

1 Kings 19:19–21 (NIV)

¹⁹So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. ²⁰Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. “Let me kiss my father and mother goodbye,” he said, “and then I will come with you.”

“Go back,” Elijah replied. “What have I done to you?”

²¹So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his servant.

Luke 9:51-62 (NRSV)

⁵¹When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵²And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” ⁵⁵But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶Then they went on to another village.

⁵⁷As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” ⁵⁸And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” ⁵⁹To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” ⁶⁰But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” ⁶¹Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” ⁶²Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Sometimes commitment just won't wait.

There's an old joke about the difference between being involved and true commitment. It is like a breakfast of ham and eggs: the chicken was involved, the pig was committed. I imagine there were days that the prophet Elisha felt a bit like the pig¹; and it all began on a warm afternoon when the great Elijah made a visit.

Elijah on the run (1 Kings 19)

With Jezebel determined to find him and kill him after God's triumph on the slopes of Mt. Carmel, Elijah ran southward. After a day's travel across the desert, Elijah was done, cooked, spent in a way he had never imagined possible. So he found a lone tree and sat down under it, quietly telling God that he was ready to die. Then he stretched out and fell asleep.

Suddenly, an angel touched him and told him to eat. He opened his astonished eyes and right there, next to his head, was some bread that had been warmed on hot stones. Next to it was a jar of fresh, cooling water. The angel told him to eat. Then the angel touched him a second time, speaking again. Elijah better get up; he was going to need the nourishment for the journey ahead.

So Elijah did as he was told; he ate and drank it all. In a desert wilderness, you never know when you might get food and water again.

As he ate, he contemplated this latest turn of events. He had been ready, even eager, to die and had told God as much. And what had he gotten in return? Food and water. I

¹ Of course, being an Israelite, Elisha wouldn't want to be mentioned alongside a pig, much less compared to one! My apologies.

guess we'd say have to say his prayer was answered with what he needed, not what he wanted.

On the strength of that meal, Elijah pressed on. He traveled southward for the longest time, forty days and nights, all the way to Mt. Horeb, aka Mt. Sinai. It was the mountain of God where Moses had first met God at the burning bush and where God had first brought his people after redeeming them from slavery in Egypt.

Elijah found a cave at the base of the mountain and slept there for the night. Soon, Elijah felt God with him again. That same urgent clarity. God asked him what he was doing at God's mountain. So Elijah, knowing full well that God already knew the answer, told God the story as briefly as he could.

Elijah heard God again. This time God told him to go stand outside so that he could experience directly the presence of God. But before he could even leave the cave, a mighty wind began to buffet the mountain that was unlike any storm Elijah had experienced. Remembering the stories of Moses at this very mountain, Elijah thought at first that God was in this unearthly wind. But God was not.

Then an earthquake shook the mountain to its core. Surely, Elijah thought, this had to be God. But it was not.

Then a fire came, much like the one that had burned but not consumed Moses' bush. This just had to be God. Elijah knew the stories well. God had always come to his people in this way. In thunder and wind and storms and fire. They all spoke powerfully of the powerful YHWH. . . . But even in the fire, there was no God.

Then there came only the sound of sheer silence. And in that exquisite calm, Elijah knew that God was present. So he covered his face with his mantle² and stepped outside the cave. Then God asked exactly the same question he asked before. And Elijah gave exactly the same answer.

Elijah wondered where this was heading and he soon found out. God had more work for him yet. No rest for the weary and all that. Elijah is to head northward, anoint a couple of kings along the way and also anoint another prophet, a man with a confusingly similar name to Elijah's . . . Elisha.

Elisha drops everything

Let's try to picture the scene for a moment. Elisha has been hard at work, using a dozen oxen to plow a field. He has a substantial operation and a lot of capital tied up in the livestock. Elisha is a man of means. And the man has been hard at work, sweaty and tiring. In the midst of his labors, up walks a man who tosses a mantle across Elisha's back and then keeps right on going.

In a flash, Elisha grasps the meaning of this admittedly bizarre act and runs after the man, ready to follow him. All Elisha asks for is a bit of time to say some goodbyes and settle his affairs. The man, who we know is Elijah, tells Elisha to go ahead and take care of things. So Elisha quickly destroys his plows and slaughters his oxen; there will be no going home for Elisha. He throws a big barbecue, says his goodbyes, and then catches up with Elijah, whom he will follow and serve.

Yep . . . Elisha is much more the pig than the eggs. He is called and he goes. That simple. And what is God asking from Elisha? A lot:

Elisha's summons to be a prophet was a call to an office of risk. Prophets had been killed, others were in hiding (1 Kings 18:4, 13), and Jezebel had run Elijah out of the country (19:1–3). The office to which Elisha was called was not a popular one. The prevalent mood was one of accommodation to Canaanite religion (18:21). Nor was prophecy an economically secure calling. Elisha had to give up his life as a

² A mantle (v. 13) was a shawl-like outer garment. It is to Elijah what Moses' staff was to him. Elijah covers his face because he knows that God told Moses he could not see God's face and live.

farmer (and if the twelve yoke of oxen were his, he was a very wealthy farmer) and follow Elijah. Elisha's call required humility. . . . Above all, Elijah's summons meant that Elisha had to make a complete break with his old way of life and become totally committed to the new. In spite of all this, Elisha accepted with joy and enthusiasm.³

Jesus takes it up a notch

Elisha is given some time to get ready before he heads out to follow Elijah. But Jesus takes commitment to another level when he meets three men on the road to Jerusalem.

As Jesus and some of his disciples make their way, they attract some would-be followers who seem most enthusiastic about joining the movement. There are three men and each one makes clear their readiness to follow Jesus . . . as soon as they take care of a few things. In this, they are no different than Elisha.

The key to understanding Jesus' encounter with these three men is to see that all three have perfectly fine reasons for taking care of some things before they head out on the journey. One man merely wants to bury his father. What could be wrong with that? Another wants to say goodbye to his family. Who wouldn't? But Jesus won't have any of it. If these three men want to follow Jesus they must be prepared to drop everything, that minute, and go. There can be no other loyalties. There can be no other priorities. Elijah had at least let Elisha kill his livestock and throw a barbeque before heading out (1 Kings 19:19-21). But then again, Elijah wasn't Lord. Jesus is.

If you've known Jesus only as Jesus-meek-and-mild or Jesus-of-the-nice-hug, then passages like today's are jarring. Can't even bury his father!?!? But hard teachings demand hard techniques. Jesus knows well that his followers simply don't get it. They don't understand where his vocation will lead. They haven't counted the cost for Jesus, much less for themselves. They may consider themselves to be fully ready to be Jesus' followers, in the strongest sense of that word, but they are not. Alan Culpepper writes:

The final scene [of Luke 9], which depicts the errors of would-be disciples who do not understand that Jesus is on the road leading to the cross in Jerusalem, challenges us with the radical demands of discipleship. Because faithfulness would require Jesus to lay down his life, the call to discipleship to Jesus inevitably means unconditional commitment to the redemptive work of God for which Jesus gave his life. The disciple will be like the Lord. Therefore, one should not rush into discipleship with glib promises. On the contrary, the radical demands of discipleship require that every potential disciple consider the cost, give Jesus the highest priority in one's life, and, having committed oneself to discipleship, move ahead without looking back.⁴

Are we ready? Am I? This is a question I keep asking myself. Do I really understand the shape of a Christ-centered life? It can't always be the easy way forward. But can I see the hard way and, if I do see it, do I trust God enough to press on? In good times and bad?

As Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, he knows the difficult path ahead for his disciples even if they do not. But he will do all he can to teach them about commitment, even if the lessons seem harsh.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin by sharing some stories of times when you were asked to truly commit to something important, even life-changing. Did you want more time to decide or to get ready? Have you ever simply had to plunge in straight away, like

³ Rice, G. (1990). Nations under God: a commentary on the book of 1 Kings (pp. 165–166). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans.

⁴ Culpepper, R. A. (1994–2004). The Gospel of Luke. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 9, pp. 217–218). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Elisha? How is it we get past simply being involved and come to truly embrace commitment?

2. I suspect that we've all taken the path of least resistance at times in our lives. You might share some stories of times that you didn't take the hard road, even though you should have. Perhaps you knew this at the time but the road just seemed too hard to go forward. You might also look for some times in your life that you *did* take the hard road, avoiding the path of least resistance. Was it worth it? What did you gain from the experience?
3. When have you personally experienced God's presence with you? How about those times when it seemed that God was somewhere else? Discuss how an affirmative core conviction of God's presence in the person of the Holy Spirit would help to reassure you that God is always present with you? Can our head really help us to overcome feelings of being separated from God? How do you strive to connect with God?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: Stories of Elisha

Monday, 2 Kings 2:1-22 Elijah is taken to heaven and Elisha picks up his mantle

Tuesday, 2 Kings 4:1-7 Elisha visits a poor widow

Wednesday, 2 King 4:8-37 Elisha restores life a dead boy

Thursday, 2 Kings 4:38-44 Elisha takes the poison away from a pot of stew then calls forth a miraculous feeding

Friday, 2 Kings 5 Elisha cures the skin disease of an Aramean general

Saturday, 2 Kings 6:1-7 Elisha floats a lost ax-head to the surface of the water

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Genesis
Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the Gospel of Luke
Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series – *Spring Training: Some Theological Curveballs*