ so he could share with his friends and his servants what the Lord is doing in his life. He slaughtered a couple of the oxen and built a fire with his plowing equipment. In other words, he burned his farming implements because he did not intend to return to the farm. He had been called to the ministry, and he was fully committed to it.

Doctrinal Points

1. The Lord calls busy people.

Notice - Elisha was not just sitting around doing nothing. He was quite busy, apparently directing a sizable farm operation. But when he was called, he responded immediately.

The Lord wants busy people in the work of the Lord, so He calls busy people. He knows that people who are busy before their call will be busy people after their call. The Lord does not call sluggards or lazy people. The Lord calls busy people.

Now if you're thinking that we're just talking about people who are called to be foreign missionaries or called to full-time Christian service - **no!** We're talking about **all believers!** God calls all of us to serve Him.

And God is looking for **workers - not shirkers!** Are you wondering why God doesn't call you to greater areas of Christian service? Is it possible that you tend to be lazy? Are you just going along for the ride on the church committee - while others do most of the work? If you want to be called to greater areas of Christian service, remember - God calls busy people!

2. There is a time to pass on the mantle.

"Passing on the mantle" means to pass on your responsibilities to someone you've trained to take your place - to fill your shoes. When Elijah was re-commissioned, the Lord told him to anoint Elisha. He was to pass on the prophet's mantle to Elisha.

The fact that Elijah was to pass on the mantle to Elisha didn't mean he was being shelved or replaced, and would no longer be useful for service to the Lord. No! **There is a time to pass on the mantle!** Elijah was getting older. A new generation was coming along. But God didn't want Elijah's role to cease or fade out. He wanted the ministry to continue from one generation to the next with a smooth transition.

During the transition, Elisha would gradually pick up Elijah's responsibilities, and in this case it worked beautifully. Elijah was not jealous. He wasn't reluctant to turn over the prophetic responsibilities. He trained Elisha, and Elisha learned well (as we'll see). So when Elijah was suddenly taken to Heaven (2 Kings 2), Elisha was there and ready.

Unfortunately the transition doesn't always go smoothly. Sometimes the older generation is reluctant to pass on the mantle. Sometimes the younger generation is reluctant to take on the mantle. Both generations need to realize that ***there is a time to pass on the mantle.***

As I look around this congregation today, I would guess that I'm older than most of you here. And it would be wrong, as a teacher of God's Word, if I took this attitude: "I've got the mantle. This teaching position is mine, and I'm going to hold onto it. I don't have to pass the mantle on. If I want to, I'll just wing a little devotional from 1 Kings here and there. I don't care about passing on the mantle."

If you in the next generation were to take this attitude: "I don't have to take that mantle. In fact I don't want to. There are other things I'd rather do. Dave Reid can continue to do the job. I don't have to take over the responsibility of disciplined study and teaching of the Word."

If either of us said this, we'd both be wrong. Before God, as a teacher of His Word, it's my responsibility to teach the content of 1 Kings - not just to give you a little fluffy devotional thought. And you in the next generation are responsible to take on the mantle and learn the content of 1 Kings - not just get a good feeling from a little sermonette. Why? Because you will wear the mantle fully in the future, and it will be your responsibility to pass on the content of 1 Kings. It's part of God's Word.

2 Timothy 2:2 says this: "*And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.*" Paul was the older generation, and Timothy was the new generation, the younger generation. The apostle Paul was saying: "This is the word of God, Timothy. What you've heard from me, you must pass on to others." Committing God's Word to the next generation of believers is the way we spread the word. That's the way it works. Pass on the mantle! Pass the baton to the next runner on the team! It's your responsibility to pass the Word on to other faithful people - believers who will get the content and be able to teach others also. There is a time to pass on the mantle!

Practical Application

Burn your bridges behind you!

"What? Burn your bridges behind you? I thought the Bible said we should never burn bridges behind us!" Well, the Bible doesn't say either of those things! Normally, that's right; you don't burn your bridges behind you. But when it comes to

being committed to what God calls you to do, in some cases you must to burn your bridges. There must be no turning back. You must be fully committed. Not 50% committed, but 100% committed. No turning back!

Where is that idea taught in these verses? Well, Elisha burned his plowing equipment! For Elisha, there was no turning back. Burning his farming equipment was a gesture that meant he was moving on – that he was fully committed.

Some of you are probably thinking, “Why didn’t he sell the plow and oxen, and use the money for the work of the Lord? Wouldn’t that have been better?” That would have been fine, but the important point was Elisha’s symbolic gesture. He indicated to all his friends and family that he was 100% committed to the call to serve the Lord in this new capacity. So he burned the plowing equipment. He certainly practiced the principle of burning his bridges behind him when it came to commitment. We too need to learn to burn the bridges behind us, in the sense of being fully committed to do what God calls us to do.

One more point. When we read that Elisha wanted to go back and say goodbye to his family, some of you may have thought of the would-be follower of the Lord Jesus in Luke 9:61-62, *“Another also said, ‘Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.’”* In essence, the Lord said to this would-be follower, “No. Don’t go back. Come right now and follow Me.”

But when Elisha said what appears to be the same thing, Elijah said, *“Go back again, for what have I done to you?”(v20)*. In other words, “Sure, you can go back and say goodbye to family and friends. But remember - this is God’s call, not mine! It’s your decision.” So Elisha went back to say goodbye, and had a farewell BBQ to tell his family and friends of his call to the ministry. And that was OK in this case.

What’s the difference? Is this a contradiction in Scripture? No, the difference between Elisha and the would-be follower in Luke 9 was **intent**. The intent of the Luke 9 follower was to delay. He wanted to put off responding to the call to a later time. It was a delaying tactic - an excuse. Elisha’s intent was to permanently sever ties, and also to be a witness to his family and friends. The Luke 9 follower was unwilling to burn the bridges behind him - but Elisha was more than willing to burn his bridges!

Are we willing to burn bridges - to sever ties - when it comes to discipleship? Are you holding on to something that’s keeping you from moving forward in your commitment to the Lord Jesus? A job? A hobby? A sport? A relationship? Normally we don’t burn bridges, but when it comes to the great commitment of discipleship, some of us need to cut ties and burn some bridges. Let’s burn our bridges behind us!