

THE MAN WHO WAS THE PEOPLE'S FRIEND

"Then she came and told the man of God." II Kings 4:7. "And she said unto her husband, Behold now, I perceive that this is an holy man of God." II Kings 4:9.

It is well for us to recognize the continuity of the work of the Lord. One man serves for a time, is called away, and another takes his place as the Lord wills. Elijah was succeeded by a young man named Elisha.

Elisha was God's gift to Elijah in his dark hour. Elijah had scarcely uttered his words of despair, "I, even I only am left", when God gave him the name of a young man to be anointed as prophet in his place. The directions which God gave to Elijah were sufficiently clear to enable him to find his successor.

I. His Call.

It was springtime in the valley of the Jordan. The trees were putting forth their leaves; the time for the singing of the birds had come, and the voice of the turtle was heard in the land. On the farm of Shaphat, in that rich agricultural district on the west side of the river, all the hired hands were out plowing, and Shaphat's son, Elisha, was with them. The twelve yoke of oxen were pulling the wooden plows through the alluvial soil of that fertile valley. In the midst of this peaceful and busy scene came Elijah. Suddenly, he stepped up behind Elisha and threw his mantle over his shoulders, probably without a word being spoken. The mantle was the sign of prophetic office and power, and Elisha understood at once the significance of the act. For a moment he stood in amazement not unmingled with awe at the high calling which had suddenly come to him. When he had fully regained his bearings, Elijah had passed on, and was already leaving the field. When Elisha received the call, he was left absolutely free to accept and obey it, or to reject it, whichever he chose to do.

Very marked was Elisha's readiness to accept the call of God. It is dangerous either to push before or to lag behind the call of God. If the Lord has work for us, He will call us to it. But we must cultivate a spirit of attentive and prayerful readiness. When the call came to Elisha, he immediately recognized that for which he had long been prepared, in heart, and he accepted the call without a question. He did not ask where he was to go, or to what it would lead. There was no bargaining with God. The response was immediate and unequivocal. It was his ready obedience that honored God.

Elisha understood the meaning of his call. It was not to a position of wealth, of ease, or of influence. On the contrary, all this had to be relinquished. He, a man of peace, was called from home, friends, and comfort, to endure hardships, to suffer persecution, and to bear scorn. Yet, he did not offer any frivolous excuses or unbelieving objections.

Hastening after the prophet, Elisha requested permission to bid farewell to his parents and friends before leaving all to follow him. This request is proof of how ready he was, at the call of God, to break with the life of ease, and to take up the hard work of a prophet to an unwilling people. When he bade his parents farewell, Elisha turned back to the oxen and servants, he took the yoke of oxen he himself was using, he killed them, lighted a fire with the plowshare, cooked their flesh, and feasted his servants.

In killing the yoke of oxen with which he had been plowing and using the wood of the plow to make the fire, plainly indicated his voluntary and final separation from the quiet life in the country, and the definite surrender of himself to the call and will of God. Another reason for his action, and his provision of a feast, was to let the servants know that what he was doing was being done with a happy heart. He wanted to show them that the day God called him was not a day of sorrow and mourning, but was a "red-letter" day in his life. Then, leaving father, mother, servants, his good position, and his comfortable home, he went forth as a homeless pilgrim.

II. His Choice.

After his call, Elisha practically vanished from the scripture narrative for some time. Later he reappeared at Gilgal, when Elijah was about to start on his last journey. Elijah told him that the Lord had called him to go to Bethel and requested that he remain behind. But Elisha would not part from him. The sons of the prophets at Bethel came forth and told Elisha that it had been revealed to them that Elijah would be taken away that day. Elijah gazed on the eager face of Elisha, and longed to be of some service to him. With yearning heart, he said to Elisha, "Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee." What a glorious chance for Elisha to make his fortune! The great prophet on the point of ascending to the throne of God, gave him leave to ask anything his heart desired, with an intimation that it should be granted. What would have been your request, under those circumstances? Would you have said, "give me that beautiful tract of land," or "grant to me that post of honor"? Elisha looked up at him and saw the scars on him, saw the lines upon his face, read the records of his troubles in the furrows on his brow, and in the lines upon his cheeks. He knew that it all meant danger, hardship, and suffering, but there was nothing on earth he so much desired as the necessary gifts and graces to serve God as His prophet in Israel. So, he said, "I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me." It was the first opportunity Elisha ever had for such a choice, and it was likely to be the last. Time has proved that he made a wise and noble request.

Elisha's choice revealed his spiritual insight. He did not crave his leader's miraculous powers, or his magnetic influence, or his indomitable will, but his spirit, which he ~~authorized to be~~^{kept alive as his} true secret of his work. He longed to pursue the work which Elijah had started with the same steadfastness and the same resolute devotion.

What was the answer to his request? It was remarkable regardless of how we explain it. Elijah 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."

III. His Career.

1. As a Minister.

Elisha was well qualified for his ministry. As a prophet he was called of the Lord, anointed with oil, which was the symbol of the Holy Spirit,

fully dedicated to the Lord, and trained for the ministry under Elijah (I Kings 16:19-21).

His message was that of repentance and righteousness. The preacher is not merely an explorer, or a discoverer, but a herald.

Elisha was at his best in the home. There we see him in his compassion and friendly sympathetic interest. There was a godly widow whose husband had been removed by death, who was in debt, and her sons were about to be taken away by her creditor and sold as slaves. In her difficulty she appealed to Elisha. On Elisha's inquiry, she acknowledged that she had nothing left except a small quantity of oil. Elisha told her to borrow vessels from all her neighbors. She did so, and set the vessels up in her house, and taking the pot of oil, began to pour into the empty vessels. As she did so, because of her faith and obedience, the oil multiplied until she had filled every vessel which she had. Determined to do nothing without the direct command of Elisha, she came to him with the glad tidings of what had happened, and he told her to sell the oil, pay her debt, and for her and her sons to live off the balance.

Thus the widows cruse of oil has become a proverb which means the providential care and goodness of God.

Elisha also knew how to deal with sinners. When Naaman, the great man of Syria, came to be healed of his leprosy, Elisha sent a brief message to him, telling him to go down and wash seven times in the Jordan. Naaman was enraged at what he considered a personal slight and insult. He thought that so great a man as he should be dealt with in a different way. Elisha refused to soften, tone down, or adulterate his message for Naaman or anyone else.

2. As An Educator.

Elisha was president of a School of the Prophets, or what we today would designate as a Theological Seminary. He had the long vision and knew that his own work was not enough. What he did would be multiplied by training other young men for the prophetic office. That is always the duty and the privilege of any wise leader. Even the best cannot live forever, so there must be others prepared to deliver the message after their voices have been silenced by death. So Elisha spent much time at the School of the Prophets.

3. As A Benefactor.

Two miracles, one of mercy, one of judgment, marked Elisha's establishment as Elijah's successor. The first of these miracles was typical of his whole ministry. All of the natural charms of Jericho were spoiled by the unsatisfactory condition of the water. Calling for a new cruse and a supply of salt, Elisha led the way to the spring whence the water issued, and, casting in the salt as the symbol of purification and preservation, declared that God "healed" the water.

Other Bible characters worked great miracles, but Elisha is the only man who worked a miracle from his grave. Sometime after his death, a funeral procession was on its way to a cemetery. Suddenly a band of Moabites made their appearance as invaders. Unable to reach the prepared grave, the bearers cast the man into the sepulcher of Elisha; and when he touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his feet. The influence of a good man goes on after his death; even from his grave a good minister continues to speak. What can be more real or more potent than the influence of godly men and women whose voices are no longer heard and whose faces are no longer seen. "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them." Revelation 14:13.