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The Call of Elisha I Kings 19:19-21

Intro: We have 3 verses left in **ch19** but before we dive into today's text, let's do a quick summary of what has come before so we will have a better understanding of how and why we have arrived here. **Ch19** describes a rough patch in Elijah's ministry. He had just come through the God-contest of **ch18** that pitted Baal, the storm-god of Sidon against Jehovah Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel. Of course, Yahweh showed up in miraculous, undeniable power and Baal didn't show up at all. When Yahweh's fire fell and consumed the sacrifice, the crowd fell to the ground and declared, "The Lord (Yahweh), He is God!" After the fire fell, the rain fell for the first time in 3.5 years, proving the Jehovah Yahweh is the only storm God. Since the prophets of Baal had been proven to be false prophets, Elijah executed just judgment upon them, relieving them of all earthly responsibilities and duties.

Now, King Ahab witnessed both the miraculous fire and the miraculous rain but it didn't seem to have the same effect on him as it did on the rest of the congregation. He just ran home and told Queen Jezebel all the Elijah had done. Jezebel then turned around and threatened to do to Elijah what he had done to her priests. When Elijah got wind of that, he lit out for the high country. We discussed the fact that Elijah wasn't afraid of death as he would actually pray that the Lord would take him out. Clearly, he wasn't running scared or wholly committed to self-preservation but we can tell by his actions and requests that he is at a low point in his ministry.

Call it professional burn-out, emotional depression or he just got up on the wrong side of the floor mat; whatever it was, Elijah was done. God had shown up in a very powerful and very public way and yet nothing in Israel had changed. Elijah could see no other reason to continue on; "We did our best, the message can't get any clearer, let's pack it up!" Elijah may have been done with ministry but praise the Lord, God wasn't done with him. He sends an angel to prepare Elijah for a long trip. He feeds Elijah and lets him take a nap – twice! I would venture to say that a lot of our emotional problems throughout the day could be solved with just a meal and a nap and between the two, I'd rather the nap. Elijah's being prepared for a long

journey; he's going to Mt. Sinai and he's taking the scenic route.

When he arrives, God asks him a strange question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" We often emphasize the "doing" as if this was an accusatory question but that would be wrong because God knew what Elijah was doing there, He sent him there. The emphasis should be on the word "here." Mt. Sinai was where Moses was given the Law by Yahweh and Elijah has returned to the very spot to bring official accusation against the nation of Israel for willfully and stubbornly trespassing that same Law. Elijah was asked the same question twice and he gave the same answer twice – bringing covenant accusation against Israel for breach of the covenant.

In between this question and answer session, a strange event takes place. God instructed Elijah to go out and stand on the mountain and the Lord would pass by. In this passing there was a great and strong wind, there was an earthquake and then there was a fire. The significant thing about each of these was that the Lord wasn't "in" any of them. Elijah only recognized the presence of the Lord in that still small voice that he heard after the noise and chaos.

The text doesn't explain the event but we can still take some spiritual encouragement from it

It's almost as if God is saying to Elijah, "You called down fire from heaven, had the prophets of Baal slain and prayed down a terrific rainstorm to end a drought but now you feel like a failure. You need to understand that I don't usually work in a manner that is loud, dramatic and impressive. My still small voice brings the Word to the listening ear and heart. Yes, there's a time and a place for the wind, the earthquake and the fire but most of the time, I speak to people in tone of gentle love and quiet persuasion." The Lord wasn't rebuking the courageous ministry of His faithful servant; He was merely reminding Elijah that He uses many different tools to accomplish His work. God's Word comes down like the gentle shower that refreshes, cleanses and produces life.

In this day of mega-churches, arena-sized outreaches and high-pressure promotions, it's difficult for some people to understand that God rarely works through the means of the dramatic and colossal. He can and He does but those events are few and far between. When God wanted to start the Hebrew nation, He sent a baby – Isaac. When He wanted to deliver that

nation from bondage, He sent another baby – Moses. He sent a kid named David to kill a Philistine giant with just a sling and a stone. And when God wanted to save the world, He sent His son as a weak and helpless baby. Today, God continues to reach the world with the gospel through the faithful ministry of earthen vessels like us – broken, fragile, weak – but still useful.

After Elijah had given his formal charges of apostasy against Israel in v14 he had nothing new to say to the Lord, but the Lord had a new message of hope for a frustrated Elijah. The Lord told him to return to the place of duty. Elijah was called to serve and there were tasks that needed to be done. His first responsibility was to anoint Hazael to be king of Syria. This was a Gentile nation but it was still Yahweh who chose the leaders. Next, he was to anoint Jehu to be king of Israel, because even though the nation had divided from Judah, Israel was still under the divine covenant and was responsible to Yahweh. Elijah's third task was to anoint Elisha to be his own successor.

It was evident to Elijah that the past generation in Israel had failed to live up to the requirements of the covenant and he's disappointed that the present generation hadn't done any better (v4). Now Yahweh is calling him to help equip the next generation by anointing 2 kings and a prophet. This is the OT version of Paul's exhortation to Timothy in [II Tim 2:2](#). God gave ministry to Timothy and to Elijah, not to keep for them but to pass on to others. God was going to use Elijah to answer his own prayer for the next generation and the future of Israel.

Of course, the people Yahweh named weren't specifically significant in the social structure of that day. Hazael was just the servant of King Bed-hadad of Syria, Jehu was a captain in the Israelite army and Elisha was just a farmer. But, by the time Elisha and Jehu completed their work, Baal worship was almost wiped out in Israel ([II Kings 10](#)). God was calling Elijah to stop weeping over the past and stop running from the present. It was time for him to start preparing others for the future. When God is in control, there is always hope.

But the Lord did more than just send Elijah out to recruit new workers. He also gave him the assurance that his work and their work would not be in vain. God would use the swords of Hazael and Jehu and the words and works of Elisha to accomplish His purposes in Israel. Even more, He assured Elijah that his own ministry hadn't been a failure, since there were

still 7K people in the land who were faithful to Yahweh. Elijah wasn't alone, there were plenty of "believers" still out there and yet, God sent him to touch the lives of 3 individuals. He didn't tell Elijah to go and gather the 7K and preach to them in a mass meeting. There is certainly a time and place for that but we must never underestimate the importance of working with individuals. The focus of Elijah's ministry may seem small but God is great and He will accomplish His purposes through His faithful and obedient servants.

19-21 – These last few verses may seem insignificant in the grand scheme of Israel's history but just as a few small drops of water leaking from a dam are the precursor of a catastrophic event, so too, these verses herald the beginning of God's just and painful judgment against Israel's apostasy. Elijah is merely answering God's call but Elisha will become an instrument of God's judgment upon Israel and Elijah's claiming of Elisha for Yahweh's service is the first faint dribbles of Yahweh's decreed process of judgment. Israel's fate then hangs upon Elisha's call. We need to keep this in mind even as we now focus on that call.

The first thing we notice is how suddenly the call of God might come. We've been given a heads-up that the call was coming but Elisha was clueless. There he was, minding his own business, simply doing what farm hands do on a regular basis, in this case working the land on his father's farm. When he was eating his Cheerios that morning, he would've never guessed that Elijah the Tishbite would walk across his new ploughed field and toss his mantle on him. Now, Elisha knew what that meant. The prophet's mantle was a symbol of his prophetic authority. This was an acted out symbol that called Elisha to join in Elijah's work as a prophet. Though he understood the symbolism, Elisha would have never anticipated this happening when he woke up that morning.

Sometimes God's call comes suddenly. There have been others who were equally surprised: Moses was surprised by God's call while he was tending his father-in-law's sheep (**Ex 3:1-2**). Matthew was called by Jesus while he was in the middle of collecting taxes (**Mt 9:9**) and it wasn't by accident that God's call came while these guys were working. God almost exclusively calls people who are already busy. He rarely calls folks who can't seem to ever find anything constructive to do. God is looking to call servants, to employ workers who will humbly and willingly submit to His will.

Of course, the call of God may have seemed sudden to Elisha but that doesn't mean it was unplanned, as though the kingdom of God were some kind of seat-of-the-pants operation, bouncing along from one crazy idea to the next. God had already revealed His decision to use Elisha back on Mt. Horeb. So, what appears to be all-of-a-sudden to Elisha was already settled with God. God had decided all of this even before Elisha was given the opportunity to decide. Suddenness is often the wrapping paper in which God's sovereignty sometimes arrives. We may think God's call comes out of nowhere but take heart, it has been established before the foundation of the world!

Now, you may be inclined to point out that Elisha is a special case. His call was unique because he was called to be Elijah's successor just as Joshua was called to be Moses' successor. God has called Elisha to the prophetic office and the special capacity of filling Elijah's very large shoes and you would be correct. But, if you also take that to mean that Elisha's call, as such, holds no claim on regular Christians like us then you would be wrong. Sure, Elisha's ministry will prove to be very unique and very special but there is also a sense in which his calling to that ministry is not unusual at all. Elisha's call simply depicts what God is always entitled to do (command our obedience) and what we are always obligated to acknowledge (that He has the right to do so). Elisha's case merely reveals in an unique way the general attitude that should be held by all of God's people: that we're servants ready to do our Master's will.

Elisha's call may have come to him suddenly but we can see that he received and obeyed it joyfully. Elisha's response in v20 doesn't indicate an unwillingness to answer Yahweh's call but rather, it shows that he has a clear understanding of what is being demanded of him (I will follow you) and an obvious desire to comply. His subsequent actions point to his intention to make a complete break from his former job. He didn't use the plow equipment to cook the meat because there was no other wood around; he used it to show that he was forever giving up his previous calling. And the people ate roast beef to celebrate it!

Elisha sometimes gets bad press for his comment because people tend to view it through the prism of [Luke 9:61-62](#). Yes, there are similarities in both stories but only in their form. The guy in [Lk 9](#) is quite different from Elisha.

Jesus' comment in [62](#) pictures someone who has purposefully taken up a task (the plow) only to be distracted from his task by constantly looking back: he has a divided mind. In [Lk 9](#), saying goodbye is an obstacle to kingdom commitment but in our text, it functions as the entry to kingdom service. Elisha goes back for 1 reason: to sever his connections, not to delay his commitment. He doesn't return to hold back but to cut loose.

The text clearly shows that Elisha was ready to face the cost of his call in the area of his affections: he was literally kissing his parents goodbye. In that culture, family was everything. It was the epicenter of Jewish life and society; everything a person was and hoped to be revolved around their family relations and yet, Elisha quickly realized and readily accepted the fact that going after Elijah would forever subordinate those relationships. Jesus places the same responsibility on those who follow Him ([Lk 14:25-26](#)).

But, Elisha wasn't just kissing his parents goodbye, he had to kiss security goodbye too! Apparently his pops was a wealthy man. Even if he didn't own all 24 of those plowing oxen, he at least owned a field that was large enough to require 24 oxen to plow. Shaphat's farm offered Elisha a degree of earthly comfort that Elijah's mantle couldn't touch but God's call rarely focuses on our comfort or our convenience; in fact, it never does. I recently read an article about Khari Willis, a 26 yr-old NFL player who's giving up his career to further the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He's not the first professional athlete to take such a drastic step and probably won't be the last. God's call doesn't always require such sacrifice but sometimes it does. What are you prepared to do? Which is more important to you?

Elisha also had to kiss goodbye what was familiar to him. Clearly, he was doing what he was raised to do; he was a typical Israelite farm boy; he knew what to expect and what was expected of him. There's something strangely reassuring about knowing what will generally be on your plate. Life is not predictable but the familiar can give you the illusion that it is. Farm work, tilling the soil, raising livestock, harvesting the crops – everything in its season; such was the ordered traditions of the customary. This might seem boring to some but to those of us who believe that tedium and routine are cousins of joy understand - Elijah was offering nothing so stable as what Elisha already had.

For Elisha, Yahweh's call must dominate every area of his life and it is no

different for modern disciples today. We also must consider all of the hindrances, obstacles and difficulties that may stand in the way of our whole-hearted commitment to Jesus Christ. Affections, security, familiarity; don't we often find ourselves having to count the cost in these same areas? Don't we find our favorite idols rearing up their ugly heads from these same areas, demanding our allegiance and our hearts? You may have never been tempted to worship Baal but that doesn't mean idolatry is never been a problem. Anytime we allow something to come before God's call on our life, we are setting His will aside to pursue our own. Elisha chose to put Yahweh's call first in his life and he was burning his bridges behind him.

Finally, notice how ingloriously God's call begins. After all his sacrifice, dedication and determination, what was the particular work that Elisha had been called to? The end of [v21](#) says he became Elijah's servant! Wow, that's not very glamorous work for someone who has been specifically designated by Yahweh. In fact, [II Kings 3:11](#) tells us that Elisha became known as the one who poured water on the hands of Elijah. Granted, those had to be some special hands but Elisha used to plow fields, then Yahweh called him and now he pours water on an old man's hands. Not a very outstanding piece of ministry – just a personal butler to an old prophet.

But this information is important, if nothing else, it is convicting for the normal spirit of servants in today's church. It's astounding how few of God's servants have true servant's heart. I've heard plenty of stories of how some humble soul has found their way into a particular ministry in a church, only to be transformed into a little Napoleon, barking orders and pushing their own agenda. All it takes to be a good servant is to find out what needs to be done and then just do it faithfully, to the best of your abilities, expecting nothing but the approval of your Master. That sounds overly simple because it is. But, even though it's simple that doesn't mean it is easy as we are not naturally servants. We want to achieve, we want to ascend – we want to be sitting on the right or left hand of the Son of Man.

The text doesn't just address our idolatry, it also addresses our discouragement. We often make the mistake of thinking that God's call automatically means exciting service. It rarely does in a worldly sense. Elisha became Elijah's servant – pretty mundane stuff. But at the time, that was Yahweh's call! If it's God's call then what's wrong with a no-frills ministry? If God calls us to pour water on the hands of Elijah and we do it,

are we not doing His will? Does anything else matter? A true servant's heart may require you to kiss goodbye loved ones, security, the familiar life – or it may just call you to order your will, your expectations under the will and expectations of your heavenly Master. 😊