

**Reading:** 1 Kings 19:15-21

**Theme:** The call of Elisha.

During the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 2016 we looked at the life of Elijah. In the passage we read we meet Elijah's successor - Elisha. I want us to look at the life of Elisha over the coming months. Sometimes we hear sermons about Elisha, but often it is on a few selected passages. I pray it will do us all good to have a series of messages on him. There is almost twice as much written in the Bible on Elisha compared to Elijah - but it is disjointed and not in one section. Here is the first account of Elisha, then we hear nothing of him for some 10-15 years later on Elijah's last day. Let's see 3 things tonight:

### **1. The contrasts.**

Do we remember poor, depressed, self-pitying Elijah who had wanted to lie down and die? Elijah was a great man, but a man of like passions as us. He had his highs and his desperate lows too. The Lord, to encourage him and as a part of his restoration, told him to anoint two kings and his successor. Elijah was shown God's work would carry on in his successor and this one's name, family and address are all given in v16. Yet they would be men of very different temperaments, abilities, backgrounds, histories and ministries.

There is a contrast in their histories - Elijah burst suddenly onto the scene, like a whirlwind and there he was, in the court of Ahab and Jezebel - no family details, not even the tribe he came from, nor his former job are told us. With Elisha we are told his father, his work and his home village.

In terms of ministry, Elijah's was confrontational - calling the nation to the reality of his name "*Jehovah is my God*" - to challenge and confront the nation with its falling away and sin. Elisha seems called to minister to the 7000 in Israel who didn't

bow the knee to Baal – he too ministers according to his names' meaning "*God is salvation*". His ministry and work are centred on restoration, on comfort and showing God's goodness. Elijah announced a drought for 3½ years; Elisha's early miracles are often linked with water - parting the river Jordan, healing a spring, supplying water for 3 kings and their armies, a metal axe head floating, Naaman washing in the river Jordan.

Elijah's life was a solitary one until Elisha is sent as his successor and companion. Elijah is a solitary figure and no doubt found living at Zarephath a real trial, as he had to share his space, fit into household routines etc. yet he was shown he needed company, help and friendship. None of us are designed to be islands. Yes, we may be independent, but that is vastly different to being isolated - for we need friendship and fellowship. In contrast to him, Elisha seems a people person - found with schools of prophets, happy to stay with and interact with people, to be involved in their daily lives, fears, joys etc.

Why does God use such contrasting men? It shows us God is not restricted to one class or type of people in His service. The workers may change, be dead and buried - or not so in Elijah's case! Yet the God of the work does not change and He will make sure His work carries on. The work is God's and He has those in every generation to proclaim His word - even to a dark place like Israel at that time, God sent first Elijah to shake them and then Elisha to care for the faithful ones, even though the nation was destined to be destroyed. Our God still raises up His servants to minister - those suited for their generation, even if they contrast with former messengers - the message is still the same, even if the messengers change. Now we see:

## **2. The call of Elisha.**

Elijah was clearly told to call and anoint Elisha as his successor in the prophetic office. It would be much easier if the call of God to what we would now term “full-time Christian service” was always like this! Yet there are lessons we can see and apply from this unique calling of Elisha – so here is another contrast between Elijah’s abrupt appearing and Elisha’s calling!

Elijah was to anoint 3 people (v15-16), Elisha is last on the list and yet it is he who anoints the other 2 later on. The Lord took the initiative in the call of the one to succeed Elijah and he was not found in a school of prophets, or in a place of study, not with a book in his hand, but a plough! This was a surprising and unexpected call of a person diligent in their normal course of work. For Elijah it was a long walk as he headed from Horeb into Judah, then northwards along the Jordan Valley into the territory of Issachar to Abel Meholah (= meadow of dancing), where there was fertile soil laid down by the regular flooding of the river Jordan. Yet for the past 3 ½ years of drought there had been no flooding, but after the events at Mount Carmel, the rains had come, so Elisha’s father - Shaphat, had got the 12 ploughing teams out - showing he was a man of wealth. Among the workers in his fields was his son Elisha. God’s call would come to Elisha not as he sat back in ease, or as he meditated or did nothing, but as he was going about his work. He was not high and mighty, feeling he was special as the boss’s son, but he was involved in hard, manual, but skilled work; a hot, sweaty and smelly work to – behind a yoke of hot sweaty oxen!

Whatever God’s plans are for us, we need to show ourselves faithful in life, in secular callings - even if God will or will not choose to use us in ‘full time service’. I have heard of, read of men who failed at this and that and so they assumed God was calling them into the ministry! Dr MLJ’s advice was, if you can do anything else other than going into the ministry, do it! He went on

to say that if you failed in secular work, why would such a one expect to succeed in the ministry! There has to be divine compulsion to leave our secular calling and work. Often this is inward, but confirmed by outward events and recognition, but in Elisha's case, it was catalysed and crystallised by Elijah's actions.

I have never ploughed, but I understand it takes a lot of concentration to keep a straight line. People say it needs a fixed view and you can't daydream, or admire the view - as you have to keep looking ahead. That is also true with mechanical means, let alone having to control the yoke of oxen - so Elisha would have been skilled, been absorbed in concentrating. I do not think it too far-fetched to say he'd rolled up his garment (*girded his loins*) for work, even had a shirt off and then suddenly he has a camel hair cloak thrown over him! It seems Elijah had come off the path and "plop!" - then walked on!

Elisha was in no doubt as to what this meant. People ask if he knew who Elijah was or seen him before? He may have; he may have been there on Mount Carmel, been as an eyewitness to the great work God did through Elijah. Elisha may even have been challenged regarding his own serving of the Lord. Some argue that could have been the start of his internal call and confirmed by Elijah's actions here. To put the cloak, mantle over someone was to say you were identifying with them and taking them under your care and tuition. Ruth asked Boaz to "*Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a Kinsman Redeemer*" (Ruth 3:9). Here Elisha was to be functioning as a prophet and do the same work.

If Elisha had had this call straight after Mount Carmel, when everyone admired, honoured Elijah as the nation's number one person of importance and renown, that would have been a great honour and an easy choice, but not now! Do not forget Elijah was

still, at that time, a hunted and hated man by the queen and all the authorities. They aimed to make him an ex-prophet by killing him! A call to the prophetic office from such a position of wealth and influence was a huge thing - being costly to go into “full-time service”.

This principle still holds true today - people can give up many material blessings and ease to go into the Lord’s service “full-time”. It brings with it many blessings and joys, but also hardships, trials and testings that are unique. Yet it is a great honour to serve the Lord Jesus, the King of Kings and to be in Royal service. Dr MLJ, was, as a young doctor, a Harley Street specialist of great renown and attending to royalty, but he gave it up to become a minister in a rundown area of South Wales. Yet he considered it promotion and disliked people saying that he had given much up!

Realise every Christian is called into “*full-time service*” of the Lord; whatever role in life we have - in school, in a neighbourhood, at home or at work, in sport or business. In all situations we are to serve the Lord faithfully. As we do so, we may be entrusted with more service for our Saviour - our lives and work in secular roles are also full-time service for our Lord.

Yes, there may be a “call” to full-time Christian service and as it begins within us, it can grow and grow; it may be accompanied by developing gifts and the use of those gifts. Then these are evidenced over a period time and are noticed by others – maybe even before we ourselves recognise the call. This is a big area, yet a call is not given in isolation, nor contrary to one’s gifts and equipping - which will include temperament and abilities, and not in isolation of doing and seeking good to believers and unbelievers. Yet Elisha’s call was sudden, dramatic, but it was most clearly of God and he was called to serve alongside an older,

wiser servant of God and had the privilege of being in a good position to be trained and get experience. Now finally see:

### 3. The concord.

No, not supersonic Concorde, as there is no “e” on this concord. It means harmony, agreement, even a musical chord pleasing or satisfactory in itself. It includes a pleasant harmonious agreement - basically it means that Elisha said “Yes” to the call. He had a ready and willing heart to serve and it was not a work of reluctance or felt he had no choice in, but a willing, happy, joyful choice of heart that said “*Yes, I’ll follow you and be a prophet.*” There was no reluctance, but a wholehearted response, which he showed by running straightaway after Elijah - quick to own it and immediately ready to follow.

Yet he is also humble and caring. He humbly asked if he could go and kiss his parents goodbye. Interestingly, some say that this is weakness on his part! Yet even the highest calling in Christian matters does not remove our natural ties, nor our natural obligations and affections. Elisha is not like the one in Luke 9:61-62 - the man there had seen many things, had heard Jesus preach; had time to consider; to get ready to follow Jesus and it may have been likely he was going back to be **talked out of following** Jesus! Here Elisha was suddenly put upon, called on and out of kindness to his parents he went back, as Matthew Henry put it, “*to take leave and not to ask leave*”. For us all, God’s calling to be a Christian or to serve Him does not break our natural ties and duties. If any Christian neglects family duties, they are a bad witness. Only if family call us to deny God and sin, do we ignore those wrong calls!

In v20 Elijah’s words seem strange, but they are not a rebuke, only words to cause Elisha to consider. Elijah had done no rite or ritual to Elisha, so he is being challenged, encouraged to see it was of

God. Elijah stayed around - as he was there after the farewell feast! Elisha said goodbye to family and friends. He did so with this feast using his oxen and ploughing equipment. This tells us much of how he viewed his call to serve alongside Elijah:

**A. It was a joy and not a trial.** This was an expression of joy to the Lord calling him. To serve God, to be a Christian is a glorious and joyful thing and we like Elisha, or like Matthew (Levi), should make a feast - not literally, but let it be a joyful thing that we are serving our Saviour.

**B. It said “*I’m all out for God*”** - his old way of life was done with, his oxen and ploughing gone and he was not going back - for this call of God was for life and he had no backup or insurance plan – but to serve God all his days.

This is what we as Christians are called to do. If we are considering Christianity, we are to realise beginning as a Christian is to be a wholehearted and lifelong commitment to God as that is exactly what God is looking for - the God who loved us so much that He sent His only begotten Son to die to save us, He wants, demands wholehearted, lifelong commitment. This is especially so for those who are called to serve God in full-time ministry, they are not to have an escape plan or dream in place. Yes, some may have to work part-time, called “tent making” to provide for themselves and family as they look after a church, yet they are determined to serve the Lord whatever.

**C. It showed his readiness** - he made the feast and left with Elijah. He went from a position of influence, wealth and ease to be Elijah’s attendant - described as the one who “*poured water on Elijah’s hands*” (2 Kings 3:11). Elisha was meek and humble, it showed in his working alongside hired hands and serving Elijah. A famous preacher called Charles Simeon in conversation with

Henry Venn (*another well-known preacher of history*) asked what the 3 most important abilities for a minister of the gospel of God are - Henry Venn replied “*the 1<sup>st</sup> is humility; the 2<sup>nd</sup> is humility and the 3<sup>rd</sup> is humility!*” Augustine said “*humility is the ornament of angels and pride the deformity of devils*”

None of us deserve to serve God and if we are called to serve Him, we should constantly marvel. In fact, we should marvel at ever being given God’s love in Christ and the love of Christ should compel us to live for, serve and tell of our great God. Elisha was not a weak man, but a meek and humble man. We need to humble ourselves under God’s mighty hand and then He can raise us up in usefulness, for He knows that all the glory will be given to Him.

Perhaps we need to examine our hearts and lives afresh as to whether we are serving our God with wholehearted service. Are we following Him, having given over all to Him? Pray the Lord would bless us all as we go on to grow in our service of and love to our lovely and great God and Saviour.