

1 Kings 19:19-21

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[0 : 00] And flick back to 1 Kings 19. We're going to look just at the last paragraph of this chapter tonight.

! And hopefully there won't be anything controversial tonight, like there was last week. But part of the reason that I chose to preach on Luke 9 this morning, if you're around, is that Luke 9 echoes some of the themes in this passage at the end of 1 Kings 19.

On obedience to Jesus Christ. On following him and serving him and leaving things behind. On sacrifice for his gospel.

Now it's true that both Elijah and Elisha are very different from us, aren't they? We are not Elijah and Elisha. Both, their calling is entirely unique. Elijah is called as a prophet and a covenant executor, if you like, for the people.

And Elisha is called to take over from him. And we'll get on to the handover from Elijah to Elisha in 2 Kings. And we'll focus on their relationship a little bit more then. But tonight I just want us to pause and see Elisha's initial call to serving God.

[1 : 21] And because the passage, even though they are unique, it does have a lot to say to us, I think, about obedience and service to the Lord. There are patterns and characteristics of Elisha's call that can apply to all believers.

So three headings tonight. First of all, the unexpected ways God calls his servants. The unexpected ways God calls his servants.

And what strikes you here is that from Elisha's point of view, certainly, this call from Elijah comes totally out of the blue, doesn't it? It comes at a moment when he's not expecting it.

It comes in the mundane, everyday situation that he's always in. He's out in the fields ploughing, presumably his dad's fields, although we're not told that, but I think that's probably likely.

And of course, we as the reader, we get the benefit of seeing what is about to happen to Elisha, don't we, before it happens. We've had plenty of time to get to know Elijah and hear about God's plan.

[2 : 30] We know that Elisha is going to be called as Elijah's successor earlier in the chapter. And so as we're kind of reading, the end of chapter 19 doesn't feel that impressive, really, or exciting, maybe.

It feels perfectly natural. We're expecting it. But think of it from Elisha's point of view. He's behind the oxen, and he's not thinking that morning, is he?

Today, I've got this feeling, I've just got it in my bones, that I'm going to be called to be a great prophet. Today is a big day for me. He's not thinking that. No, he is just doing what he is doing.

There was nothing unusual about this day for him over any other day. And it's the same kind of thing with others that God calls, isn't it?

Moses was looking after his father-in-law's sheep when he was called and he met God. Gideon was treading wheat in the wine press, getting on with everyday stuff.

[3 : 36] Think of Matthew, counting coins, doing his accounts in the tax booth. He's doing his day job, isn't he? And Jesus happens to meet with him at that very moment.

We as the reader get a sense of God's view of his plans and his callings of different people at different times.

But that is not how we view things normally from our point of view in life, is it? And often the first we've heard of God's work for us is right at the moment that we don't expect it.

When we're doing something totally different. And we're asked to do something that we never planned to do. Something that happens that we never anticipated.

But just because we haven't anticipated it doesn't mean it wasn't planned. In God's mind it's already been prepared beforehand for Elisha to do and for us to do.

[4 : 37] We love that verse, don't we, in Romans 8. Where Paul says, All things work together for the good of those who love him. It speaks of God's providence over all things.

Our problem with that passage though is that it's very difficult to see that, isn't it, in the moment.

When difficult things happen or when plans change and unexpected things come up.

And often even after they've happened we can't always see why those things have happened. A lot of us never get to see how God's plan was brought together, do we?

But I think we can look back over a lot of our lives and see that the little coincidences and the little unplanned things, often the smallest things that we never planned, have made massive changes to things that have happened in our lives.

Tim Keller, in his book on suffering, writes about the chain of events that brought about the church that he serves in New York, Redeemer Presbyterian Church.

[5 : 49] It's a bit of a longish section but he kind of traces the chain of events, it's quite good to hear. He says, The church exists to a great degree because my wife Kathy and I were sent to New York to start this as a new church.

Well why were we sent? It was because we joined a Presbyterian denomination that encouraged church planting and they sent us out. But why did we join the Presbyterian denomination?

We joined it because in the very last semester of my last year at seminary, I had two courses under a particular professor who convinced me to adopt the doctrines of belief in Presbyterianism.

But why was that professor at the seminary? He says, He was there only because after a long period of waiting he was finally able to get his visa as a citizen of Great Britain to come and teach in the United States.

The professor had been hired by my US seminary but had been having a great deal of trouble getting a visa. For various reasons at the time the process was very clogged and there was enormous backlog of applications.

[6 : 58] So what was it that broke through all the red tape so that he could get his visa and come to teach me that last semester? Well I was told, he says, that his visa process was facilitated because one of the students at our seminary at the time was able to give the school administration an unusually high level form of help.

The student was the son of the sitting President of the United States at the time. Why was his father President? It was because the former President, Richard Nixon, had to resign as a result of the Watergate scandal.

Why did the Watergate scandal ever occur? I understand that it was because a night watchman noticed an unlatched door. If you don't know the story, go and Google it later on.

He says, what if that security guard had never noticed that door? What if he simply looked in another direction? In that case, nothing in that long list of coincidences would have ever occurred and there would be no Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York.

He says, I like to tell people in the church, if you're glad for this church, then even Watergate happened for you. It would be a great thing, wouldn't it, to think about our lives and this church and to kind of go back and to piece together all of the coincidences, all of the unexpected calls and the things that happened that we never planned as to how we got here and why we were here, how this church got here in the same way.

[8 : 37] It is difficult, isn't it, when we're used to doing one thing and we're suddenly called to do something else, to make plans and learn how to do something really well, don't we?

We study and we plan and we think, this is me for life, and then suddenly, when we're winning at life, it feels like God has a habit of moving us onto something else where maybe we're not so confident.

But all of the little unplanned things that happen, all of the changes of direction and changes of occupation and service and vocation and circumstance, for us they might be bolts out of the blue, but for God, they're all part of the chain of events that he is working together.

And so that is maybe how Elisha felt, isn't it? But God sometimes calls to an unexpected service. Secondly, God sometimes calls to a lowly service.

He sometimes calls to a lowly service. It's worth noticing about Elisha's call is that it is a call to something relatively humble in his work, at least at first anyway.

[9 : 59] From what we're told of him, we can work out that Elisha was probably a man of means. The writer mentions that he is the son of Shaphat, which at least says to us that Shaphat was worth mentioning.

That maybe he is someone of means, or he's well-known, or he comes from an influential family. And Shaphat's farm sounds like it could be pretty well off, doesn't it?

Elisha has got 12 oxen in front of him. And even if he was hiring those oxen, he's got a field big enough to need 12 oxen, hasn't he? You don't need a kind of ride-on tractor if you've only got a tiny backyard kind of thing.

And so Elisha is called from having a stake in what looks like a pretty successful and wealthy work life to something that is much more humble, to something pretty unspectacular.

In fact, he is called to be an apprentice, to be a servant of Elijah. Really, a humble dog's body for Elijah at first.

[11 : 11] We learn later in 2 Kings chapter 3, the next time that Elisha appears, he is described as the one who poured water on the hands of Elijah.

Now we'll get on to what that means then, hopefully. But what that tells us is, isn't it, that Elisha was Elijah's second fiddle. He was there to echo Elijah's ministry and imitate him.

And in the call itself, in the passage, we see that Elisha is to follow Elijah, isn't he? There's almost a sort of pecking order here. So the initial call, at least, doesn't involve anything spectacular.

He's gone from a rich farmer to a water-pourer, to a hand-washer. It's not much of an upgrade. And often, the Lord calls his servants not to spectacular things, but to humble things.

The disciples had to learn that, didn't they? As James and John wanted to sit at Jesus' right hand in glory, and Jesus said, no, whoever would be great among you must be the servant.

[12 : 25] And whoever is first among you must be slave of all. Just goes against our natural urge for significance, doesn't it?

We don't want to play second fiddle. We don't want to be servant to anyone. But this is often what the Lord calls us to, to an unexpected and often a lowly service.

And thirdly, and lastly, God always calls us to a better service. God always calls us to a better service.

You may have picked up the link with Luke 9, as we read, the end verses of chapter 19 here, because it sounds like a pretty similar situation, doesn't it?

Someone, just like in Luke 9 this morning, is being called to serve God, but the offer on the face of it doesn't seem too appealing at all. Some people think that Elisha does what the man in Luke 9 does.

[13 : 30] Do you remember him from this morning? He says to the Lord Jesus, I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home. Jesus says, no one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.

You can't be double-minded. You can't have other priorities that are as great as following Jesus.

And it feels like that guy in Luke 9 is a sort of New Testament version of Elisha.

It's what Elisha asks to do, isn't it, in verse 20. Elijah, I am going to come with you, but let me kiss my mother and my father and then I'll follow you.

But I think cleverly, Luke uses that example to show the subtle difference between the two.

Because Elisha's request, when you look at the context, Elisha's request to go and kiss the family was different in that it doesn't show a delay in commitment, but it shows an understanding of what is required by this call.

You can say goodbye to things, can't you, that Jesus is calling you from in a way that actually means you're just prolonging being with those things and doing those things.

[14 : 57] But he asks for this opportunity not to prolong what he's got there, but to make a clean break from those things.

Let me go and kiss my family shows that he knows this is a final, this is an end to that chapter. It's a final close with that previous calling. He's not being half-hearted here because we know, we're told, as soon as he gets back where Elijah is, he sacrifices the oxen that he's been working with and burns all the farming equipment to break a clean break.

So the difference is that in the Luke case, saying goodbye for that guy was part of an effort to sort of put Jesus off. It's part of an obstacle to obedience.

To have things in our lives that we think I'm saying goodbye to this thing, I'm really, really getting rid of this thing, but actually I'm just going to keep saying goodbye to it for a bit longer.

And actually, as I'm doing that, I'm making friends with it the longer I say goodbye to it. I haven't made a clean break with it. We can say goodbye to idols in the same way, can't we?

[16:14] When they sort of become respectable idols in our lives. We say, we kind of know it's wrong, but I'm going to say goodbye to it over a long period of time and just get used to it.

But in Elijah's case, saying goodbye marks the beginning of obedience for him. Elisha doesn't return so that he can hold back from Elijah.

He returns so that he can cut loose from his previous life. So the point is, for Elisha, Elisha, it doesn't matter if he's getting a downgrade, does it?

Or that plans have changed. Or that he's going to have to have some difficult breaks with a past vocation and service.

As long as he is doing God's will, nothing else matters. Because God's will and serving God is always better.

[17:16] Even if all he gets to do to start with is wash the prophet's hands away from his home, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter whether you're in a mega church in a city somewhere, or you're in a little church in some backwater in Burkina Faso, or whether you're seeing hundreds of people converted in your workplace, or it's a total slog to be honest.

Whether you're successful matters less than whether you're faithful. That matters more. Elisha doesn't burn the yoke of the oxen because there wasn't any other wood around and he just sort of thought, oh well let's burn this stuff.

No, this was a decisive break, wasn't it? It's interesting in the passage how the word kiss is used.

The word kiss is only used twice in 1 and 2 Kings as far as I can see.

It's used once here speaking about him, Elisha, kissing his household goodbye isn't it? And it's used just a few verses earlier in verse 18 if you look there of all those who had not yet bowed to Baal and every mouth that had not kissed him.

Do you see what the narrator is doing there? He is drawing a connection between Elisha's obedience to Elijah and a service to the people that God has ready for him to serve.

[18:49] It's as if as he breaks from his family and his old life with a kiss he kisses his old life goodbye he joins himself to those who have not kissed Baal.

And in the calling of God even though it's mundane service there is a sense here for Elisha that there is going to be something much bigger at stake here. There's much more going on even in the humble lowly work that he's about to do.

He is embarking as he kisses his old life goodbye on something bigger and on something much better. He's being made to be part of a body of people that he is going to serve.

God's people. And by obeying God's call now he doesn't know it yet that his faithful service in the little things are going to turn out to be of unspeakable value.

His obedience in the unexpected and in the mundane things will be used greatly by God for his people and there are little hints of that even here actually.

[19:55] Notice how with the burnt offering of the oxen and the plough equipment he burns up the animals doesn't he and he provides food from them.

Verse 21 he gives the boiled flesh to the people. Already in his joyful and humble acceptance of this call to service he is used as a provision for others.

It's no coincidence that there are 12 oxen isn't there? 12 oxen for the 12 tribes of Israel. And there's a hint here of things to come with Elisha where he'll be used to feed God's people and provide for them in magnificent ways.

But he's not thinking that here is he? He's thinking mundane at the moment. Thomas Brooks pastor said that thousands are held back from Jesus by the world's frowns.

People saying don't follow Jesus. Thousands do that. But he says 10,000 are held back by the world's smiles.

[21:10] Given the things that could have held Elisha back here he could have let the world smile at him couldn't he? on his farm. But he still follows.

Because he knows that even in the underwhelming things God may ask us to do it is always better to serve him. There is always something more in serving him.

There is always something grand behind the graft of small time service. It's always better. As Jesus says there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters.

and mother or father or children and lands for my sake and for the gospel who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands with persecution in the age to come eternal life.

Christian obedience is never lost is it? It's always gain. It's always better. We just have to look around this room don't we? And for evidence of that.

[22 : 19] For he is the God who plans and who weaves the insignificant things together. The one who has a whole people for us to serve and to bless and to connect with.

Now just as we finish one of the advantages of preaching twice on a Sunday is you get to say things that you didn't get time to say in the morning. You get another chance. I just want to close on the subject of obedience and leaving things behind for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Because both this passage and the Luke's passage this morning gave us really radical words on that didn't they? Radical moves that God calls us to make unexpectedly often.

But what I don't want you to go away with this week is the feeling that now to follow Jesus you've got to cut ties with everybody and cut contact with everyone who might not believe and who might not follow Jesus.

Just as we close I want to turn back with you to Luke's gospel really quickly. Just flick there with me to Luke chapter 5. It is on page 861.

[23 : 38] There may be wisdom in breaking with the past in a way that blesses the people and situations you've inherited from the past. Because there is another example of a man who does what he should when Jesus calls to follow him.

Look at Luke 5 and verse 27. Jesus, he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax booth. and he said to him, follow me.

So look, it's a similar scenario again isn't it? For Levi it's an unexpected call and it's a humble calling. He's got to leave all this money.

But Levi recognises no matter what Jesus asks him to do, it is going to be better to serve him. And so verse 28, leaving everything he rose and followed him.

But the interesting thing is that just after Levi makes that break with his old vocation, verse 29, Levi made Jesus a great feast in his house and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with him.

[24 : 50] Levi has a party with his old work colleagues, doesn't he? and his tax collector mates. There is a connection there and it's not incompatible with his new commitment to the Lord Jesus.

In fact, that connection is used in that commitment. It's used as a new opportunity for Jesus to minister to a whole new set of people.

people. There is something to be said about keeping a kind of contact with people and elements of our lives before we met Jesus and before we followed him.

So that Jesus can come and bless those people as well through us. both Elisha and the man in Luke were unique cases where there was a specific choice to be made and it may be that there are times in your life where you do have to make decisive breaks with certain people and with certain ways of life and with certain habits those things that do not help you to follow and serve Jesus and you need to break with them and to not just keep kissing them goodbye and prolonging it but we need to see wisdom to know when it's time to have an involvement with those people that serves that commitment to the Lord.

Just as Elisha kissed his household and had a brief connection with them it wasn't a stalling tactic for him was it? It was part of his new obedience. And so Levi shows us I think we can work with and we can love and we can be involved with people not to hold back from Jesus but in our obedience to him and we need real wisdom to tell the difference don't we?

[26 : 47] To tell the difference when someone or something smiles from the world at us and holds us back from following Jesus or when your service in the workplace or the backyard or the street is part actually of the momentum of following Jesus forwards and it can be because only the Lord knows doesn't he what connections and what chance meetings and what uncanny coincidences in our own minds what people and places that he will lead us to in our following Jesus.

service. Even if our work is unexpected and mundane it is always better to serve him.

Shall we pray?