

Elisha: Seeing the Hand of God at Work

Session 1

April 27, 2025

God's Hand in Calling Us to Serve

The Point: God invites us to join Him in His work.

Session Passages: 1 Kings 19:19-21; 2 Kings 2:7-15

1 Kings 19:19-21

Connection to the Point. At God's direction, Elijah anointed Elisha to serve, and Elisha left his livelihood to obediently follow Elijah.

Context. The events in 1 Kings 18 were the climax of the prophet Elijah's ministry. Elijah had challenged King Ahab to summon all the Israelites along with all the prophets of the false gods Baal and Asherah to gather at Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:19). There the Lord through Elijah defeated all the false prophets (vv. 20-40). Afterward, Ahab's wife, Jezebel, sent a messenger to Elijah who informed the prophet the queen was planning to have him killed. Fearing for his life, Elijah fled into the wilderness, and God brought him to Mount Horeb (19:1-9). At Mount Horeb, God spoke to Elijah, commanding the prophet to anoint Hazael (*HAZ ay el*) as king of Aram, Jehu as king over Israel, and Elisha as prophet in Elijah's place (vv. 9-18).

Elijah (v. 19) was a ninth-century prophet from Tishbe in the Northern Kingdom of Israel (1 Kings 17:1-2 Kings 2:12). Much of his ministry entailed his confrontations with King Ahab of Israel and Ahab's wife, Jezebel, because they promoted polytheism rather than worshipping Yahweh, the one, true God. Early in his ministry, Elijah declared to King Ahab that there would be no rain in the land apart from the prophet's command (1 Kings 17:1). During the drought, Elijah went to Zarephath (*ZAR ih fath*; a town south of Sidon on the Mediterranean seacoast), where he first miraculously provided for a widow and her son, and then after the son's death raised him from the dead (vv. 8-24). Elijah is perhaps best known for God's victory over the prophets of Baal and Asherah at Mount Carmel (chap. 18).

Elisha (v. 19). Elisha's name is a combination of the Hebrew words for God and salvation, so his name means "My God is salvation" or "My God saves." Elisha is called "man of God" about thirty times in the narratives about him in 1 and 2 Kings, and that title is used for Moses as well (Deut. 33:1; Josh. 14:6).

Mantle (v. 19). The Hebrew term for *mantle* appears twelve times in the Old Testament. It is associated with both a physical outer garment (cloak or robe) and the idea of splendor and glory. The English phrase “pass the mantle” is used today even in secular contexts for one leader passing on leadership to his or her successor and may have originated with this story. By placing his mantle on Elisha, Elijah was obeying God’s command to anoint Elisha as prophet in his place (v. 16). The act also symbolized the passing of Elijah’s prophetic power and authority to Elisha.

Kiss my father and mother (v. 20). The implication of this phrase is that Elisha was not a reluctant prophet, but he was a realistic one. He understood the cost of discipleship, and he was returning to say goodbye to his parents, his life, and his security. There is an echo of the call of Abram in this text (Gen. 12:1-3), as God called both men to leave the security of family and home and depend on the providence and power of God.

For what have I done to you? (v. 20). By asking this rhetorical question, Elijah was communicating to Elisha that the call on Elisha’s life was not actually from Elijah. Though Elijah was acting as God’s mouthpiece, the call on Elisha’s life was from God Himself. Consequently, though Elisha would serve as Elijah’s attendant, Elisha’s service was ultimately to God and not his mentor.

The oxen’s wooden yoke and plow (v. 21). The use of the *yoke* and *plow* to cook the meat was an act that symbolized the clear break Elisha was making with his former life, to which he would not be returning. Jesus used similar imagery when He described the type of separation from one’s former life in relation to being His disciple, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

Gave it to the people (v. 21). Elisha’s return to his home to bid farewell to his father and mother was not merely a return to his nuclear family. In the ancient world households included extended families as well as those in the service of the family. In addition to any sons and daughters, Elisha’s parents’ household would have been made up of relatives, household servants, and even close friends. By returning to his parents’ household and sacrificing the oxen, Elisha was able to serve an entire group of people, and they were blessed by his sacrifice. By making this kind of sacrifice, Elisha was also communicating the joy that he had in being called to be the Lord’s prophet.

Followed . . . served (v. 21). The Hebrew term for *followed* means to walk in both a literal sense and figuratively in reference to one’s lifestyle or pattern of conduct. The term for

served means to minister or attend. Elisha's call from God was to the lifestyle of service to Yahweh first as Elijah's attendant and later as Elijah's successor as a prophet of God.

2 Kings 2:7-11

Connection to the Point. Knowing Elijah would soon depart, Elisha asked for the Spirit of God to be with him as He was with Elijah.

Context. The time of Elijah's departure arrived. When the Lord told Elijah to go to first Bethel and then Jericho, both times Elijah told Elisha to "stay here," and both times Elisha refused to leave the prophet. In both Bethel and Jericho "the sons of the prophets" told Elisha that the Lord was taking Elijah away (2 Kings 2:1-5). Elijah told Elisha that the Lord had commanded him to go to the Jordan River, and again Elisha told Elijah that he would not leave the prophet. So the two traveled to the Jordan (v. 6).

The sons of the prophets (v. 7). This phrase appears only between 1 Kings 20 and 2 Kings 9 in the Old Testament. The word *sons* does not indicate a biological relationship, but rather some type of prophetic group or guild. *The sons of the prophets* were under the authority of a greater prophet of God (2 Kings 6:1).

Struck the water (v. 8). Elijah's actions here echo Moses's actions when God parted the Red Sea (Ex. 14:21-31). In both cases, the individual was the means God used to display His power. The staff that Moses used and the mantle that Elijah used were not magical items with the power to create miracles. Instead, they were symbols of the power of God to do miraculous activity and demonstrated that as the Creator He has power over nature.

Let me inherit (v. 9). This phrase speaks to the familial relationship Elijah and Elisha shared. It also indicates that Elisha understood that the prophetic role he would take up in Elijah's place was received according to God's grace and power.

Two shares of your spirit (v. 9). God instructed the people of Israel that their firstborn sons were to inherit a double portion of their fathers' estates (Deut. 21:17). This phrase indicates the familial nature of the relationship between Elijah and Elisha. *Your spirit* refers to the Spirit of God which rested on Elijah. Elisha's reference to *your spirit* demonstrates he understood he would be inheriting Elijah's responsibilities as a prophet and that such prophetic responsibilities were a gift from God and exercised through God's power.

Chariot of fire with horses of fire (v. 11). In this context, *fire* symbolizes the presence of God. In the ancient world, the power of a king and his kingdom was often measured by the strength of the army—horses, chariots, and charioteers (Ex. 14:7-9; Josh. 17:16-18; 1 Sam. 13:5; 1 Kings 10:26). In a similar way, the omnipotent power of God is demonstrated by His army of fiery horses and chariots.

Just as the fire God sent down upon Mount Carmel demonstrated His omnipotent power over the false gods Baal and Asherah (1 Kings 18:19-40), so now in taking Elijah to heaven the Lord demonstrated His power over life and death. Elijah did not die, but was taken alive into God's presence.

Heaven (v. 11). In the Old Testament, the Lord's presence is said to dwell in different places. The garden of Eden, the tabernacle, and the temple were sacred spaces where God dwelt among His people. However, throughout the Old Testament God is also said to dwell in heaven. In fact, Deuteronomy 26:15 declares that heaven is God's "holy dwelling." From heaven God rules all creation and relates to humanity, sending blessings and passing judgments over the people who dwell on the earth. So, when Elijah was taken up "into heaven in the whirlwind," all those who were watching would have understood that Elijah had entered into the place where God's presence dwells.

The whirlwind (v. 11). The false Canaanite god Baal was worshiped as the Rider of the Clouds and was believed to have power over fertility, the seasons, rain, and wind. By taking Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, the Lord was demonstrating, as He had done both through the drought (1 Kings 17:1; 18:1) and at Mount Carmel (18:19-40), that He alone is Lord over creation and is the one true God.

2 Kings 2:12-15

Connection to the Point. It was evident that the Spirit of God rested on Elisha as he returned from the place of Elijah's departure.

My father (v. 12). The relationship which was implicit in Elisha's request to inherit two shares of Elijah's spirit (v. 9) is now made clear. Elisha had a familial relationship with Elijah, viewing him as a spiritual father. A similar relationship existed between Elijah/Elisha and the sons of the prophets (vv. 3,5). This perspective echoes the relationship Jesus has with believers, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:34-35).

The chariots and horsemen of Israel (v. 12). The *chariots* and *horsemen* of fire represent God's presence and strength. That Elisha identified them with Israel indicates both that God is Israel's true strength and that the power behind Elijah's ministry was God. Now God was taking Elijah up into heaven.

This is another indication that God is greater than the false Canaanite god Baal. The Lord has power over both storms (Baal was said to be the storm god) and over life and death. The God of Israel is not merely some regional god whose power is limited to a geographic area or a certain group of people. He is Lord over all creation and all peoples. He alone deserves our worship. He calls all people to repent and place their faith in Jesus Christ; when they do this, they will find abundant and eternal life.

Tore them (v. 12). Throughout Scripture, the tearing of one's clothes signifies mourning and grief. For instance, when Elijah proclaimed God's judgment upon King Ahab of Israel for all his evil and idolatry, Ahab tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and fasted in grief and repentance (1 Kings 21:17-27). When Job was informed his wealth had been taken from him and his children had been killed he tore his robe and shaved his head (Job 1:13-20). The tearing of one's clothes was also a reaction to situations which were considered to be blasphemous. At Jesus's hearing before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high priest tore his robes when he (falsely) believed Jesus's claim to be the Messiah was blasphemy (Matt. 26:63-65). Paul and Barnabas tore their clothes when the people of Lystra tried to worship them (Acts 14:11-15).

Picked up the mantle (v. 13). By picking up Elijah's *mantle*, Elisha picked up not only Elijah's physical clothes but also took on Elijah's spiritual role as God's prophet.

Where is the Lord God of Elijah? (v. 14). Elisha did not ask this question from a position of doubt but from a position of boldness and belief. He knew that he was the successor to Elijah. Elisha was entreating God to display His power through him in the same way that He had displayed that power through Elijah.

The spirit of Elijah (v. 15). The sons of the prophets recognized that the Spirit who had rested on Elijah now rested on Elisha. As such, the power of God that Elijah had access to was now available to Elisha. While that power would be made manifest in miraculous acts such as the parting of water and later in raising the dead, the most miraculous act that Elisha would perform was to speak the words of God. From the beginning of time until now, the one thing that people need more than anything else is not miraculous healings or great displays of power. It is the Word of God being spoken to them in such a way that they can

hear, understand, and respond in faith to the Creator God who loves them and desires to have a relationship with them (John 1:10-13; 3:16-18; Heb. 3:15).

Bowed down (v. 15). Both in the world of Elisha's day and in some cultures today, the action of bowing down indicates submission to authority. By bowing down before Elisha, the sons of the prophets submitted themselves to Elisha's authority and affirmed what God had already done—made Elisha His prophet in place of Elijah. In a similar manner, when the church at Antioch commissioned Barnabas and Saul as missionaries, they were recognizing that the Holy Spirit had set apart and empowered the two for the task (Acts 13:1-3).

Interestingly, in spite of their actions of bowing down before Elisha there apparently was some lingering doubt among the sons of the prophets as to whether Elisha was God's prophet in Elijah's place. Believing the Lord might have moved Elijah to another earthly location, they persistently asked Elisha that some of them might go in search of Elijah. Elisha finally relented and after their search they returned to report they had not found Elijah (2 Kings 2:16-18).