

### “How Do We Respond When God Calls?”

How well do you know your Bible? I think it's safe to say that most of us would like to know our Bible better. The reason I ask this, however, is that even people who really don't have a lot of Bible background or knowledge probably know some of the more famous stories of the Bible. Even non-Bible readers and non-church-goers likely are aware that Jesus died on a cross, for example. There are a number of other Bible accounts that probably rise to the top of this list of things people are more likely to know about their Bibles: David killed Goliath, Jesus rose from the dead, Daniel lived through the lion's den.

You could probably list a number of other accounts from the Bible that are fairly well known, and some that are less well known, and eventually you would get to some accounts that are really not well-known, even by people who are fairly familiar with this wonderful book. Some people, in fact, would probably be quite surprised to read certain passages in the Bible. The one that we're considering in our sermon this morning is not shocking or surprising, but it probably isn't an account that many have spent a great deal of time considering. It's not in the regular rotation of Sunday School lessons, and we read it in worship no more than once every three years. And yet, as with all of Scripture, it is recorded for us for a reason. It has lessons for us to learn.

The account is that of Elisha being called to follow Elijah, something that would ultimately lead to Elisha taking over Elijah's position as a prophet. As we consider how Elisha responded to this call, it is good for us to ask ourselves, “How do we respond when God calls?”

This account is taken from the book of 1 Kings. That book of the Bible tells the history of the nation of Israel beginning right after the time of King David. As the name implies, it says a lot about the men who ruled over Israel. But its primary focus is on the religious history of God's people. It emphasizes things like the building of the Temple, and it focuses on how well individual kings follow God's direction. Our account from chapter 19 comes from a time when the most wicked of the kings ruled over Israel, a king named Ahab. 1 Kings also tells us that throughout all the ups and downs of the kings, God remained faithful to his people and spoke to them through his prophets. Among the most significant and prominent of those prophets was Elijah.

Right before our account, 1 Kings records how Elijah had become frustrated with the wickedness he saw. He was discouraged that he was a lonely voice for God in opposing that wickedness. God gave him assurances that he was still in control. At that time, God also gave Elijah instructions that a man named Elisha would succeed him as God's prophet.

As we heard earlier, our sermon text today shares what happened when Elijah went to Elisha. It might sound a little strange to us, but what Elijah did was to take his cloak and place it on Elisha. Elisha understood. Elijah's cloak represented his prophetic ministry. Elisha knew that God was calling him to succeed Elijah as prophet.

But notice that Elisha already had a job and a livelihood. He was out, with servants, plowing the fields. He was working as a farmer and apparently as one that was fairly successful and well-off. We get that distinct impression because he was working with twelve yoke of oxen, twenty-four powerful plowing animals.

Elisha understood, and he caught up to Elijah and asked permission to say some farewells. He returned to the field where he had been plowing and said a very impressive farewell. He slaughtered the oxen that he had been using—he wouldn't be needing them anymore—he burned his plow in order to cook the meat and fed those to whom he was saying goodbye. What was so impressive about this farewell was that it was so final. Elisha would not be coming back to his previous income and way of life. His answer to God's call was clear.

Is our answer to God's call as clear? At first glance, it might not seem like we have a lot in common with Elisha. We need to think a little deeper to find how his situation applies to ours. We haven't had a prophet come to us in the same way that he did. This account is his history, not ours. But we do have

something in common with that Old Testament prophet. God has called us. No, not to be his lead prophet, but to be his child and follower. He has called us to believe in him and to serve him. Ours is the call to faith and everything that comes with it.

In that regard, our call is different than the specific one to Elisha. We aren't expected to leave our livelihoods or our family. We aren't expected to leave our lives behind. But we are expected to be willing to do exactly that if it were required from us. What do I mean by that? I mean that Scripture makes it clear that to live in faith is to view God and our relationship with him as the single most important aspect of our lives. Martin Luther describes faith as he explains the First Commandment by saying, "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." Jesus says it this way: **"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me"** (Mark 8:34).

But is that how we answer the call? Far too often our reaction is to hold on to something else, or someone else, more than we do our Savior Jesus. Far too often we are more focused on what we want and want to do than we are on what God wants us to do. Elisha's work and livelihood was not sinful, but God called him away from it anyway. In the same way, God calls us not only to leave our sins behind, but also to leave behind whatever might threaten our relationship to him, even things that could otherwise be wonderful blessings. What sort of things? One of the most common examples is money. God gives us our money for our blessing and use and invites us to use it to his glory, but so many get focused only on the money and it threatens their relationship with God. That may be a common example, but it is not the only one.

We fall short of honoring God in all we do when we allow anything to overcome what God tells us is right. He calls us to confront the sin that we see, and it is often easier to ignore it. Do we give our whole life to God when we choose our friends? When we select our entertainment options? When we interact with others, do we put their needs and desires ahead of our own?

We won't find the answer only in looking at the example of Elisha. We won't find it only in looking at the examples of Simon and Andrew, James and John from our Gospel today (Mark 1:14-20). In many cases, their good examples will simply shine the spotlight on our failures. We find the answer in looking at the one who calls. Jesus is the ultimate example of sacrificing his life on our behalf. That makes him so much more than an example. He lived in our place and died in our place precisely because of our sinful shortcomings. His work was to overcome and take away our sins. He gives us his perfect righteousness and obedience. And he empowers us to respond by following him wholeheartedly. How do we respond when God calls? Let's respond by gladly following, by being willing to leave anything and everything behind if necessary because what remains ahead of us is heaven itself. Let's not allow anything, no matter what it is, to take our focus off of that destination.

And as we live in the way that God has called us all, let us also consider one specific issue addressed in our Scripture lessons this morning. Like our sermon text, the other lessons speak of people called to serve God in a full-time way, to leave behind old lifestyles and livelihoods in order to do so. People are still called to do the same today. Pastors and teachers and staff ministers serve important, God-given roles, called to do so by God through his Church, his people. Let's continue to pray that God would provide the pastors that we need and the other called workers who serve in these full-time roles. Let's continue to support and encourage those who are qualified for these positions, and to invite them to consider the opportunities before them.

And together with them, let us all seek to share this good news, the news of a loving and self-sacrificing Savior. That news is the very reason that any of us would answer the call God extends to us.

How well do you know your Bible? There is no quiz today on whether or how well you know the account of Elisha's call. Instead, use his call to remind you that God has called you to faith and service, and let his wholehearted response encourage you to follow Jesus in an unequivocal and enthusiastic way.

The Text: 1 Kings 19:19–21 (NIV)

<sup>19</sup> So 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.

<sup>20</sup> Elisha 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?”

<sup>21</sup> So 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.