

THE PROPHET AND THE PLOWBOY



FOCUS VERSE

II Kings 2:9

And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me.

LESSON TEXT

I Kings 19:19–21

19 So he departed thence, and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth: and Elijah passed by him, and cast his mantle upon him.

20 And he left the oxen, and ran after Elijah, and said, Let me, I pray thee, kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow thee. And he said unto him, Go back again: for what have I done to thee?

21 And he returned back from him, and took a yoke of oxen, and slew them, and boiled their flesh with the instruments of the oxen, and gave unto the people, and they did eat. Then he arose, and went after Elijah, and ministered unto him.

II Kings 2:8, 10–14

8 And Elijah took his mantle, and wrapped it together, and smote the waters, and they were divided hither and thither, so that they two went over on dry ground.

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10 And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so.

11 And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

12 And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof. And he saw him no more: and he took hold of his own clothes, and rent them in two pieces.

13 He took up also the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and went back, and stood by the bank of Jordan;

14 And he took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and smote the waters, and said, Where is the LORD God of Elijah? and when he also had smitten the waters, they parted hither and thither: and Elisha went over.



FOCUS THOUGHT

God has given us the gift of life, and it is a wonderful experience. In Jesus Christ we learn to appreciate life's challenge, purpose, and potential.



CULTURE CONNECTION

A True Servant's Attitude

A servant thinks of others more than himself. He is humble, self-effacing, and focused on the needs of others more than on his own needs. He finds true joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment through helping others and meeting their needs whenever he can. A true servant is selfless, not selfish.

In his book titled *The Preacher's Portrait, Some New Testament Word Studies*, John R. W. Stott offered some insights into human nature and the attitude necessary for one to serve others. To mention only a few of them, he wrote:

"People are illogical, unreasonable and self-centered. Love them anyway.

"If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Do good anyway. . . .

"The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway. . . .

"What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway."

Elisha was devoted to dedicating his life to serving Elijah even though it meant following a difficult and challenging path. Elijah tried to dissuade Elisha from pursuing "a double portion" and from following him, telling Elisha he had asked "a hard thing." However, Elisha persisted with determination and a willingness to serve.

Even though the idea of servanthood often runs counter to our contemporary culture in North America, our nations and the church would be well served if more individuals were willing and ready servants.

OUTLINE

I. DIFFERENT TYPES OF LEADERS CALLED

- A. The Prophet
- B. The Plowboy

II. THE MASTER AND THE SERVANT

- A. Elisha Followed Elijah
- B. Elisha Served Elijah
- C. Elisha Succeeded Elijah

III. THE SUCCESSOR'S ROLE

- A. A Continuing Leadership
- B. A Greater Ministry
- C. God's Kingdom Blessed

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

We live in a world where many people balk at the idea of climbing the ladder to success. They want to take the elevator directly to the top. These individuals could learn a lot from the prophet Elisha. His servant's heart and willingness to be a follower rather than a leader paved the way for him to receive a double portion of God's Spirit.

When thinking about Elisha, his miracles immediately come to mind. His accolades often

overshadow his service, but his humility should not be forgotten. He began by answering the call of the prophet Elijah. He left behind his plowboy status to become Elijah's apprentice. Many would see his choice as a demotion.

Elisha, however, viewed his calling as one of the greatest opportunities in his life. While others observed a figure in the background waiting on Elijah, Elisha envisioned something far greater for himself. Many may have viewed him as a nobody, but Elisha possessed a spiritual ambition that only a few have ever known. Elisha's drive was born out of humility, service, and a belief that God had a plan for him to do greater things than he had ever done. Elisha allowed the Master to shape him into a vessel that could receive a double portion.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. DIFFERENT TYPES OF LEADERS CALLED

A. The Prophet

Elisha had an outstanding example in the prophet Elijah. Elijah had a résumé that put him in elite company. His confidence and

list of accomplishments ranked him right up there with Moses. Like Moses, he battled a wicked king. Like Moses, he would see the majesty of God on a mountain and wrestle with depression in the wilderness of despair. And just as the Lord was with Moses at the end of his days, so He was with Elijah, reserving a special calling up into glory for this faithful man of God.

Life was not easy for Elijah because he worked in the northern kingdom of Israel where wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel reigned. Ahab had evil inclinations, but Jezebel incited him to go even further in crossing lines. Additionally, Baal worship was widespread and growing. Elijah found himself in a setting where his very name spelled trouble. In Hebrew, *Elijah* means “My God is Jehovah.” Elijah did not oppose Baal in name only. He took the fight directly to Baal, showing that Baal’s supposed power was non-existent.

Mountain of triumph. Elijah proved himself to be a true prophet when he declared the land would be without rain. The prophecy was a slap in the face of the Canaanite deity Baal and his worshipers. Anyone who lived in the area knew Baal was considered a storm god. But God sent Elijah to show that Baal had no control over the weather. Not one drop of rain or dew fell for three years and six months (James 5:17). During this time, the prophet Elijah lived in hiding. God sustained him with food until this man of the one true God challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest on Mount Carmel. The one who answered by fire would be God.

During the contest, Elijah took the opportunity to mock Baal and his prophets at every turn. Although the prophets of Baal spent all day calling on him, there was no answer. When it came Elijah’s turn to offer a sacrifice, he even raised the stakes of the competition by pouring water all over the sacrifice. And Elijah’s God did not let him down. Whereas the false deity Baal remained silent, the one true God who had withheld the rain answered by fire when the righteous man prayed fervently.

After Elijah had slain all the prophets of Baal, he prophesied to Ahab that the rain would come. The rain came just as Elijah had prophesied.

Wilderness of despair. Sadly, Elijah’s victory was short-lived. Jezebel put out a contract on his life. Elijah fled. No doubt sick of all the hiding he had experienced during the years of drought, Elijah once again found himself on the run. He began to question not only his calling, but his very reason for existence. He felt alone in the world and wished to die.

Angelic visitation. But God was not finished with Elijah. In spite of his great victory on the mountain, Elijah still had some unfinished business to complete for the Lord. God sent an angel to provide the prophet with food to strengthen him. Then God led him to another mountaintop experience. Elijah journeyed to Mount Horeb. Horeb is another name for Sinai, and God wanted to speak with Elijah there just as He had spoken to His servant Moses.

God’s direction. God let Elijah know he was not alone and was still part of the master plan. The Lord instructed Elijah to anoint two kings and also to anoint a prophet to replace him. He let Elijah know he was not the only one who served the one true God. God had reserved seven thousand men who had refused to worship the image of Baal. No matter how many altars are torn down or how strong the opposition of the enemy seems, God will always reserve a remnant. And God soon added to this remnant a new prophet.

Although God had chosen Elisha to be this new prophet, perhaps He had an additional job for Elisha. Elijah’s despair may have shown that the prophet needed a friend—someone who would stand beside him no matter what. Elijah had walked the path alone for so long and had shown exemplary faithfulness in the face of evil and despair. Now he needed someone who would be faithful to him and serve him just as he served the Lord.

B. The Plowboy

Elisha seemed to have no designs on being God’s next great prophet. As a farmer, he had crops to plant, and the recent return of the rains made it possible for him to till the soil. No longer would he journey to the fields and see the hard, thirsty, unforgiving earth refuse to budge. Elisha saw his opportunity for a more abundant life for his family, and he was going to seize the day. He was not looking for a career change or peering any further into the

future than harvest season where he would reap the rewards of his labor.

A humble situation. Elisha appeared to be in a humble situation as he began to plow his fields. Some scholars believe Elisha was the son of a wealthy landowner, but even the well-to-do would have faced difficulties during the extended drought. The location of the family's lands may have mitigated the situation somewhat because they lived near a stream that fed into the Jordan. The family also had access to springs in the area. But God had not preserved Elisha during the drought so he could go back to business as usual and succeed his father. In spite of his personal plans and his family's vision for his life, Elisha had a brush with destiny.

Effect of the mantle. Elisha felt the call of God when the mantle of Elijah touched him. In one extraordinary moment, Elisha's life changed dramatically. Immediately he wanted to leave his life on the farm to enter the service of Elijah and the Lord. The old prophet tested his new protégé's commitment, acting as if he had done nothing to merit Elisha's response. But Elisha was not deterred. No one needed to tell Elisha what to do. God had spoken to the plowboy through the mantle.

The plowboy's response. Elisha showed his resolve to trade his old way of life for his new calling. He took his yoke of oxen, slaughtered them, boiled their flesh, and fed the people. The pull of the mantle was so strong he could not resist. He spent no time discussing what his responsibilities would be, his future compensation, or opportunities for advancement. Elisha followed Elijah, hoping that someday his faithful service would allow him to seize a chance to receive a blessing from the prophet and his God.

II. THE MASTER AND THE SERVANT

A. Elisha Followed Elijah

Due to changes in the workforce, many of us in today's world do not truly understand the importance of being an apprentice. Although we have education and job training, we are usually paid from day one when we begin a job. In days gone by, individuals wanting to learn a trade did so by becoming apprentices. They had to faithfully serve the master of a craft, performing many menial tasks. Their

wages consisted of the knowledge and experience they gained.

Some prophets in the Bible had a sort of apprenticeship or internship arrangement. While many prophets received their calling directly from the Lord, others, like Elisha, received a call from a mentor. We can identify these prophetic apprentices in the Bible when we see the phrase "son(s) of the prophets." An account of one of the sons of the prophets on a special mission from the Lord is given in I Kings 20:35–43. Elisha was often around other sons of the prophets (II Kings 2; 4; 6), but he surpassed them in spite of his humble beginnings.

B. Elisha Served Elijah

Elisha began his apprenticeship by serving Elijah. In addition to learning more about the Lord, he had a front-row seat to the ministry of Elijah. Elisha embraced the opportunity to gain knowledge from his mentor through both service and observation.

Elisha's ministry shows the need to follow the advice of II Corinthians 10:12 and not compare ourselves with others. Elisha's ministry was different from Isaiah's. Isaiah received a grand vision of the glory of God, seeing the Lord "high and lifted up" (Isaiah 6). He also served in the royal court, advising kings about international affairs in the southern capital of Judah at Jerusalem.

In contrast, Elisha knew that Elijah often opposed the royal court of the corrupt northern kingdom of Israel. Elijah challenged the evil King Ahab and his wicked Queen Jezebel. Elijah's example created a difficult road for Elisha to follow. Nevertheless Elisha did not question his calling just because he did not serve the king who reigned in Jerusalem. Rather he accepted God's will for his life, refusing to be overwhelmed by the difficulties as he kept his eyes on the prize set before him.

Faithful and committed. Elisha did not find instant gratification in his calling. He left the hard work of the plow to take on the new task of serving his mentor, Elijah, not to immediately perform miracles or hear from the Lord. Elisha never disdained his calling or went to Elijah to proclaim it was his time to shine. Instead he respected his mentor. He understood the wisdom of Proverbs 27:18: "Whoso keepeth the

fig tree shall eat the fruit thereof: so he that waiteth on his master shall be honoured.”

Loyal and unselfish. Elisha remained loyal to his mentor. He did not seek wealth or prestige. One day Elisha would have a servant named Gehazi whose self-centeredness led to his ruin. When Elisha refused gifts for helping Naaman, Gehazi’s greed got the best of him. He surreptitiously left Elisha and attempted to acquire gifts for himself. The one who had seen Elisha involved in raising the Shunamite’s son from the dead (II Kings 4) and had seen that Naaman’s leprosy had been cleansed (II Kings 5) failed to recognize the incredible opportunity of serving the man of God. As a result of his greed and the lies he told Naaman, Gehazi was cursed to live the rest of his life with Naaman’s leprosy (II Kings 5:27). In contrast, there is no hint in Scripture that Elisha resented his role as servant or attempted to enrich himself for his sacrifice.

C. Elisha Succeeded Elijah

Elisha understood the importance of having spiritual goals. When Elijah struck the water of the Jordan with his mantle so he and Elisha could cross over the Jordan on dry ground, Elisha knew the great prophet would soon go on his heavenly journey. Before a whirlwind caught up Elijah into Heaven, the man of God said to Elisha, “Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee” (II Kings 2:9).

Most likely, Elijah had never asked Elisha what he wanted because Elijah was the master and Elisha was the servant. But because of his devotion to Elijah and his unselfishness, Elisha was given the opportunity to make a request of Elijah: “I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me” (II Kings 2:9). Elijah recognized Elisha’s hunger for the things of God, and he said, “Thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so” (II Kings 2:10). Just as he had done throughout his entire ministry, Elisha kept his eyes on Elijah.

III. THE SUCCESSOR’S ROLE

A. A Continuing Leadership

Once Elijah disappeared into Heaven, Elisha immediately put God’s promises to the

test. Taking up the mantle of his mentor, he smote the waters of the Jordan and said, “Where is the LORD God of Elijah?” (II Kings 2:14). All the years of service and faith paid off as the God of Elijah answered, and Elisha crossed back over on dry ground.

Elisha continued the leadership of Elijah by making himself available to other sons of the prophets, helping their widows, and being a godly example in an age where the worship of Baal still attempted to ensnare the people. Elisha’s bold request for a double portion was amazing, considering the circumstances in which he lived. But perhaps such a great prophetic voice was needed in such a dark time. Elisha’s leadership brought hope to the people of Israel. Although some of them might have felt concerned because Elijah was gone, they had no reason to doubt the power of God as Elisha continually demonstrated there was still a God in Israel.

B. A Greater Ministry

God’s power stands strong from generation to generation. If we count both the miracles and the prophecies of Elijah, the prophet’s ministry consisted of fourteen mighty deeds. Elisha’s request for a double portion meant that he needed to perform twenty-eight supernatural feats. Some of his mighty acts include cursing the disobedient (II Kings 2:24; 5:27) as well as using his prophetic gifts to see hidden things and future events (II Kings 5:26; 6:9; 7:1–2, 8:1, 10, 12; 9:7; 13:17, 19).

Many of his miracles were associated with water, including parting the Jordan (II Kings 2:14), healing the waters (II Kings 2:21), and strategically filling ditches with water (II Kings 3:16–17). He prophetically knew the water-filled trenches would lead to the defeat of the Moabites (II Kings 3:18, 21–27).

His most famous miracles include the continual replenishment of oil until all the vessels had been filled (II Kings 4:4), the prophecy of the birth of the Shunammite’s son (II Kings 4:16) and his later resurrection (II Kings 4:33–35), the healing of Naaman (II Kings 5:14), and the floating axe head (II Kings 6:6). Two of his miracles were related to food: the healing of the poisoned pottage (II Kings 4:40–41) and the increase of the bread (II Kings 4:42–44)—a miracle Jesus duplicated in Matthew 14.

Elisha even took on the entire Syrian army, praying for his servant to see the heavenly host that was backing him up (II Kings 6:17) before causing the army to lose its sight (II Kings 6:18) and restoring it (II Kings 6:20). Later the Syrians were deceived by the sound of chariots (II Kings 7:6). Elisha died without having received his double portion, but God was not finished yet. In II Kings 13:21, a dead man who was thrown into Elisha's sepulcher came back to life. If we are truly faithful to God, our ministry does not end at death. God's promises are more powerful than the grave.

C. God's Kingdom Blessed

God's kingdom was doubly blessed through the ministry of Elisha. Elisha stood in stark contrast to Ahab and Jezebel. Their self-serving and vengeful attitudes had led to the slaughter of the righteous Naboth (I Kings 21), the theft of his land, and the proliferation of sin and Baal worship throughout the northern kingdom of Israel. Elisha was truly a man of God and a man of the people. He served God, obeying His commands and being a willing vessel. He served the people, but not in an attempt to win a popularity contest and appease them. Rather he provided for their needs, performing miracles, prophesying, and training other prophets.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Christian artist Steven Curtis Chapman's song "Burn the Ships" tells a story similar to Elisha's life. The song relates the historical event of Hernando Cortez sailing to what is now Mexico and, upon arrival, burning his ships so his men would be committed to fight

for the cause of Spain. According to the *New World Encyclopedia*, Cortez actually sank his ships instead of burning them, and the difference between the song and history is likely due to an error in translation. Nevertheless the principle is the same: sometimes we have to get rid of the escapes back to our old lives in order to fully serve the Lord.

Elisha understood this principle. He was willing to give up the potential wealth and lands his father would have offered him in order to be a servant to the Lord and to Elijah. Elisha's example and Cortez's military strategy challenge us to make sure we are fully committed to the Lord.

Serving the Lord can be difficult sometimes because it demands humility. It can sometimes require what seems like a demotion. But the wise among us know we often have to take a step back in order to move forward in life and in our walk with God.

In Chris Gardner's autobiography *The Pursuit of Happyness*, the author tells about taking a demotion from being a salesman to interning as a stockbroker. Gardner lived for six months with no salary and without the guarantee of a job. Ultimately, he earned a spot in a great company and went on to become a multimillionaire.

If someone like Gardner can take such a huge risk in the natural world, what is preventing us from stepping out by faith and doing something for God? We may approach the situation with uncertainty, but we have two good examples to follow. We can see the perseverance of Elijah both in triumph and test, and we can see the godly example of faithful service in the man with enough spiritual ambition to ask for a double portion. ■

REFLECTIONS

- Today's lesson speaks of being a faithful servant and being an apprentice to be successful in Christ. How is this mindset different from the world's definitions of success?
- Elijah felt both victorious and depressed while serving the Lord. How can we handle the ups and downs that can come with working for the Lord?
- What is something in your life you need to get rid of in order to fully commit to serving the Lord?
- The Bible says, "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness" (Matthew 5:6). How do you define spiritual ambition in your own life? What opportunities for serving the Lord are you pursuing now?