

The Cloud of Witnesses

Elisha

Lesson 1: Elisha's call

Reading: 1 Kings 19:19-21

Not long after the showdown with the prophets of Baal, God told Elijah to anoint Elisha as his successor.

It must have been a bitter-sweet experience. Relieved that his work was done, the pressure was to come off from him; however, having won a decisive battle he may have wanted to see the results for himself, despite the fact that Jezebel was after his blood. God revealed to Elijah how the family and dynasty of Ahab was to be judged and eliminated. Eventually, Elijah pronounced the last word against his major enemy, Jezebel.

Elisha was a farmer. He was out in the field when Elijah arrived, just carrying on with his normal daily chores, plowing with his oxen. However, from the text we find that he was more than just a normal farmer. He was rich. The fact that 12 yoke of oxen is mentioned suggests that Elisha employed others in his fields, and yet despite that, he was still prepared to put his own shoulder to the plow. He was not afraid of hard work or the normal requirements and duties of life.

Yes, Elisha was hard at work plowing his fields when Elijah arrived. Surprisingly, we do not read that Elisha had earlier prayed to God for direction, wisdom or a call into ministry. No, he just went about his normal work and God saw into his heart and answered his inner unexpressed yearnings.

Elijah did not give Elisha a great sales pitch about the role he was inviting Elisha to accept. He just went up and threw his cloak around Elisha's shoulders – the normal act from a prophet inviting an apprentice to follow him.

Elisha immediately responded to the personal appeal by running after Elijah and confirming that he would follow as soon as he had taken leave from his parents. Please notice he wasn't seeking their approval; rather, he was giving them the privilege and opportunity to celebrate with him the joy of his call.

Elisha used the tools that were the symbol of his source of livelihood as the foundation of his celebration. He burned his plow and sacrificed his oxen to hold a feast with the family he was leaving behind, before he followed the call to serve God and Elijah for the rest of his life.

There is no hint of doubt, pressure or undue haste; just quiet determination. He had been called by God to surrender his life in obedience and service to Him. That would be evidenced by submitting to Elijah and becoming his disciple, his assistant. Elisha would simply move from serving his family to serving the Lord's prophet.

He wasn't interested in the remuneration, the job description or even the job title. He wasn't concerned about the job opportunities, responsibilities or privileges. His only concern was to respond wholeheartedly to the call of God, no matter the cost to himself. He would give his all to fulfil his call.

I believe God does the same with each one of us. He offers us the privilege of becoming a part of

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His plan to reach out into a sad and hurting world with love and hope. Sometimes it necessitates us giving up our agenda for His, or giving up our ambitions to fulfil His plans for our life. As Elisha found, there is no greater privilege, and the life God calls us to is totally exhilarating and beyond description. Have you answered His call on your life yet?

Elisha would say to us today...

There is nothing greater in life than being called by God. Each one of us needs to have that encounter with God so we know what on earth we are supposed to be doing. We all need a cause worth dying for.

Prayer

Father, please help me know what the most important thing is that You want me to do with my life, and then help me complete it. For Your Name's sake. Amen.

Additional Readings

- Luke 5:1-11
- Acts 26:12-18
- Luke 4:14-21

Questions

1. How do we find God's life purpose for us?
2. What is the cause God has for you that you would give all your energy for?
3. What is the next step you need to make towards fulfilling that role?

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Lesson 2: Elisha asks for a double portion

Reading: 2 Kings 2:7-14

The time had finally arrived for Elijah to leave this world and be promoted to Heaven. He had completed the work God had called him to do and now his eternal reward was waiting for him.

Before departing, however, he took Elisha, his attendant, on a journey. It was to be a significant spiritual process. It would also be the final challenge that Elisha would face prior to being launched into his ministry.

Elijah appeared to be indecisive. He took Elisha on a mystery tour that included three poignant locations of considerable spiritual significance. At each destination the locals warned Elisha that Elijah was going to be taken from him. Even Elijah challenged Elisha to stay behind. However, Elisha was determined, not only to go through the initiation process but also to be there with Elijah in his final moments.

The first place was Bethel – the House of God – the place where Jacob met with God, and dedicated his life to serve God and give Him a tenth of all God prospered him with.

The next place was Jericho. The barrier that stood between the Israelites and the Promised Land. The city whose walls the Lord caused to fall after the Hebrews had encircled it seven days. The place where Rahab had hidden the spies so as to save their lives.

Then they came to the River Jordan. That place where the Hebrews finally left Egypt behind. Yes, they left Egypt when they crossed the Red Sea on dry land. However, they continued to rebel and so God allowed them to remain in the desert until all those people had died off and the next generation was ready to move on. It speaks of new beginnings, of water baptism and living with the promises of God.

Elijah parted the water once more, this time using his cloak and the two of them crossed on dry land. Arriving on the other side, Elijah asked Elisha what he would like Elijah to do for him. Elisha replied with a huge request, *“I want a double portion of your spirit.”*

Elisha wanted to accomplish twice as much as Elijah, not in order to boast about who the most significant prophet was but, undoubtedly, because he saw the incredible influence Elijah had on the nations at the time. Elisha wanted God, and the power of God, to be seen in even greater ways. He was not satisfied with how things were; he wanted to move the spiritual climate of the nations further on. He wanted the nation he inherited to be more godly when he was gone.

He wanted everyone to know the greatness of his God. Everyone to acknowledge that Jehovah, the God of the Hebrews, was the only true God, the Almighty, Creator and Sustainer of the Universe.

Elijah told Elisha that his request was very difficult to agree to, but if Elisha was present when he left the earth, his prayer would be granted.

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Shortly after this exchange, the chariot of fire, drawn by horses of fire, arrived and took Elijah to Heaven in the whirlwind. Elisha cried out in grief. Once the dust had settled, Elisha saw Elijah's cloak, removed his own and replaced it with Elijah's.

The first thing Elisha did with it was to strike the Jordan, crying: "*Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?*" Immediately the waters parted for him to cross on dry land.

It is recorded that Elisha performed twice as many miracles as Elijah, albeit all through the power of God.

Elisha would say to us today...

God honours passion. If you want the best out of life, be sold out to Jesus; don't compromise your Christian faith.

Prayer

Father, please help me to be focused upon You. Help me not to get side-tracked by the values and goals of this world. May I seek Your will in everything I do, and always remember that without You I can do nothing. Amen.

Additional Readings

- Genesis 32:22-32
- Jeremiah 29:11-14
- Psalm 42:1-5
- Revelation 3:14-22

Questions

1. What did Elijah do to find out how committed Elisha was?
2. What made Elisha ask for a double portion of the spirit in Elijah?
3. How passionate are you about Jesus and fulfilling His purpose for your life?

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Lesson 3: Elisha and the widow's oil

Reading: 2 Kings 4:1-7

God is compassionate and caring. He takes a special interest in widows and orphans. Isn't it comforting to know that the Creator of the Universe is, nevertheless, interested in the daily, ordinary and mundane issues of our lives? Peter tells us that we should cast all our anxiety on Jesus because He cares about us. There should be no issue, no challenge, no concern that we feel we cannot bring to the attention of Jesus.

Jesus said that God, the Father, knows even when a sparrow dies, and God considers that we are worth a whole lot more than sparrows.

In this reading, we learn about the death of a prophet and his widow's plight. He had died with considerable debts. His creditor was coming to take her two sons away so that they would work for him and pay off the debt. That would have left her without any means of raising an income, distraught and lonely, on top of having to work through her deep grief.

In her despair, she turned to Elisha for help. Ever practical, he asked her what she had in the house that might be capable of raising the sum required. She replied that she was out of resources, except for a little oil. Elisha told her to ask around for as many empty jars as she could, and so she sent her boys off on a jar hunt. They evidently searched high and low and asked all their neighbours.

They returned with a whole stack of them. Mother then went to her remaining jar of oil and started pouring the contents into one of the other flasks. That was when the miracle started. The jar she was pouring the oil from lost none of its volume although she had filled the other flask. It happened again and again and again.

The oil kept flowing from the original jar, filled every other container she poured the oil into, and yet never ran out. She was so excited she asked her boys to go and find more empty jars. They returned to say there were no more to be found; she had already received every jar available. Once she was satisfied that there were no other jars or containers to be found, she sought out Elisha once more, and asked him what she should do.

I wonder if he laughed. I'm sure I would have. Laughed with delight. Elisha told her that she could now go and sell enough of the oil to settle her husband's debts, and to keep the leftovers for her family's on-going needs.

Do you see how good God was? He not only satisfied her need to pay off her late husband's debts but, over and above all that, He provided for her future.

I wonder if she panicked when the oil stopped flowing. But did you notice the oil only stopped flowing once every jar was full? The oil didn't need to flow once her needs were met. I'm reminded of the Manna and quails; the Heavenly provision God gave the Hebrews whilst they were in the desert. Both stopped when the people entered the Promised Land, when they were able to eat the provisions they found there.

God is a practical God. That means He is ready to meet our daily needs. It also means He will often use the common and mundane things of life to show us His love and mercy. How often my wife and I have found, when 'living by faith', God doesn't necessarily give us money to meet our

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needs. Instead, we find the petrol seems to stretch, the milk container seems to hold more than expected, and the food expands to meet the needs of all the guests, whether invited or even when they arrive unexpectedly.

Yes, God expects us to use what He has already given to us and then He will supply the increase. It's usually as we give that we find He returns even more to us to meet our every need. Never forget, God is a good God and cares for each one of us.

Elisha would say to us today...

Use what is in your hand. Yes, God is into miracles; however, He still expects us to use what He has already given to us.

Prayer

Father, please help me to discover the gifts and talents You have given me so that I may complete the work you have appointed for me to do on earth. Amen.

Additional Readings

- Exodus 14:10-18
- Luke 9:10-17
- Acts 3:1-10
- 1 Corinthians 12:1-7

Questions

1. How do we find out God's will for us?
2. What are the spiritual gifts God has given you?
3. What would you do with your life if there were no restraints on your time or money?

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Lesson 4: Elisha and Naaman the leper

Reading: 2 Kings 5:1-14

The account of this miracle is one of my favourites. There is so much to learn from it.

The King of Aram was a very powerful monarch. He had a very successful army that had been victorious over Israel in battle. From one such conflict they had taken some Israeli children captive. One young girl ended up as a slave to the wife of the Commanding Officer, whose name was Naaman. The King was particularly impressed with Naaman's courage and success, and so held him in very high regard.

However, life was about to change significantly for Naaman when he contracted leprosy. Just as today, when we use or hear the word, cancer (or A.I.D.S), fear overwhelms us. In those days the most dreaded enemy was leprosy. Just to be diagnosed with it was like having a knife thrust into one's heart.

It was the prelude to a slow debilitating death. As with A.I.D.S., it was considered socially challenging because it was highly contagious. The patient would eventually be expelled from family, home, the neighbourhood and society, and end up a beggar on the streets. They would have to cover their faces, ring a bell and shout "*Unclean! Unclean!*" warning everyone to move out of their way and not to come near them.

Whilst not uncommon, leprosy was, nevertheless, devastating to all who suffered from it. Naaman, the King of Aram's general, somehow contracted it. It couldn't be concealed from his household, and so the Israeli servant girl heard the shattering news.

Far from feeling pleased that her captor had finally received his just punishment from God, she was overwhelmed with compassion and begged her mistress to get her husband to visit Elisha so that he might be healed. Initially, willing to try anything, Naaman approached the king for approval for the excursion.

The king was delighted with the possibility and, heeding the diplomatic expedencies, wrote a letter to the king of Israel asking for his help. The king of Israel, however, smelled a rat! He knew that he was totally incapable of healing anyone and therefore interpreted the letter as a challenge and precursor to war.

Fortunately for everyone, Elisha heard of the king of Israel's dilemma and sent the king a message. Elisha suggested that the king should not react so strongly, and if the king was happy to send Naaman around to his place, he would sort out the problem for the king. Understandably, the king was relieved, and sent Naaman on his way to Elisha's home.

When Naaman arrived there, Elisha sent one of his assistants with a message, "*Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed.*"

How often pride gets in the way of blessing! That, of course, was Satan's downfall too. Naaman was not about to humble himself enough to follow those orders. Give him a battle to win, an enemy to destroy, and that would hit his radar screen. But wash in the Jordan, that muddy creek? "*No thanks, we have cleaner rivers back home.*"

How blessed Naaman was. Not only did he have a gracious and caring slave back home, but he

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also had some wise servants on his entourage. They made him see sense. Naaman swallowed his pride and went down into the Jordan. But it wasn't until he surfaced the seventh time that he saw he was completely healed.

Question – do you care that much for your boss?

Elisha would say to us today...

Always strive to maintain an attitude of humility. God opposes the proud and helps the humble.

Prayer

Thank You, Father, for allowing Jesus to come and show us how You want us to live. Holy Spirit, please help me become more and more like Jesus. Amen.

Additional Readings

- Isaiah 14:12-15
- Luke 1:26-55
- Philippians 2:5-11

Questions

1. Why did Elisha refuse to see Naaman when he first arrived?
2. What was so special about Naaman's wife's servant?
3. What can we do to keep ourselves humble?

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Lesson 5: Elisha and the siege of Samaria

Reading: 2 Kings 7:1-20

The times were desperate. The people had run out of food; the city was surrounded by the enemy. Indeed, the situation was so desperate that some of the people had already resorted to cannibalism. When and how would the end come?

The people of Israel were besieged by the Arameans. When the King of Israel heard about the cannibalism and the people asking him for help, he responded by accusing Elisha and threatening to behead him by sunset.

Elisha guessed the king would be hard on his heels. When the king sent his messenger to get him, he knew he was right.

The king complained that he was fed up with waiting for God's deliverance and wanted to get the job done himself. Elisha countered that in the following day there would be plenty of food available for everyone.

However, the king's officer jeered at Elisha's pronouncement, adding that even if God opened the windows of Heaven it could not be done. Elisha replied that he would see the miracle happen but would not partake of any of it personally because of his unbelief. God had a plan that neither the king nor his officer knew.

Ironically, God used some outcasts to achieve His purposes. There were four lepers living on the tip outside of the city. Not permitted within the city walls, they were totally dependant upon the grace of those who lived within, to share their food with them. However, even the scraps dried up and, consequently, the lepers were faced with starvation, in addition to their medical and social distress.

The lepers considered their plight and decided to give the enemy a chance. If the enemy killed them, they would be no worse off than they were already. On the other hand, if the enemy had pity on them, they might even live a little longer. They decided to give the idea a go, and so wandered over to the enemy's camp.

When the lepers arrived they were in for a shock. They couldn't believe their eyes. The whole camp had been abandoned. (God had caused the enemy to hear the sound of horses, chariots and a vast army, which they took to be the Egyptians, and so they fled, leaving everything they had behind.)

The lepers entered the first tent and scooped down the food and drink, and then carried off the gold, silver and clothes and buried them for later. They did the same with the items left in the second tent. After that their conscience challenged them and they exclaimed, "*We're not doing right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves.*" They remembered all the starving people they had left behind in the city.

The lepers overcame their self-preservation, greed and selfishness and returned to the city gates. There they told their story to the gatekeepers, who in turn shouted aloud the report, so that it was heard in the palace grounds and reported to the king.

True to his suspicious character, the king doubted the validity of the report, countering it with the

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suggestion that it was a trap set by the enemy. The king reckoned the enemy just wanted the people, in their desperation, to go and search for food, thus leaving the city unprotected, so the enemy could enter it and capture it unopposed.

Consequently, the king sent a few men to confirm the report. Once they had done so, they returned to the city with the same good news. When the people heard that the news had been verified, they immediately created a stampede in their haste to break their starvation. In the rush, the king's officer who had jeered at Elisha was trampled to death by the pressing throng.

Never pre-judge the way God will answer your prayers. Be open to the unexpected, and never discount the people you feel least likely to be of any help. And once you have personally benefited from receiving the Good News, keep on sharing it with others.

Elisha would say to us today...

Learn the lesson of the lepers who said, *"We're not doing right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves."*

Prayer

Father, thank You for allowing me to hear the Good News. The Good News that You loved me so much that You sent Jesus to die for me, to pay the penalty of my selfishness. Please help me never forget that it is now my job to share that Good News with everyone I know. Amen.

Additional Readings

- Joshua 23:1-14
- Isaiah 55:8-13
- Luke 8:30-39

Questions

1. Why is it important not to pre-judge how God will answer our needs or prayers?
2. What was the result of the army officer's doubt over Elisha's prophecy?
3. Who does God want you to share the Good News with this week?