

responding to God's call

Elisha's 3 steps to service

KEY TEXT—1 KINGS 19:19-21

RESPONDING TO GOD'S CALL TO SERVE

Responding to God's call to service is something that my wife and I have had to deal with regularly. During the last 8 years, we have been asked to consider moving 16 times. Each time a request has come, we have entered into a process of between 10 minutes and 9 months as we have tried to discern God's will and know how to respond.

These times have never been easy. We have our human desires and our human frailties, and through these we try to grasp the purposes and designs of the living God.

As a pastor, being called to new responsibilities is part of my job. Since being a pastor's kid, I have moved many times in my life and to a number of countries. While I have always been part of a pastoral family where God's service is prominent and central, as Christians, we all face fresh calls from God to serve Him and His kingdom.

What I would like you to consider now is how to respond when God calls you to serve Him. What is necessary for you to successfully respond to a new area of God's service—to whatever, whenever, and wherever He may call you? And at the same time, to be mindful of what may block you from hearing his call to service?

BACKGROUND

a tough responsibility

The story before the call of Elisha in 1 Kings 19:19-21 adds some important context to what is unfolding. Elijah recently appeared from three years of hiding and confronted the prophets of Baal on top of Mount Carmel. He prays for fire to come down out of Heaven to testify to the truth about God, and it happened. These false prophets are destroyed and rain falls in response to Elijah's prayers. However, Queen Jezebel is furious with Elijah and promises to kill him. Overcome with fear, and seemingly losing all confidence in God to protect him, Elijah runs terrified into the desert.

Eventually, God appears to Elijah at Mount Horeb—not in fire, or earthquake—but in a still small voice. Elijah twice bemoans the fact that he is the only one faithful to God in Israel, and apparently worried that God's word is not bearing fruit in the land. God replies to Elijah revealing that there are 7000 loyal followers of God besides him.

And then, in Elijah's moment of self-doubt, God asks Elijah to appoint a successor to him. Elijah's ministry, he learns, is about to close and be passed on to another. I wonder what Elijah thought to himself as he walked down the road to look for Elisha, the one who was going to take his place.

an unexpected call

By contrast, Elisha is in a field ploughing without a care in the world. He's single, living at home, and getting on with his work. Without warning, his world is about to be turned upside down. He is about to hear the call to God's service.

God calls Elisha to work for Him. God's doesn't call Elisha directly, but uses Elijah. Elijah is going to personally invite his successor. While Elijah's thoughts and feelings must have been swirling around since finding out that his own ministry was closing, the issue we are considering now focuses on Elisha. How will Elisha respond to God's call, and what might we learn from the way Elisha dealt with this?

3 STEPS TO SERVICE

Consider 3 steps that Elisha went through that enabled him to positively respond to God's call to service.

STEP 1—always be open to God's Providence

Consider the situation. As Elisha was literally in the middle of ploughing,

Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him.

²⁰ 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?"

The throwing of the cloak around someone, from where we get the phrase, passing on the mantle, was a clear indication to Elisha that Elijah was calling him to follow him. It is not clear whether Elijah is personally still frustrated and confused as to why God has called an end to his ministry and why he has to find an apprentice, but it is clear that Elijah doesn't do much explaining. He simply throws his cloak around Elisha then walks away.

Elisha is evidently stunned because it says that he ran after Elijah. Elijah did not stand in front of him and wait for a response. Elijah just walks away. Elisha is so stunned that he stays rooted to the spot, so when he comes to his senses, Elisha has to run to catch up with Elijah.

When Elisha reaches Elijah, Elisha asks if he can go back and say goodbye to his family. Elijah is not outwardly encouraging, "Go back," Elijah replied. "What have I done to you?"

Perhaps Elijah is testing Elisha in the same way Jesus tested wannabe disciples. But Elisha is not put off by what appears to be a grumpy old prophet. And this is the point. Somehow, in spite of what appears to be an unsupportive and testing

attitude by Elijah, Elisha discerns that God is at work. But how did Elisha know this? I would suggest that Elisha was able to respond positively to Elijah's non-encouragement because Elisha was already living a life where he was used to discerning God's Providence in his life. Elisha was used to living with his spiritual ears and eyes open, so when God called unexpected for something new, Elisha was ready to respond.

STEP 2—be willing to embrace uncertainty

When Elisha leaves with Elijah, Elisha didn't really know what he was getting involved with, although he did know what he was leaving behind. Notice two ways in which Elisha embraced this uncertainty.

1. **Embracing poverty instead of wealth** Verse 19 tells us that Elijah found Elisha while he was ploughing with twelve pairs of oxen. It has been suggested that Elisha might have been part of a fairly wealthy family. They appear to own many oxen unless it was all the village working together. Elisha was apparently well off, but the life of a prophet was quite the opposite. Who knew where they would live or what they would eat, or how this would be accomplished? After all, Elijah had been fed for the past few years by birds in the middle of no-where and a widow in a foreign country. But Elisha was willing to embrace poverty in order to serve God.
2. **Embracing isolation instead of a secure and loving family** Once Elijah indicates that Elisha should follow him, Elisha replies, "Let me kiss my father and mother goodbye... and then I will come with you" (verse 20). Elisha evidently had a loving family that meant a lot to him. By contrast, Elijah was a stranger. What Elisha did know about Elijah was that Elijah and just come out of hiding after 3 years, had been hunted by the king of Israel, and was currently being hunted by the Queen of Israel for the death of her pagan prophets. This was not a promising career path. But Elisha was ready to embrace insecurity and isolation for God's service.

STEP 3—be decisive in going forwards

Elisha goes back to kiss his mother and father goodbye. But he does a lot more than that.

²¹ So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the ploughing 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.

Elisha burns the most essential parts of his old life—the wooden yoke and the ploughing equipment and the oxen themselves. Once this was done, there could be no going back. Maybe Elisha was aware that he had a tendency to regret his decisions. Whatever the case, Elisha completely destroys any path back to his old life. Once he knew that God had called him, Elisha was utterly decisive in going forwards.

This is emphasised by the fact that Elisha does not do this secretly. He invites the whole village to eat these 2 large ploughing oxen. He proclaims publicly that God has called him to a new ministry and there is no going back. In one sense, you could say that he has made the whole village hold him accountable to God's call to service.

MY RESPONSE

Such decisiveness is key to my response to God's call. I am mixing some ploughing metaphors, but many years later Jesus echoes these sentiments,

Luke 9:62 Jesus replied, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

With this in mind, what service has God called you into for the sake of His kingdom?

- **Are you living a life of openness that you will know God's call to service when he speaks?** Choose to risk being continually open to God's voice.
- **Are you willing to embrace uncertainty and insecurity?** Choose service to the Kingdom of God above all else because there is nothing to compare it to anywhere in the cosmos.
- **If you have heard God's call, are you being decisive or are you wavering in secret?** If you know that God has put his hand on your life, be decisive and move forwards immediately.

1

LIFE POINT

God's call to service is heard as I live in constant openness

2

LIFE POINT

God's call to service may require embracing uncertainty

3

LIFE POINT

God's call to service may require me to act decisively

4

LIFE POINT

God's call to serve Him may require some painful choices