

Elijah and Elisha—Help for Church in Dark Times

4—Ready for God 1 Kings 19:19-21; 2 Kings 2

Introduction

The two stories about Elisha that we look at today are important for us because they show what is important as we bear witness to Christ in the world—and sometimes, a church—that doesn't want him. I've headed it 'Ready for God'. How do we serve God in these days?

Comment re judgement in study two

But first, I need to add a comment to the second study in this series—where Elijah calls down fire from heaven on the sacrifice.

I said that the 3.5 year drought for which Elijah prayed 'is not punishment for their sins but so Israel would return to the Lord'. My notes actually say '*the point* of his asking for no rain is not punishment but that Israel would turn back to the Lord'.

This distinction is important. God does take issue with our idolatry. God is angry with those who don't acknowledge their Creator. Romans chapter one makes this clear—and it happens at the same time as gospel preaching. The righteousness of God is...' and 'God's wrath is...' being revealed.

But God doesn't desire to settle the score in the way we may think he might. Luther called wrath God's strange or alien work (based on Isa. 28:21). That is, *love* is natural to God. Anger is not. He must be stirred to anger. But his anger is real, and for those who will not repent, it is final.

But it remains that God desires that we turn and know him—the giver of every gift. I hope that this is the point that came across.

Enter Elisha

We turn now to Elisha. Elijah is told to appoint three people who will execute the judgement that always follows a rejection of grace. One of these is Elisha who will take over his role.

It is now clear to him that even though there has been a wonderful demonstration of God's grace and power on Carmel, the nation as a whole is going to follow Jezebel. But he does know 7000 will not bow to Baal—and, by nature of the case, life for them is going to be difficult. The people of God will continue to live through dark times.

We are introduced to Elisha in 1 Kings 19:19-21. I note three things about him.

1—He wants God to be known—as does Elijah

Elisha is ploughing on the family farm when Elijah finds him. He throws his cloak over him as a symbol that the younger man must take up 'the mantle' of responsibility that has been Elijah's.

Of course, Elisha would know Elijah, and recognise what this action means. His only question is, 'Do I have time to say goodbye to the family?' (The Lord's criticism about deferring does not fit here.)

This is granted and he proceeds to destroy his vocational equipment, his 'tools of trade'—bullocks and plough—to make a farewell feast for his family.

What is clear is that he doesn't expect to come back to the family business if things don't 'work out'. This reminds us of the disciples leaving their boats and nets to follow Christ.

Now we could say here that Elisha is an example of commitment, but I think that misses the point. Commitment *can* be something that begins with us, but something bigger needs to get hold of us. Being ready to join Elijah does not start with Elisha.

What does Elisha know about God that leads to his readiness?

First, he has been instructed in Israel's faith. For example, he knows that their land, their kings and their worship are all gifts from God. He knows their law is God's will for them.

Second, he has recently seen (or heard about) this faith being revived by Elijah on Mt Carmel, rebuilding a broken down altar to the Lord, a bull being offered for the sins of the nations and God's fire authenticating their worship.

Third, he is watching God healing their land. They are out ploughing! Crops are again a viable option. So Elisha knows much about God in practical terms.

But, turning to ourselves, if we are going to be ready for God, what do we know?

We know God is Creator. We know he is the Father of Jesus Christ. The world has witnessed his dying and being raised from the dead—a remarkable demonstration, not only of power but also of grace. We now that the salvation of believers and the welfare of the world is entirely in his hands.

We know we have been forgiven and transferred to a new kingdom—the kingdom of Christ. It is clear that there is another kingdom alive and well, but we prefer to be informed and empowered and directed by the reign of Christ than whatever other regime we are part of.

God has made everything ready for us, and it is this is what makes us ready for him.

So, if we say 'Yes' to Christ's call, it is not because we are heroes who will muscle up and prove we are up to a challenge. It will be because, like the disciples of Jesus, we have nowhere else to go. And, because we love the one who loves and has given himself up for us. And because we know there is no other way for anyone else either. And we know that what we have discovered is best thing for the world as well.

Back to Elisha—he is clear about this. He wants God to be honoured and trusted. He wants Israel to know the danger in their present course. He wants God to go on intervening in Israel as he did at Carmel.

All this is more important to him than being prosperous, safe or popular, more important than being part of the recognised ‘establishment’.

He knows the prevailing culture of idolatry and the politics of violence. So he is not thinking about this as a good career path!

Now, a second thing we need to notice about these times of Elisha...

2—He is among a company of prophets

Through these chapters of 1 and 2 Kings, we begin to hear of numbers of prophets, and of ‘sons of the prophets’ or ‘prophets of the Lord’ who are gathering during the reigns of Omri, Ahab, Ahaziah and Joram.

Obadiah has hidden and fed 100 prophets of the Lord. God has told Elijah he has 7000 people who won’t bow their knee to Baal—who will risk the wrath of the king rather than worship something that isn’t God. They may or may not be prophets but they are all part of a prophetic community.

Through Elisha’s life, we will see him moving among these groups. The darkness of the days is contributing to the building up this community of the faithful.

Going ahead some 100 years or so, there is a similar gathering referred to in Isaiah’s time. God tells him to ‘seal up the testimony among his disciples’ (Isa. 8:1-17). Not everybody is listening, but there is a community of those who do.

Later again, Malachi takes us to the heart of being a prophetic community, or what it means to be the church in our own times...

‘...those who feared the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the Lord and esteemed his name. They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him’ (Mal. 3:16f).

If you think about it, much of the NT, and certainly, the Epistles, are written to people who speak with one another, fear the Lord and esteem his name. And God says to us ‘You are mine’. As churches are formed and as the apostles and then their writings, circulate among the churches, they become essentially prophetic communities.

So these ‘sons of the prophets’ show us that in dark times, we need people who are personally *ready for God* but who work together—to encourage and share in what God wants to do. Not everyone is going to be an Elijah or Elisha, but we are all anointed by the Holy Spirit to be a prophetic people. God doesn’t have two classes of Christians. God has set us up to be ready for him in the kingdom.

Sometimes, days of apostasy and indifference can dull the spirit of many Christians. But then, and perhaps, because of his judgements, God stirs us to be ready for his kingdom and to pray for times of refreshing.

Returning to Elisha, he will become a leader among these sons of the prophets—as our next talk will show. But now, it is time for Elijah to leave the earth, and it is some of these sons of the prophets who say to Elisha, ‘Your master is going to leave us!’

3—He is dependent on God’s power

This story is in 2 Kings 2. Elijah is on the move and intent on leaving Gilgal for Bethel, then to Jericho and across the Jordan. Effectively, he is retracing the track of Israel’s entry into the Promised Land under Joshua (Josh. 1—8). It looks like he is leaving the land.

Elijah tells Elisha to stay put—not keep following him. The sons of the prophets tell him his master is going, and he doesn’t want to talk about it. But Elisha is single minded about something and won’t be diverted, right up to the final moment. Then Elijah says, ‘What do you want?’

Elisha’s answer is crystal clear—‘A double portion of your spirit’ he says. Let’s look at what this may mean.

Elijah has had powerful influence in Israel’s life (as the chapters in between these two stories show). His prayers have first devastated the land, and then renewed it. He has continued to affect the outcome of battles.

Israel will continue to need this witness. If Elisha is going to be up to the task, he will have to have something bigger than what he is in himself! So what does he want? ‘I want the powers and resources that I should have as your heir—a double portion of your spirit.’

To us today, this may seem to be well above the experience we are likely to have. But think about where we actually are as Christians. God has shown himself to us in Jesus Christ. We know God is gracious to us. And we want the world to know the God we know.

So, well may we say to Jesus Christ whom we follow, ‘If you want me to be your witness in the earth, I’ll need the Spirit that has been upon you!’ Nothing less will do the job! There is no question that God is pleased with such a prayer!

In fact, Jesus doesn’t wait for us to ask. He asks God to send his Spirit, the Spirit of Christ—that is, the Holy Spirit loaded up with all that he has accomplished—to enable us to bear witness to him and his Father in the world.

The apostles are very aware of this. They have been preaching in Jerusalem and been arrested. They are insisting on saying that Jesus is alive and that he is Lord. After a trip to prison, they gather for prayer with the church. But they don’t pray for protection. They pray for the grace and power to continue their witness. And again, they are filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:29-31).

We return to Elisha who has followed Elijah to the final moment. They have crossed the Jordan. And then Elisha sees Elijah transported to heaven by a whirlwind—without death.

This makes Elisha cry out, ‘The chariots of the Lord and his horsemen!’ He may be referring to the fact that he sees such chariots and horsemen. But it probably indicates that Elijah has

actually been God's chariots and horsemen for Israel's welfare—an army more potent than any military.

Elijah has dropped his cloak. So Elisha picks it up and in this way assumes the ministry that had been Elijah's.

He heads back to the Jordan and asks, 'Where is the God of Elijah'. And the waters open for him. What expectation! The same is happening for him as for Elijah. But also, it what happened when Joshua took over from Moses. He also crosses over on dry land.

We won't trace all the remaining actions in this chapter, except to say that Elisha is vindicated at every point as he retraces the first entry of Israel to their promised land.

First, there are fifty sons of the prophets who have seen Elisha open the waters of the Jordan and they know the spirit of Elijah is on Elisha. Second, he insists that the group who witnessed this will not find Elijah on earth anywhere—and he proves to be right. Third, the sons of the prophets at Jericho have foul water and he mixes a brew and heals the waters at their camp. Fourth, he curses a group of children who trail him into the countryside and taunt him about 'going up' like Elijah—to get out of the way. It is a deliberate assault on his authority. Bears maul and kill 42 of them (cf. Deut. 13:6-11).

Like Samuel before him, the Lord is not going to let any of his words fall to the ground (1 Sam. 3:19).

The significance of all this is that Israel, for all her apostasy, is still regarded by God as his people, needing his guidance and provision. He has again given them a leader to take them forward as they live in the world as his people. The chariots of Israel and its horsemen ride again! And so it proves to be.

We cannot give effective witness to Christ unless God himself gives evidence of his presence. Jesus says, 'the Spirit of truth will testify about me...and you will testify also' (John 15:26-27). We work in concert with no less than God's own Holy Spirit.

This becomes clear on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit made it clear to everyone that something is happening that comes from above. A short while later, the company of believers in Jerusalem prays for boldness to witness while God gives evidence of the truth of this message.

We don't need to ask, 'Do miracles still happen in our times?' The question is, 'Does God show other people the truth of the message we preach?' It is clear in the New Testament that this is what Jesus and the apostles expect to happen. And later, we find an interesting comment written to the young church at Corinth. Paul says that if they walk truly as a church and give prominence to the gift of prophecy, they may see unbelievers who have come to their meeting fall down and acknowledge that God is among them.

It is a wonderful thing to be a Christian! It is also a wonderful thing to know that in the world that doesn't want to know God, we are witnesses to his being alive and being gracious. So we can be ready for God because we know him and want others to know him. We can be ready together with others. And we can be ready because we are not looking to ourselves to work miracles. That is God's business!

We need to follow up this miraculous aspect of Elisha's life next time.