

Lessons from the life of Elijah

18. The call of Elisha (1 Kgs. 19:15-21)

Stephen Whitehouse

Elijah had witnessed the earth-shattering events of the earthquake, wind and fire, followed by the calming hush of "a still small voice". The prophet was now about to receive some startling news from God, that he was not alone in Israel; in fact, there were seven thousand others who had not bowed to Baal. The prophet is sent to call one of these, Elisha, to be his servant and successor.

AFTER ONCE MORE declaring, "I, even I only, am left" (1 Kgs. 19:14), Elijah heard God command him, "Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus" (v. 15). The prophet was being told to retrace his steps and to return to his former stand of duty. This is similar to when Abraham had left Egypt after his deception of Pharaoh, and "went on his journeys . . . to Beth-el, unto the place where his tent had been *at the beginning*" (Gen. 13:3). He too had to return along his original path.

Instructions for the future

Though this commandment to Elijah may sound stern and direct, God was being compassionate, for He was about to "shew unto [him] things which must shortly come to pass" (Rev. 1:1). This is illustrated by what God commanded him: "when thou comest, anoint Hazael to be king over Syria" (1 Kgs. 19:15). The future was being made plain to God's servant.

Hazael was an officer of the king of Syria and came to the throne when he had murdered King Ben-hadad (2 Kgs. 8:15). His name means 'Whom God beholds', and in him we see the "strong wind" of 1 Kings 19:11 that was to howl upon the Land and bring much destruction, for Hazael was to lead the Syrians against the Israelites, whom he "smote . . . in all the coasts" (2 Kgs. 10:32).

Similarly, the Lord continued by saying to Elijah, "and Jehu the son of Nimshi shalt thou anoint to be king over Israel" (1 Kgs. 19:16). Jehu's name means 'Yahweh is he', and he was the instrument of the "earthquake" (v. 11) of revolution.

Jehu's victories against God's enemies form a lengthy and impressive catalogue. It was Jehu who, after being proclaimed king of Israel, se-

lected a band of men, sped to Jezreel and killed Jehoram, the son of Ahab and Jezebel and successor to his brother Ahaziah on the throne of Israel (2 Kgs. 9:24). And who can forget the scene of Jehu entering the city of Jezreel and commanding the eunuchs of the royal palace to cast down Jezebel into the street? It was there, on the ground, that Jezebel's broken body was trodden under foot (v. 33).

Yet even this was not enough for Jehu, so he commanded the death of all the royal princes of Samaria, and on the morrow seventy heads were piled high in two heaps (10:7,8). Then all the worshippers of Baal in Samaria were slaughtered (vv. 19-25) and the temple of Baal was destroyed (v. 27). Israel was to shake, and the house of Omri was to share the fate of the dynasties that had preceded it.

Elijah's successor

But now, in stark contrast, God introduces Elijah to his own successor: ". . . and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room" (1 Kgs. 19:16). What an honour to be bestowed upon Elijah, that he would have the privilege of ordaining his rightful heir! How he must have felt assured by the knowledge that another was to be Divinely appointed to succeed him, and would continue his mission! Significantly, Elisha's name means 'God his salvation', and in him we surely see the instrument of God's "fire" (v. 12).

God continued with the words, "And it shall come to pass, that him that escapeth the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay: and him that escapeth from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay" (v. 17). Now Hazael and Jehu were both employed as Divine instruments to punish—they were the means of destruction—but by neither were the hearts of the children of Israel turned to their God. However, Elisha was altogether different, since he took the sword to no man. There was nothing natural in Elisha's instrument, it was purely spiritual, for Elisha's sword was "the sword of [his] mouth" (Rev. 2:16; cf. Isa. 11:4; 49:2). In this connection Hosea declared, "I hewed them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of My mouth"

(6:5); and Isaiah, "For by fire and by His sword will the LORD plead with all flesh" (66:16). This intense flame would plead with Israel and bring the message of salvation.

Moreover, Elijah on the mount was being taught a fundamental principle: that God's kingdom is to be advanced, not by wrath and vengeance, but by meekness and gentleness, through words of gentle persuasion (*cf.* Jas. 3:17).

It is also worth noting that, though Elijah is commanded by God to anoint Hazael, Jehu and Elisha, there is no record that he anointed either Hazael or Jehu. What we do find is that Elisha was responsible for declaring to Hazael that he would be king (2 Kgs. 8:13) and was involved in the anointing of Jehu (9:1-3). It may have been the case that Elijah had first anointed them secretly, as did Samuel with David (1 Sam. 16:2,13), but there is no evidence to suggest this.

"Yet I have left Me seven thousand in Israel"

The Lord continued with some staggering news for the prophet: "Yet I have left Me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him" (1 Kgs. 19:18).

The traditional school of thought would suggest here that God was in fact rebuking Elijah for his ignorance, that there was a mass of faithful ones in the land, and that he should have known better. If this interpretation is accepted, then how would Elijah have felt on hearing the news that amongst the very people he had so severely accused there were as many as seven thousand who had remained faithful to the God of Israel?

The alternative view of this phrase is captured in the margin: "Yet I will leave Me seven thousand". If this rendering is adopted then it can be concluded that God was not rebuking the prophet at all, but comforting him with the news that, though it was a time of spiritual corruption, He would still preserve seven thousand. Moreover, a remnant would survive this terrible onslaught, even "a remnant according to the election of grace" (Rom. 11:5). We should remember that there is always a remnant. The psalmist refers to such as God's "hidden ones" (Ps. 83:3), or, as the NKJV puts it, "sheltered ones", and the RSV, "protected ones". What beautiful descriptions of those whom the Lord shelters from the natural tempests of life—for the lives of all the faithful are "hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3)!

But why were there exactly "seven thousand"? Was God referring to a literal number of people,

or was the number merely symbolic? Seven is the number of the covenant and of God's perfection, and interestingly the term "seven thousand" is used elsewhere as a symbolic number (Rev. 11:13). Was Elijah therefore being told that, though judgements would be poured out and the time of adversity would continue, God would still preserve the people of His covenant (*cf.* Isa. 1:9; 10:20)?

God confides in His prophet

Though God had asked, "What doest thou here, Elijah?", there is nothing to conclude that the Almighty was angry with His servant. In fact, to the contrary, we observe God going to great lengths to comfort the prophet.

Let us also appreciate the honour that God placed upon Elijah, since we see here his Maker informing the prophet of His future plans and how they would be executed to fulfil His will. What an intimate relationship they must have shared! Christ also shared this level of intimacy with his disciples, as is illustrated by his own words: "Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father *I have made known unto you*" (Jno. 15:15).

So, after the visitations on Horeb and the commission Elijah had just received, the prophet left the holy mount and returned through the wilderness, back to the Land. Elijah received the news with great humility and grace. There was neither resentment nor animosity that another had been selected to continue his work. He responded immediately, without further ado. By no means was this an easy journey, since it was a distance of about 160 miles between Horeb and Abel-meholah (*cf.* 1 Kgs. 4:12), and most of the trek was through arduous desert.

The call of Elisha

The record now continues, "So he [Elijah] departed thence, and found Elisha the son of Shaphat" (1 Kgs. 19:19). Again, as on previous occasions, the Lord directed his path (17:10; 18:7), and he met his successor. There is no evidence that Elijah knew the identity of Elisha. However, as soon as their paths crossed Elijah knew that this indeed was the appointed man.

It is also worth bringing to attention the fact that Elisha "was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth" (1 Kgs. 19:19). He was occupied in hard labour. Elisha

was taking advantage of the rains that had just fallen, and was active, dedicated to the job in hand. Surely this is a lesson for us; God never wants an idle man, He desires labourers.

Elisha was with "twelve yoke of oxen", so he probably would have belonged to a wealthy family if they were his possession. Though Elisha may well have been endowed with material blessings, he nevertheless did not consider it beneath him to put his own hand to the work, just as the Lord Jesus taught: "whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant" (Mt. 20:26,27). Let us take heed.

Twelve oxen would have reminded Elijah that Elisha most assuredly was the chosen one to push forward his efforts in uniting the twelve tribes. Just as he had previously assembled twelve stones (1 Kgs. 18:31), and had commanded twelve barrels of water to be poured upon the offering (vv. 33, 34), he now observes twelve oxen, a sure sign that this was the man.

But what was the reaction of Elijah when he saw Elisha? Was there a moment of rejoicing that he had found his rightful successor? No, the narrative simply records, "and Elijah passed by him [Elisha], and cast his mantle upon him" (1 Kgs. 19:19). It might seem a very calculated and impassive response by the Tishbite prophet. However, for us truly to appreciate what was done we need to understand what is meant by the "mantle".

The mantle

Elijah's throwing his "mantle" upon Elisha as he passed by was a symbolic act. It was the sign of their common prophetic vocation, the seal and bond of the new relationship that now existed between them. It is a term which speaks of the transference of responsibility of the prophetic work from one to another. In many ways it was a type of sonship, as is illustrated by the words of Elisha when he saw the flaming chariot about to whisk Elijah away: "My father, my father" (2 Kgs. 2:12; cf. 13:14).

How then would Elisha react to Elijah's gesture? Would he understand what Elijah's intentions were? Would he truly appreciate the significance of this action? It is clear from Elisha's response that he knew full well the deep spiritual significance of what had just been done: "And he left the oxen, and ran after Elijah" (1 Kgs. 19:20). So the first thing Elisha did was to leave his oxen behind; there is no service without sacrifice. It

might be ships and nets (Mk. 1:20); for some of us it may well be houses, or even father, mother, wife or children (Mt. 19:29); but, whatever the calling, the message is the same: "come out from among them, and be ye separate" (2 Cor. 6:17).

It has been a subject of much debate as to whether Elisha demonstrated mixed loyalties when he responded by saying, "Let me, I pray thee, kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow thee" (1 Kgs. 19:20). Elisha was asking for permission to give a parting embrace and a kiss to his parents before he joined Elijah on his quest. Such an act was common for friends and relations at parting (cf. Ruth 1:9,14), and surely is no indication of a divided heart. Just remember what the Lord Jesus taught: "Honour thy father and mother" (Mt. 15:4; Mk. 10:19; cf. Eph. 6:2). If instead Elisha had pleaded with Elijah that he should "go and bury [his] father" (Mt. 8:21; Lk. 9:59), then we may well have drawn a different conclusion; but to pay due respect to his parents is nothing more than being a good and loving son.

What was Elijah's reaction to this very reasonable request? He simply replied, "Go back again: for what have I done to thee?" (1 Kgs. 19:20). He told him to return to his plough. Was Elijah testing the resolve of Elisha, determining what was truly in his heart? Surely he was not refusing Elisha's support, and commanding him to return to his parents. A much more reasonable interpretation is that Elijah empathised with Elisha's situation and encouraged him to return home to do the honourable thing, and then to follow him after he had taken leave of his parents.

Elisha ministers to Elijah

Elisha acted, and "returned back from him" (v. 21). But, on his return, what did he do? He "took a yoke of oxen, and slew them, and boiled their flesh with the instruments of the oxen". This action seems significant, as if he was in this act sealing a covenant with God in solemn vow; a symbolic act, expressive of Elisha's new-found commitment to the God of Israel.

So Elisha was done with his earthy pursuits; his old life was behind him and a glorious future beckoned. To demonstrate his devotion he used his wooden implements and livestock to provide a fellowship meal enjoyed by all (v. 21; cf. 2 Sam. 24:22). There would be no going back for him. He was leaving his present station and occupation and dedicating himself to his new way of life. The Lord Jesus taught that all disciples need to

follow this example: "whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple" (Lk. 14:33). For Elisha there was a new race to be run, a new field to plough.

Once the meal was over, and the last farewell made, Elisha "arose, and went after Elijah, and ministered unto him" (1 Kgs. 19:21). What is more, Elisha would soon be known as a loyal and faithful minister, even the one "which poured water on the hands of Elijah" (2 Kgs. 3:11). From now on it was not going to be the ravens (1 Kgs. 17:6), or the widow woman at Zarephath (vv. 15, 16), or even the angel in the desert (19:5-8), but a friend and companion, who would serve Elijah.

When we consider this type of ministration, from one brother or sister to another, it is worth remembering the challenging words of our Master: "he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve. For whether is greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? is not he that sitteth at meat? but I am among you as he that serveth" (Lk. 22:26,27). Elisha surrendered himself to Elijah's cause and followed him. We similarly have been called and must surrender ourselves in the service of our Lord: "No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (9:62).

(To be continued)

Out of the earth

News from the world of archaeology

Tony Benson

New discoveries at the Pool of Siloam

ONE OF JESUS' best-known miracles is the giving of sight to a blind man at the Pool of Siloam, as recorded in John 9. The modern Pool of Siloam, situated at the bottom end of the ridge running

south from the Temple Mount, is a small rectangular pool into which the waters of the Gihon Spring flow after their journey through Hezekiah's Tunnel. The building that exists on the site is nineteenth century in origin, and the building and the pool occupy only a small part of the area once occupied by a pool and a

church constructed in the fifth century to commemorate Jesus' miracle.

But was this the site of the Pool of Siloam where the blind man washed off the mud with which Jesus had anointed his eyes, and saw for the first time? For many years it has been assumed that it was, but a dramatic new discovery alters this perception.

A little to the south of the present Pool of Siloam is a walled garden situated at the point where the Kidron Valley and the Tyropoeon Valley meet. A narrow alley runs between this garden and the bottom of the ridge. In June 2004 workmen were replacing a sewer pipe, watched by an archaeologist, as is the practice in Jerusalem, with its rich heritage of ancient remains. Two steps were uncovered, and the work was immediately halted. Excavations were quickly commenced and a length of steps 225 feet long unearthed.



PICTURE: www.HolyLandPhotos.org

The partially excavated remains of the recently discovered Pool of Siloam, showing the steps leading down to the pool.