

## Barbecuing Your Bridges Behind You!

I Kings 19:19-21; II Kings 2:1-6

I came across an article that read,

*You know you're in a small town when:*

- *the nearby airport runway has grass on it;*
- *every sport is played on dirt and the big rivalry is between teams sponsored by the hardware store and the cafeteria;*
- *you don't use your turn signal because everyone already knows where you're going;*
- *the pickup trucks on main street outnumber the cars 3 to 1;*
- *you dial a wrong number and talk for 30 minutes anyway;*
- *you miss a Sunday at church and receive a get-well card by Wednesday;*
- *someone asks you how you're doing and then pulls up a chair to listen to what you have to say.*

I am not sure a little town like that exists. When you hear that description though, if you are like me, there is something deep down that says, "That would be a wonderful place to live. That is a place that seems a lot slower and where the people seem closer and more personal."

Our city and flurried lifestyle is best portrayed by another article that I read recently. It told a different story, saying,

*A moving van was in front of a suburban home and the homeowners, a husband and*

*wife, were busy tidying up the front yard. A woman, who lived a few doors down, walked by. She waved and said, "Welcome to our neighborhood."*

*After a few nervous moments, the wife spoke up, "I don't know quite how to say this, but we've been living here for almost two years. You see, we're not moving in, we're moving away."*

Perhaps you have come to the same conclusion that Harry Truman did about his town of Washington D.C. He once quipped to a reporter, "If you live in Washington and you want a friend, get a dog."

At the very time in Elijah's life when he was convinced no one cared about him, and if you had asked, he would probably have said that a dog would not even be interested, God had a special plan. It was a plan that involved a friend.

I invite your attention to the books of I and II Kings and specifically, to the introduction of a man who will arrest the focus of biblical attention for several chapters. His name is Elisha. He was first introduced to us by Jeremiah, the author of Kings, in chapter 19 of I Kings.

### Review of Elijah's Life

Let me refresh your memory with a brief review of Elijah's life, while you are turning to that chapter. As we studied the life of Elijah, chapter 19 told of that deep, dark episode that revealed Elijah's depression and despair. He was to the point that he prayed, in verse 4b,

. . . *It is enough; now, O Lord, take my life.*

..

In other words, “I’ve had enough; please take my life.”

We called our discussion of this chapter, “Throwing in the Towel,” because Elijah was doing just that. He was signaling defeat; Baal was just too big to beat.

Remember that God did nothing about Elijah’s request to die; God did not answer his prayer. Aren’t you glad that God does not answer all of our prayers?! He did not respond with anything other than a provision of a long rest for one tired old prophet; interrupted twice by special food, delivered by an angel.

When Elijah awoke from his well-deserved rest, God instructed Elijah to do three things. One of those three things was to find a young man, named Elisha, and draft him into prophetic service. Look at the last part of verse 16.

*And Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place.*

Now, that did not mean that Elijah was relieved of his duty. God was not saying, “Listen, Elijah, you were doing really great by the brook; you never complained. Then, at the widow’s house, you stuck it out. And, on Mount Carmel, you were so courageous. But this, ‘I’m too discouraged to go any further, I want to die’ routine, well, that does it!”

“Gabriel, get a replacement down there, pronto.”

No. God has some wonderful plans for his discouraged servant. And, in the end, He had a chariot ride to paradise waiting for him.

What God does say to Elijah provides incredible insight, not only into the loving faithfulness of God, but into the needy character of every child of God. He says, “Elijah, go find an associate to help shoulder your burden. I’ve already picked him out for you.”

Sooner or later, God’s design is for the children of God to encourage other children of God. Elijah needed a friend. And the Word of God reminds us that Elijah, was a man just like us.

Earlier, our pastor of the children’s ministry and I went to several children’s Sunday school classrooms. We asked the kids, “What is a friend like and why do you need one?”

Let me give you some of the children’s answers. A friend is someone who:

- is nice;
- likes you very much;
- comes over to play with your dog;
- comes over to play with your toys and that kind of stuff;
- tells you the truth (I can’t help but believe this kid got into trouble this past week and heard that little lecture!);
- someone who gives you presents (this kid is ready for Christmas!);
- gives you flowers like my daddy does my mommy on “Mother Days”;
- cheers you up when you’re sad;
- cares for you when you hurt.

Aren’t they great?!

An English publication offered a prize for the best definition of a friend. The winner said, “A friend is one who comes in when the whole world has gone out.”

To Elijah, in chapter 19, the whole world had walked out. He had forgotten the promises of God; he had forgotten the provision of God; he had forgotten that other people and prophets were in the same position as he. God’s solution to Elijah’s despair was a friend named Elisha.

Now, our normal inclination, in a study like this, is to identify with Elijah. We would all love to have a friend like Elisha. However, I believe the thrust of the word is to encourage us to identify with Elisha; to be a friend to someone else.

## **The Call of Elisha – Wearing the Mantle**

So, I want you to meet Elijah’s friend today. He is a farm boy from the Jordan valley. The Bible gives background information into Elisha’s rather wealthy family, in verse 19a.

*So he [Elijah] departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, while he was plowing with twelve pairs of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth.*

This gives us a picture of Elisha, acting as the crew chief in the field, plowing behind eleven servants. The servants each have a pair of oxen and are working

in echelon formation as they move across the vast fields. This is like having twelve big tractors operating at the same time. It was not a small operation.

Evidently, Elisha's father, Shaphat, had vast holdings in the area. As a wealthy man, he was undoubtedly an influential leader among the townspeople of Abel-meholah.

Abel-meholah means, "meadow of dancing". The name suggests the joy and happiness that was prevalent in the lives of the people who lived in this fertile farm region.

Now, the last part of verse 19 tells us that Elijah, evidently, walked across the field to where Elisha was plowing. The text says,

***. . . And Elijah passed over to him and threw his mantle on him.***

There were no words spoken between Elijah and Elisha, but Elisha immediately knew what this meant. In fact, everyone in Israel knew what it meant. That camel hair mantle represented all that Elijah stood for; it represented his position as prophet and teacher.

Sir John Malcolm wrote of eastern customs, "When a great teacher died, he bequeathed his cloak to the disciple he most esteemed . . . its transfer marked out his heir to the role."

Elijah was calling Elisha into the ministry.

### **What Elisha left**

Then, it seems, Elijah kept walking across the field. As soon as Elisha recovered from, what must have been, shock, he ran after him. Look at verse 20.

***He left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, "Please let me kiss my father and my mother, then I will follow you." And he said to him, "Go back again, for what have I done to you?"***

Elisha's response is an immediate, "Yes," but first, he wanted to go home and tell his family, "Goodbye." Do not misunderstand, however, this was not a compromise. Matthew Henry wrote that Elisha went back to "take leave," not to "ask leave of them".

Also, do not misunderstand Elijah's comment in the latter part of verse 20.

***Go back again, for what have I done to you?***

This sounds rather cold to the English reader. It is as if Elijah was saying, "Go on back home, what did I do to you?!"

However, the words, ". . . what have I done to you?" are a challenge from Elijah to Elisha for him to think about what had just happened; to carefully consider the call. The words could be rendered, in an English culture, as saying, "Go back home again and, while you're there, consider carefully what I have done to you."

In other words, "Elisha, I'm asking you to leave your home, your position, your land, your parents, and all the comforts that you know to follow me. As you already know, I'm a wandering, crusty old prophet. You'd better think about this some more."

So, Elisha returned home and notice what he did, in verse 21.

***So he returned from following him, and took the pair of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the implements of the oxen, and gave it to the people and they ate. Then he arose and followed Elijah . . .***

Now, you have heard the phrase, "burning your bridges behind you," well, Elisha ate his! He had a neighborhood barbecue! He got all the farm hands, along with their families, and had dinner on the grounds like never before. Can you imagine consuming two full grown oxen? Then, I guess they used splinters from the plow to pick their teeth when they had finally eaten all they could hold.

This leads to a thought to remember, which is, *The call of God in Elisha's life was the setting for celebration, not sorrow!*

### **What Elisha became**

We are not told anything about his parent's reaction. Can you imagine the typical response, however? They could have said, "Elisha, are you crazy? This is the family farm, how can you just walk away? Besides, you've got it made here, you're the heir to a fortune. And who is this Elijah character? We understand he's just a wanderer. Where are you going to live? How are you going to provide for yourself? What kind of future is there in being a prophet?!"

C. T. Studd, several generations ago, left his family fortune in England and set out for Africa as a missionary. When his father died, he, as the first

born, received his inheritance. In today's economy, it would be more than a million dollars. C. T. immediately gave it all away. He gave some to Hudson Taylor, some to George Mueller and his orphanages, and some to a young evangelist named D. L. Moody.

My friend, C. T. Studd is still reaping from that investment. I have a picture of him hanging in my office. There is a large portrait of his family home in England, which is a mansion of marble and stone surrounded by fields and servant's quarters. Then there is a small inset photograph of C. T. sitting outside his hut in Africa with chickens milling around. You would not dare tell C. T. now, "Man, did you blow it! What a waste!"

Now, you might say, "Hey Mom, I think I might want to become a preacher."

Mom's reply might be, "Son, let me get you some aspirin and maybe you'll get over it."

Or, you might say, "Hey Dad, I think God is calling me to become a missionary."

Dad might answer, "A what?! A missionary? How often will I be able to see you?"

"Well, I believe it will be a couple of months every three or four years."

Has it ever occurred to you that your greatest contribution to the kingdom of God will be in the form of your children? Your willingness and support in seeing your children sail away is not a small sacrifice! And, there is not one person in heaven regretting that sacrifice today!

By the way, does this mean that every Christian should give up all employment, except that which directly relates to a ministry? Absolutely not. Each Christian has a unique calling and each calling has its own unique demands. What God does want, as one author wrote, is for every Christian to sacrifice to the point of fulfilling the demands of their particular contribution to the ministry, whether it is teaching a Sunday school class, parking cars, or stuffing envelopes.

Evidently Elisha had the support of his family. There was no turning back either. They joyfully took part in this celebration, as Elisha, in his public acceptance of the call, barbecued his bridges behind him.

## The Call of the Christian – Wearing the Yoke

Now, you need to understand that there is a New Testament parallel to Elijah's call to follow Elijah. However, you are not invited to wear a camel hair mantle, you are invited to wear a yoke.

Turn to Matthew, chapter 11, and look at verse 29, where Jesus Christ says,

*Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls.*

### Two denials to make in order to wear the yoke

In this invitation, there are at least two denials. If you want to walk with Christ as His disciple, ever learning and ever growing, there are two denials you must make.

#### A denial of self-interest

1. First, there is the denial of self-interest.

The metaphorical use of the word "yoke," in this verse, was common in the day of Christ. During the first century, a student was often referred to as being under the yoke of his teacher. One rabbinical writing urged young students to, "put your neck under the yoke and let your soul receive instruction."

The idea of wearing a yoke has powerful implications. A yoke was made of wood and it was hand carved to fit the neck and shoulders of each individual oxen. The more caring the master, the better the fit.

Your Master Discipler invites you to wear His yoke which He has hand crafted for you. The curriculum for your growth and progress is different from any other Christian on earth. And, your Master is totally caring and perfectly wise in the way He has constructed your yoke.

#### A denial of self-management

2. Secondly, to grow in Christ, demands the denial of self-management.

Notice verse 29 of Matthew, chapter 11, again.

*Take My yoke . . .*

(the one I designed),

... upon you ...

(you wear it, not Him),

... and learn from Me ...

He does not wear the harness, you do. He has the reigns in His hand and He turns you to the left or right. He puts you in the field of His choice and He fashions the work for you to accomplish. He works as long as He sees fit and then, He stops you at His will. He is the master, you are the servant.

There are far too few disciples because there are far too few people who will give up the reigns.

Now, notice the thrust of the disciples' curriculum, in the last part of verse 29. Jesus said,

*... and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls.*

The teacher is Christ and the subject matter is Christ. Dr. Vandora, of Sanford University said, "The greatest means of teaching is through modeling."

Isn't it amazing that Jesus knew that without ever attending Sanford? In other words, to everyone who will slip into that divinely crafted yoke, Jesus Christ says, "I will open My life up to you and you can take a good long look. We'll walk together."

Jesus, the greater Elijah asks, "Will you follow Me? Will you wear My yoke?"

The Old Testament Elijah asked, "Elisha, will you follow me? Will you become my disciple and wear my mantle?"

Elisha said, "Yes, I will," and for the next ten years, he walked by Elijah's side.

Well, what did Elisha become? Turn back to I Kings, chapter 19, and look at the last phrase of verse 21.

*... Then he arose and followed Elijah and ministered to him.*

Imagine that we are interviewing Elisha.

"Hey Elisha, you're the personal student of Israel's great prophet. It must be exciting!"

"I guess."

"Hey, have you caused the oil and flour of some poor person to increase overnight?"

"No."

"Resurrections – have you raised anyone from the dead?"

"No, I haven't."

"How about those ravens, are they bringing you any food?"

"Nope."

"Um . . . I don't suppose you've killed any prophets of Baal."

"Uh, uh."

"Well, what are you doing?"

"I'm serving my friend."

Ladies and gentlemen, the mark of a distinguished disciple is that he or she is willing to be known merely as his Master's servant.

The call of Elisha to servanthood was the setting for a celebration.

## Application

To become a disciple or a learner of Jesus Christ, if you are willing to enter the classroom of specialized training that is uniquely drafted for you, then it will require several things of you. Let me give them to you.

### Discipleship will require reshaping

1. First, discipleship will require reshaping. Are you pliable?

We so often forget that God has commanded us to change. To be conformed to the image of our Discipuler will require radical reshaping. Are we willing to change?

Can you imagine how the life of Elisha was revolutionized? For ten years, he walked with Elijah, as a man who had had servants serving him, who became the servant of another.

### Discipleship will demand denial

2. Secondly, discipleship will demand denial. Are you willing?

Walking with Jesus Christ has lost its accompanying challenge to sacrifice our lives, our time, and our talents. What is it in your life that you are willing to give up in order to advance the cause of Jesus Christ?

Henry Dunant was a wealthy Swiss banker who was well on his way to increasing his millions. He traveled to France to meet with Napoleon about a business venture that would increase both of their

fortunes. When he arrived, he was told that the General had gone to prepare for a battle that was to take place nearby.

Henry Dunant ordered a coach to take him to the battlefield, so intent was he upon securing Napoleon's agreement. When he crested a hill near the battlefield, he was just in time to see the Calvary's charge. He saw the soldiers collide. He heard the gunfire, the clash of swords, and the screams of wounded men. He was incredibly moved by the carnage of war. In fact, he stayed for three weeks after the battle, helping to bandage the wounded, care for the crippled, and provide shelter for the families who were now without daddies.

Henry Dunant never returned to Switzerland. Instead, he gave his entire fortune to a new cause which he himself, created. In 1901, he received the first Nobel Peace Prize. Attached to the prize was a very handsome sum of money, which he promptly put back into the cause that he had created. The cause became known around the world as, "The Red Cross".

He was a committed disciple to his cause, and to his cross. We should be as well!

### **Discipleship will involve intimacy**

3. Finally, discipleship will involve intimacy. Are you available?

This is a most amazing thing. What Elisha became to Elijah over the years, was nothing less than a dear friend.

Turn to II Kings, chapter 2. Elijah is going home to glory soon. The prophets know it; Elijah knows it; Elisha knows it. So, Elijah decides to go once more, to three of the prophet schools that he had founded, and give his farewell challenge.

In a very moving scene, Elijah tries to leave Elisha. Perhaps he knew his time was short and he did not want to worry his friend. Look at verse 2.

*Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here please, for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." . . .*

Skip to verse 4.

*Elijah said to him, "Elisha, please stay here, for the Lord has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." . . .*

In other words, Elisha said, "Elijah, I'm walking with you to the very end."

Elisha had begun as a faithful servant, now he is nothing less than a loyal friend.

One of the most touching phrases occurs twice; once in each of the first two locations where Elijah and Elisha traveled. Look at verse 3.

*Then the sons of the prophets who were at Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, "Do you know that the Lord will take away your master from over you today?" And he said, "Yes, I know; be still."*

Literally, Elisha is saying, "Be quiet."

Skip to verse 5.

*The sons of the prophets who were at Jericho approached Elisha and said to him, "Do you know that the Lord will take away your master from over you today?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be still."*

Imagine that! Elisha is a prophet in training who has received his theological instruction directly from Israel's leading prophet. You would expect this mature heir to Elijah to respond, "Yes, Elijah will be taken away from me today. Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

*No!* Elisha said, "I know, but don't talk to me about it, please."

Elisha and Elijah had become dear friends. And, dear friends are impossible to replace.

### **Elisha's call, and ours, may be to serve one another**

Let me point out something else. Turn to II Kings, chapter 3. This is well into the ministry of Elisha, after Elijah is already in glory.

In verse 11, King Jehoshaphat is asking for a prophet of the Lord. A servant answers in verse 11b, saying,

*Elisha the son of Shaphat is here, who used to pour water on the hands of Elijah.*

Do not miss this point! Even though God would use Elisha to perform twice as many miracles as Elijah; even though it was under Elisha's ministry that Jezebel and Baalism were stamped out, he was still known abroad as the man who served Elijah.

Perhaps Elijah was troubled with arthritic hands. And, perhaps Elisha would heat some water in the campfire kettle and pour that warm water over

Elijah's hands to soothe them. Elisha was doing more than pouring water, by the way, he was pouring encouragement over the heart of his aging friend.

Elisha's first and greatest ministry was simply to become Elijah's friend. Elisha's call, and ours, may be to serve one another.

**Elisha's call, and ours, may be to private obscurity, not public opportunity**

That leads me to another thought about the call of Elisha. His call, and ours, may be to private obscurity, not public opportunity.

Has God called you to a background ministry of encouragement and service? If so, you happen to have, what I like to call, the gift of presence. You are just there as an encouragement to someone who needs water poured over their hearts.

This is like Jonathan was to David and Barnabas was to Paul. Perhaps your greatest ministry on earth will be this. And, long after you are gone, people who knew you, or of you, will say, "Oh, he was an

encourager!" or "Oh, how she lifted my troubled heart!"

Elijah had prayed to die, but God sent a friend to him instead. Soon, the smell of prime rib and steak sandwiches filled the air. There was a feast to enjoy!

Now, every one of us are exactly the same in one regard, and that is, we all need a friend. And, we all want a friend like Elisha. The challenge of this story, however, is to become an Elisha; to become a friend.

Perhaps you could start your search by heating some water and barbecuing some prime rib. Then, look for someone who needs the soothing treatments of your friendship. It may be your grandest moment yet, as you deny self-management and self-interest as a disciple who has chosen to wear the Master's yoke.

There will always be a shortage of friends, but there will never be a shortage of people who need a friend like Elisha.

Pray today, "Lord, make me a servant, humble and meek. Lord, let me lift up those who are weak. And may the prayer of my heart always be, make me a servant today."

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