

I Kings 19:19-21 A choice to make

Introduction

It costs to follow Jesus. In fact there is a serious price to pay in time, effort and money to do anything worthwhile in life. To put God first in your life and live it will mean that many people will consider you foolish at best and a bit crazy at worst –though most will be too polite and civilised to say so! Jesus in some very well-known words gave this challenge to His first disciples in Mark 8:34-48: ³⁴ *Then He called the crowd to Him along with His disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when He comes in His Father’s glory with the holy angels.”* This was not metaphorical language or religious rhetoric from Jesus. He was deadly serious. His hearers had seen people crucified on crosses. The Romans placed such people by the entrances to city gates and alongside major highways so everyone got the message. It was the most agonising way to die devised to date and was a reality not a theoretical possibility. In our society today the good news is that martyrdom is unlikely for anyone living for Jesus. It is over a century since someone (an open-air street preacher in Liverpool) was deliberately killed for their Christian faith in the UK. The bad news is that a very small but increasing number of people have paid the price of losing their careers, or not getting posts they might otherwise have done because they are followers of Jesus. In the last election earlier this year in addition to the well-publicized resignation of Tim Farron as Liberal Democrat party leader, a number of Christian candidates standing for election were singled out in major newspapers or political journals as unsuitable for election in particular constituencies because of their faith in Jesus Christ. This is not totally new – three general elections ago in a very close contest which she lost – probably because of the campaign against her- the grounds for opposing this woman was that her husband was the pastor of an Evangelical Church in the district. There are many examples which can be given –but what is important is that hard-line secularism is increasingly intolerant of a Christian presence in the public square. There a choice to make. We can try and please the increasingly shrill secular voices or we live in a way that will be viewed favourably by the Lord Jesus Christ when we stand before Him. What will it be as it cannot be both? Remember He also said: *Whoever acknowledges Me before others, I will also acknowledge before My Father in heaven. ³³ But whoever disowns Me before others, I will disown before My Father in heaven.* (Matthew 10:32-33). Some things in life are far from certain. Our death and accountability before the one who gave His life for us is absolutely certain. We must live now in a way we will be comfortable with then when we stand before the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. If you died tonight –what verdict would Jesus be passing on your life? A moment of truth came to a wealthy young man in Israel, recorded in I Kings 19. He had a choice to make about his future. Whichever choice he made his life would never be the same again. Let us look at his choices and our own today.

1. A clear call (I Kings 19:19)

¹⁹ *So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him.* We need to grasp very clearly that this was not an expected appointment between Elisha and Elijah. I think it is very likely that Elisha knew of Elijah as a much respected man of

God. What is more I assume that Elisha's family were amongst the tiny proportion of people who had retained their faith in the God of Israel at this extraordinarily difficult time in their history. What happened next was a life-changing event for both men. Elijah's, because he saw in the success of his mission confirmation of the calling entrusted to him in the short remaining time of his ministry, and Elisha because he would yield to an invitation to step out in faith at a level outside of his previous experience of faith.

(a) **The context** (I Kings 19:15-18) *The Lord said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. ¹⁶ Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. ¹⁷ Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. ¹⁸ Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him."* Many people after a time on holiday come back to an 'in-tray' with a series of tasks to be attended to. This is quite normal for many people. The blessing is when the list of tasks is reasonable and manageable in a suitable time frame. However, some times the demands upon us are so high we can struggle to get our head round where to make a start. I suspect this might have been Elijah's first reaction on hearing this list of tasks to be performed! After all Elijah had fled to Horeb two hundred miles south of Beersheba an exhausted and discouraged servant of God. He had been faithful and put his life on the line on Mount Carmel after several years on the run. Then the extraordinary victory over the prophets of Baal was met with a 'so what' from the tyrannical Jezebel, the power behind the throne. He was at the end of his tether. It is a familiar place to many of us –hopefully not often to this extent- but a place from which we need rest and refreshment and renewal if we are to give out again to the people around us. God enabled his servant to gain this time-out in a place of safety. Part of knowing ourselves and managing ourselves is an adequate amount of sleep. Too many of us in the western world, myself included, have had times when we have neglected to get this right. Another requirement is how are we physically and spiritually renewed? There is a place for exercise even if it is only short walks or cycle rides to 'clear our heads' but we need to find something that is part of our regular routine. However, a routine that is modest and sustainable is infinitely better than the January excesses some try for a few weeks after too much consumption at Christmas. There is also the need for spiritual renewal. We cannot give out without spiritually refuelling. I am assuming here that we spend a little time each day in reading God's Word and prayer and also make a priority of being in God's house for worship on the Lord's Day. However, there are times when we can benefit from going on courses or reading Christian books that allow us to take time to go a little deeper into something on our spiritual journey. Elijah benefitted so much from this time out with God and was content to stay there – who wouldn't!

(b) **The challenge** God gave Elijah a list of three things that had uncertain outcomes. There was no guarantee that any of these three men would believe him and respond positively. Then what he was doing would have been regarded as treasonable conduct by the current kings of Israel and Syria. These were not democratically elected governments that would step down from office if the people requested it. These kings ruled with an iron rod and anyone who got in the way would be in serious bother and at risk of death. In any case Elijah had lived life on the run for more than three years so it was only marginally more difficult for him to continue living that way. When you and I start new ministries for the Lord or even another year with existing ones we have no guarantees of success – however that is measured. But we have to step out in faith trusting that the Lord who has called us to serve will equip and empower us to accomplish all that needs to be done. The issue at hand was obedience for him and for us. Am I willing to put God first in my life and then follow Him no matter what the cost? Am I

willing to endure a little hardship as the price of faithfulness in His service or not? The hardest thing for Elijah here was to get up and take the first step on the faith journey back to Israel. The first step back to church when we have neglected our regular attendance; the first step back to service when we have neglected offering to give back to God for His blessings for us. What might your ‘first step’ be at this time?

It was a long journey for Elijah to take and he would have been less than human if a whole load of ‘what if’ scenarios had not been playing out in his head. What if I make all the effort and Elisha is not at home? What if he has just got married and committed to the family business and feels it is impossible to make a change? What if the challenge of giving up an economically secure way of life to effectively a life on the run that could be exceedingly short is too much for him? All these and many more questions would rightly have crowded in on his mind. However, we need to remember Proverbs 3:5-6: *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; ⁶in all your ways submit to Him, and He will direct your paths.* What pathway do you need to trust God for at this time? Our calling is to do what we can and allow God to take care of the rest.

What does our passage tell us took place when Elijah arrived at the family farm owned by Elisha’s father? ¹⁹ *So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him.* This was no small holding of a poor farmer but the estate of a rural comparatively wealthy farmer and his family. A poor farmer might have had one pair of oxen but here there were twelve. Elisha could easily in his privileged position have taken life easier, but alongside his father’s hired workers he too handled a pair of working oxen. He was not afraid to get his hands dirty. It spoke volumes for the kind of man he was. In John 13 there is an account of an extraordinary scene at the Last Supper when Jesus took a towel and began to wash the feet of His disciples. It was a task only required of Gentile servants, deemed unfitting to require of a Jewish employee. Yet in a context where pride and a sense of their own importance had got in the way of building strong ties of friendship between His followers Jesus wanted to demonstrate that rivalry and attitudes of superiority amongst His followers had no place. ¹² *When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them.* ¹³ *“You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am.”* ¹⁴ *Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.* ¹⁵ *I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.* ¹⁶ *Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.* ¹⁷ *Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them* (John 13:12-17). Elisha was only a young man, but he had a degree of experience and maturity beyond his years in his attitude to service. A job needed to be done and Elisha was willing to step up to the plate. How the church of Jesus Christ needs men and women who are willing to be counted in the ordinary things of life when tasks need to be accomplished, not just in the things we particularly like doing. Sometimes Christians have debated about this passage wondering whether Jesus was instituting a sacrament of foot-washing! This actually misses the point! It was a choice to make – would the people in that upper room, in this church –or in any gathering of Jesus’ followers be willing to be servant leaders available and willing to do what needs to be done. Can He count on you and me? To such an individual we read *Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him.* (I Kings 19:19b)

2. **A confident response** (I Kings 19:20)

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?”*

What do we see here of the person Elijah invited to be his successor?

(a) **A suitable person** Elisha had not gone looking for such a calling. He had not been so spiritual praying about it, but avoiding doing other forms of service. He was a practical man who gave of his best to the task at hand. He had wanted his father's business to prosper. He had invested in it for a significant proportion of his young life. Now he was being asked by Elijah to say good-bye to the security of his career, his income and his family commitment. He had received an invitation to join a wanted man on the run from the authorities. To stay at home was to have a settled future with his family, get married and have a family of his own like the friends with whom he had grown up in this rural community. There were many good reasons why Elisha might have been tempted to say 'no thank you' to Elijah. After all, his family were faithful followers of the God of Israel – amongst the seven thousand (I Kings 19:18) who had kept the faith in the nation. His name Elisha means 'God is Saviour' – the God of Israel not the Baal god of Jezebel. Anyone who met him and requested his name knew straight away that he had come from a family devoted to the God of Israel. Yet a successor to Elijah could not have come from outside this small number of devoted believers spread throughout the land. In fact, it was not Elijah that had made this selection - he was only following the guidance received from God at Horeb in the mountains of Sinai. God had prepared the person He was calling to this ministry, even if Elisha had not realised it. God has not changed. The tasks He has for you and me to do He often equally prepares us for them without us realising.

(b) **A sensitive person** *"Let me kiss my father and mother goodbye," he said, "and then I will come with you."* (I Kings 19:20b). Many Christians reading these words immediately think of Jesus' words to His followers in Luke 9:61-62: *Still another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.'* ⁶² *Jesus replied, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.'* On the surface Jesus' words seem harsh and if Elisha's words are understood in the light of Luke 9 then it is possible we may misunderstand the exchange of conversation. In addition, it appears that the famous Roman Catholic missionary to China and the Far East, Francis Xavier, followed these words to the letter. He was called by the Pope to undertake his extraordinary missionary calling. He returned to his home town to pick up some possessions before setting off on a journey from which he would not return. Apparently he declined to go home to say good-bye to his mother on the grounds that he had no time to spend on tears. This –if true- was to misunderstand Jesus' words. In its cultural context the man who uttered those words to Jesus meant that as soon as his parents had passed on he would come and follow Him. At a time when people lived on average less than 30 years, an adult saying these words to Jesus might only be asking for a few extra years delay, not potentially decades as might be the case in a similar scenario today! However, what Elisha was doing here was entirely appropriate. He was honouring his father and mother and almost certainly asking their blessing on his acceptance of the call to go with Elijah and train with a view to becoming his successor. The idea of this devoted and respectful son simply deserting his responsibilities and wandering off is completely out of the question. In a family that talked things through together and prayed together about things, here was a context where a family commitment to a choice was important. For many of us living in urban life a child choosing a vocation different to their parents is not necessarily a big deal, but it is only in the present generation in rural communities where there is not significant pressure on an older son to follow his father in running the family farm. Emotionally there was a heavy price to pay for this family in releasing their son to exercise this new calling. Elisha's pastoral heart was an attractive feature of his character. In the decades ahead in rebuilding the communities of faith scattered by the tyrannical regime of Ahab and Jezebel,

the sociable Elisha was needed much more than the solitary prophetic ministry of Elijah. It is possible that the enforced isolation of the Elijah years was something that would have been too heavy a burden for this young man, but God knows what He is doing in calling men and women to distinctive roles of service at particular times in history. In forming your character and mine God allows a variety of events to take place that shape who we are. Sometimes it is other people who see better than we do how fitted we might be to exercise certain ministries in God's service.

3. **A clean break** (I Kings 19:20c-21a)

Go back," Elijah replied. "What have I done to you?" 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.*

(a) **The impact of his calling** *Go back," Elijah replied. "What have I done to you?"* (I Kings 19:20c) The older man had an overwhelming sense of the enormous sacrifice he was asking this godly young man to make. He had given his life to a cause and had been comfortable and committed to seeking to fulfil it –or die in doing so. For Elijah who probably carried his total worldly goods with him on his travels it was simply by necessity the only way he had stayed alive –being able to move on at a moment's notice. But for Elisha with a career and home and secure future in this world's terms, alongside a loving and devoted family, an acceptance of this calling was an altogether different scenario. Was it right of him to expect Elisha to potentially give up so much? Yes it was because God's work needed to be done. When John Calvin at his seminary in Geneva set apart young couples to go back to France as pioneering church-planters in the sixteenth century he knew that some would inevitably be martyrs for the cause. In many mission fields today there is a potential price. We must not forget our friend from a Middle Eastern country who shared with us here in our church – if someone betrays him or the church then for him and probably others who are committed members it will be a painful death at the hands of the brutal regime in that country. We are less than honest if we ask people to take up offices in church or commit to a significant leadership position in some form of ministry without admitting that there is a cost of time and resources to see things through. This should not in any way deter us from asking for such a commitment as He calls us to follow Him, but it is wise and sensible to be alert to what is involved and what may be expected as we invite someone to join us in serving the Lord.

(b) **The commitment to his calling**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.* (I Kings 19:21a) Elisha took the necessary time to speak with his parents and explain the change of circumstances in his life. It is inevitable that this was a painful conversation for all concerned. His father would have had clear expectations of handing over the estate to his son in due course. This tradition, even on tiny farms that are barely viable, would have been the norm in his community. It was 'a double whammy' in that going with Elijah might mean being hunted by Ahab's forces and certainly would mean that he would see little of them in years to come. There were also in less settled times issues around the impracticality of him getting married and aspirations for grandchildren. All the emotions surrounding these issues might have been felt. Yet the commitment to go forward was clearly accepted and an irrevocable step was taken by Elisha in his burning of his work tools and the slaughtering of the oxen for the special meal associated with his commissioning for service. It was not a shortage of food that led to this step, but a public declaration that there would be no going back for him. He would follow Elijah until his death or if spared would become his successor. The symbolism of total commitment could not have been missed by anyone

present on that occasion. It is a challenge to us –that anything we do is worth giving our best to. If we are not giving of our best in the limited time we have, it begs the question about the importance of that activity in our lives. Where does the Lord come in your priorities and mine? Our words are one thing – but would our children or other adults see that we live out our faith as the most important thing day by day. We must not confuse ourselves into thinking that only overtly religious activities are done for the Lord. It affects all we do at work, and in every other sphere- but that said, what message do others pick up about the seriousness with which we take following Jesus?

4. A close walk (I Kings 19:21b)

Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his servant. In I Corinthians 1:26-29: Paul wrote: ⁶*Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; **not many were of noble birth.*** ²⁷*But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.* ²⁸*God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are,* ²⁹*so that no one may boast before Him.* Too often we read it as ‘not any’ - and incorrectly! There are a minority of people of social rank and economically advantaged circumstances who come to faith in Christ and who sometime have significant assets that are used to serve the Lord. Elisha had grown up in a household with servants to assist with any menial task and could call upon them to collaborate in larger projects. This was untypical of Israelites homes of the period. How is he now described? It is not just in this passage but elsewhere that we see similar vocabulary. In II Kings 3:11 we see a brief extract of a conversation between the King of Judah Jehoshaphat and one of the King of Israel’s army officers. *But Jehoshaphat asked, ‘Is there no prophet of the Lord here, through whom we may enquire of the Lord?’ An officer of the king of Israel answered, ‘**Elisha son of Shaphat is here. He used to pour water on the hands of Elijah.**’* In the secular world’s eyes Elisha was viewed as mad to give up his career and the security it brought. From minor gentry in the countryside to the servant of a homeless preacher on the run from the authorities; from a comfortable though basic bed to many nights under the stars exposed to the elements. It is not an obvious career path you would hear expounded in a careers office at school! Don’t expect everyone to understand or agree with your priorities if you come to follow Jesus. Remember Justine Horsfall, our former BMS link missionary in Kosovo sharing about her conversation with her parents after she had come to faith from an unchurched background, about her calling to go and work as a single woman civilian in what was effectively a war-zone in Kosovo. We are all human and it is not surprising how that conversation went. Parents often want to ask questions about the proposed choices of their children and not without a good reason. Elisha would in time accomplish a great deal for God and for his country, but at that moment in time he set out in faith without any guarantees of success. We like him have choices to make. May God help us, like him, to be willing to take steps of faith and entrust our future to the Lord, for our good and for His glory, Amen.