

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Lessons from the life of Elisha: Elisha – the servant

This morning we begin a new subject – “Lessons from the life of Elisha” – and, God willing, we will be spending the next four weeks on this subject under the following headings: the servant; the blessing; the helper; the prophet. Today, then, we will consider “Elisha – the servant”, and our considerations are based on 1 Kings 19 and 2 Kings 2.

Elisha followed Elijah and these two prophets lived with the nation of Israel at a time when Ahab was king. Ahab was a weak king and his wife, Jezebel, was the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians. Jezebel was a worshipper of the idol Baal and, on marriage, Ahab became a follower of Baal also. He built a house for the worship of Baal in Samaria and set up an altar for that purpose. The Bible tells us that Ahab “did evil in the sight of the LORD above all that were before him”, 1 Kings 15:29-33. It was during the reign of Ahab that Elijah came on the scene. His acts in the nation were a testimony against evil. Perhaps the greatest of these was on Mount Carmel when Elijah called Israel again to follow the LORD by calling fire from the LORD on the sacrifice he had set up. There was a resounding cry from the people on this occasion: “The LORD He is the God”, 1 Kings 18:39. By contrast, as Elisha follows Elijah, his general acts showed power and grace, particularly in use for others. Both characteristics were essential displays of God’s care of the nation in these difficult times.

Our purpose today is to review the call of Elisha and see how he came into service for the LORD, to learn from the Scriptures if Elisha was fit for service and, indeed, what it means to be fit for service to God.

There will be many fathers today who will be carefully watching the growth of their sons and desiring to see them becoming worthy followers of their own path. Will the son be able to take responsibilities of sonship in the family? Will he be a credit to the family name? Will he learn to care for those around and be of help in the many needs that arise? We will note some of these things in connection with Elisha and his last hours with Elijah. We can arrange our thoughts today in the following way:

1. Circumstances leading up to the call of Elisha
2. The call of Elisha.
3. The testing of Elisha
4. The acceptance of Elisha as a prophet.

1. Circumstances leading up to the call of Elisha.

Elijah had reached the point of despair. He had displayed the power and authority of the LORD at Carmel; he had run very many miles in front of the chariot which had taken king Ahab back to Samaria; he had received life-taking threats from Jezebel and had fled, finally reaching “Horeb, the mount of God”, 1 Kings 19:8. Greatly in despair, and at the request of the LORD, he describes his situation, in a resigning way, ending with the words “I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away”, 19:10. There, at Horeb, the LORD reveals Himself to Elijah, not in the wind, nor the earthquake or fire, but in a still small voice. How calmly the LORD speaks to His over-stressed servant Elijah! However, God still has work for Elijah and instructs him to do three things: Hazael is to be anointed king of Syria, Jehu is to become king of Israel and Elisha is to be anointed to take the place of Elijah himself. There are several points to notice here:

- a. God always has those He will use in every circumstance as He chooses. Elijah was one, Elisha was another. He knows when an Elijah will be withdrawn and an Elisha will be introduced to the work. This is as effective today as in Old Testament times. Is there a work the Lord is calling you to do today?
- b. God does not blame Elijah in any way; rather He comforts him by showing His servant that there are other resources to continue His will. The apostle Paul writes similarly, in 2 Corinthians 1:3 and 4: “Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation...” What a comforting God we have!
- c. Elijah is not alone – there are many more God-fearing people of whom Elijah is unaware. Do we sometimes feel all alone? In every age, Paul tells Timothy, “...the Lord knoweth them that are His”, 2 Timothy 2:19. May we never fail to believe in God.

2. The call of Elisha.

1 Kings 19:19 tells us: “So [Elijah] 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”. Now we note that Elisha was not of the priesthood, nor connected with the temple, but a normal worker in the fields, though well to do as he had twelve yoke of oxen. No word was uttered; Elijah used his mantle to indicate that he was prepared to care for the one upon whose shoulders it fell. Clearly, the call was not from Elijah but from God Himself. At the least, also, Elisha sensed that the mantle indicated that call to work alongside Elijah and share the responsibility, power and gift of service for God. Elisha immediately ran after Elijah. Anyone who senses there is a work for the Lord to be done is encouraged to do the same.

But was Elisha really ready for it? “Let me, I pray thee, go and kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow thee”, he said, 19:20. Elijah sensed a doubt and he replied: “Go back again: for what have I done to thee”? It is true that Elisha did not indicate that he wanted to ask permission to go, but how important the family situation is to each one of us? Where does the priority lie for Elisha? The LORD, or his family? Let us be clear about this. There is every reason to care for our family and, as parents, this is the first responsibility God gives. But Elisha does not appear to be married; his parents do not appear to need his help and presence and he is free to take up a work to which God is calling. The Lord Jesus told His disciples: “He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me”, Matthew 10:37. It is not a question of deserting those in need, nor is it a matter failing to give proper respect to parents, but it is a matter of giving God His rightful place. For some, God has the priority while they still live at home. On the other hand, the Lord is not likely to call an individual away from necessary care duties at home. He told the scribes and Pharisees: “God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death. But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, It is a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; and honour not his father or his mother, he shall be free. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition”, Matthew 15:4-6. These scribes and Pharisees were wrong!

Elisha was undergoing his first test. We learn that he did return home. He provided a banquet for those at home and locally, then he followed Elijah “and ministered unto him”. This meant that he was ready to do the most menial tasks if necessary. In 2 Kings 3:11 Elisha is referred to as the prophet who “poured water on the hands of Elijah”. It is often necessary to fulfil the humble tasks of service for the Lord before we are trusted with the greater things. Let us be ready for whatever the Lord gives us to do!

Between 1 Kings 19 and 2 Kings 2 we do not read of Elisha. The absence of a mention certainly indicates that, wherever he was, the LORD was allowing the training of His servant to proceed in heart and mind.

3. The testing of Elisha.

We now come to 2 Kings 2. Perhaps ten years have passed. During that time, Elijah was occupied and had been involved in encouraging the “schools” of the prophets, training centres where the students learned of the LORD and His ways. Such was the forward thinking of this man. But this chapter tells us of the time when the LORD had purposed Elijah should pass the responsibility to Elisha and then be taken to heaven. We note that as Elisha was to commence his own period of greater responsibility, it began with an ascended man. He would follow in the footsteps on earth of the power and grace that can righteously put a man in heaven in spite of sin and death and the power of the enemy. Let us remind ourselves that as servants, called into service for the Master, we, too, follow in the footsteps of an ascended Man.

Undoubtedly Elijah had become aware of the purpose of the LORD. In these final hours, Elijah must be convinced, and so must Elisha, that he was fit for the task ahead. They had been together in Gilgal. This was the place to which the whole nation of Israel had come when they crossed the river Jordan and first entered the Promised Land. It was vital that steps were taken to correct a failing during the wilderness journey. At Gilgal, the whole nation needed circumcision. Simply this involved the cutting off of the flesh. Paul refers to this in Colossians 2:11 where he says: “In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands (no longer a physical ritual), in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ...” For the New Testament believer, we note that it is not putting off the flesh but putting off “the sins of the flesh”. In Colossians 3:5 the apostle there reminds us what these things are: “Put to death therefore your members which are upon the earth, fornication, uncleanness, vile passion, evil lust, and unbridled desire, which is idolatry. On account of which things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience”, (JN Darby translation). In Romans 6:13 we are instructed to yield “your members as instruments of righteousness unto God”. Thus we learn that, now, for the Christian, there is no place for those things which displease God which He will judge in those who do not believe in Him. All things which attract the flesh in this life, which are not of God, must be cut off; they need to be put away. Elijah now suggested that Elisha remain at Gilgal while he went to Bethel. How did Elisha measure up to this? Had the matters of Gilgal been settled in his life to allow him to go forward? “I will not leave thee”, he says to Elijah, 2 Kings 2:2. Yes, he has finished with those things. How sad we are to hear sometimes of laxity in the Church to some of these things. Friend, today have you now finished with them? If

we are to represent the Man who has gone to heaven, every display of the sins of the flesh must be refused and judged.

Bethel brings back memories of Jacob of old. When Jacob left home to go to his uncle, he stopped for a night, set up stones for his pillow and slept. He had a dream of a ladder set up to heaven and angels ascending and descending. Then he heard the voice of the LORD promising him three things: first, he would be given the land over which he travelled; next, the people born to Jacob and his descendants would grow so much that they would be as the dust of the earth for multitude; and third, God promised to be with Jacob. “I will never leave thee”, He said, Genesis 28:13-15. What wonderful promises God was making to Jacob so he would understand that God was a faithful and unchangeable God, in all His ways! These are powerful lessons even today. When Elijah asked Elisha to remain at Bethel, how would Elisha react to the promises God had made? Must he stay because, for himself, he was unsure, or could he go forward with Elijah still, resting on those same promises of God? Thankfully he repeated his previous answer. Yes, he could fully depend on God to care for him and never leave him, a man fit for service. Elijah would have been satisfied and thankful.

These promises are as true for us too. The believer’s inheritance is, as Peter tells us: “an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you...” 1 Peter 1:4. The same chapter reminds us that we are “kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation”, verse 5. Then we also learn that those words for Jacob apply to us too: “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee”, Hebrews 13:5. How is it possible that any one of us will be missing in that great gathering of the redeemed soon to come? God is faithful, God is unchangeable. Every servant of God needs to demonstrate his trust in the eternal God if he desires to be a true servant.

These two travelled on to Jericho. Now this town was well known for the curse that God put on it. Anyone who rebuilt it would lose their eldest son when the foundations were laid and his youngest son as the town gates were installed, Joshua 6:26. This eventually took place as Hiel rebuilt the city, 1 Kings 16:34, during the reign of Ahab. The previous verse in that chapter commented that “Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him”. It was a day of total disregard, opposition to and rebellion against God. Elijah, however, once more asked Elisha to remain in this place. Would the aspiring servant of God settle down in the conditions in Jericho or leave with Elijah? “I will not leave thee”, was again the answer, thus clearly demonstrating his readiness only to serve the LORD. It is so easy for a servant of God, in these days, to spend time among those who are in rebellion and opposition against God. May we be like Elisha who was ready to remain committed to the service to which he had been called. How much this would have satisfied Elijah. By these three tests Elisha was shown to be a worthy servant. May we ask ourselves if we are fit for service for our Lord.

4. The acceptance of Elisha as the prophet.

At the River Jordan, Elijah took his mantle, the mark of God’s power, and divided the waters and they two went over on dry ground. It was not until they had gained the further side, they both knowing the time for parting had come, that Elijah asked what he could do for his servant. Elisha requested a “double portion” of the spirit of Elijah. The “double portion” meant double what anyone else would receive and was normal for the eldest son. Elisha’s request was for spiritual abilities to go with the responsibility he anticipated. This is “a hard thing” was Elijah’s reply; not too hard for God but hard for Elisha to expect.

The moment came suddenly when the two were divided by the chariot and horses of fire and Elijah was taken up into heaven. The mantle was left behind, and Elisha took that mark of the authority and power of God as he disposed of his own. So Elisha became the servant who became a witness to an ascended man, one whose only service was to witness for the LORD in a world under judgement. Elisha was one who had proved by his actions that he would be true to this service. When the other sons of the prophet saw Elisha, they knew that the spirit of Elijah was with him. He had become a true testimony for the LORD.

Lastly, let us notice the happy communion between Elijah and Elisha. Several times we read, “they went down”, “they came to”, “they two went on”, “they two stood”, “they two went over”. This is the kind of communion we need with our Lord as we go on through life.

May we prove ourselves by communion with the ascended Man, by following clearly the path of the Lord and the Scriptures He has given us that we are servants ready to honour His name in a world being judged by the Lord!

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