

Hearing the call of Christ

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[0 : 0 0] So, if you have your Bibles, you can turn back with me to 1 Kings chapter 19. We're thinking! We're thinking about this moment in the life of Elijah and Elisha, where Elisha hears God's call,! And we recognize in this little section that God doesn't leave himself without a witness in his world.

And so, to think about what's been happening in the story of Elijah and Elisha, almost the whole nation has turned away from worshiping God. But in the midst of that sort of moral, spiritual chaos, God raises up first Elijah and now Elisha to speak for him and to call the people back to him. So, this is, in a sense, a succession story. It's a story of God still speaking, God still working.

We can move forward in the Bible. Think about what's happening in the first century church. You know, we're beginning in the morning series to look at the book of Acts. And we heard Jesus commission the apostles, saying, you will be my witnesses. And so, they began in Jerusalem, but they spread through the nations, through their worship, through their words where they're declaring Jesus is the risen Lord, through their works of mercy, their miracles. God doesn't leave himself without a witness to himself in the world. And that remains true as we find ourselves this evening in Edinburgh. So, we recognize that probably today about 97% of the people that call this city home will not have been worshiping the God of the Bible.

And yet, here we are. And God calls his people to be an outpost of the kingdom. Those called to live and share the good news of Jesus as Lord and as King in a world where so many people are living in darkness and ignorance about who Jesus is. And so, I want us to hear tonight something of Elisha's call connected to the ministry of the Lord Jesus, but also connected to our own faith and experience using three of the different pieces of the story. The first is in verse 19, to think about the cloak. So, here is Elisha, he's plowing, and he's driving the last of the twelve yoke of oxen, and Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. And you might be thinking, what's going on there?

In some ways, it's a scene that we may be familiar with in the world of sport. So, if you followed the Tour de France at all, or even if you know anything about it in the world of cycling, you know that the race leader gets to wear the yellow jersey, and that will pass from person to person depending who is in the lead in any given stage. Or, if you're interested in golf, you could think about the U.S. Masters, where the previous champion wearing their green jacket puts the green jacket on the new champion.

[3 : 2 6] And Elijah's cloak, in one sense, was a bit like that. There is a passing the mantle. It's a symbolic way of saying, okay, Elijah has been the prophet, but we can expect that Elisha is now going to be God's prophet. But it's also more than that. So, one of the things we discover about prophets in the Old Testament, these men who speak for God to the people, these men who are given direct words from God, instructions to pass forward, significantly so often we're told they are clothed with the Spirit.

In other words, we are told in that language that God empowers His prophets to be His witnesses and to help them and to empower them. He gives them His Spirit. And so, when Elijah passes his cloak to Elisha, it is a sign that Elisha too will receive the Holy Spirit, so he will be enabled, now that he's been called, to serve his God. If you were here this morning, you might be thinking that sounds an awful lot like Acts chapter 1. God says to His apostles, wait until I send the Spirit, wait until I clothe you with the Holy Spirit, and then you'll go out as my witnesses. Still the same for the church. God gives us His Spirit, and God sends us into the world. God will not leave Himself without a witness, so here Elisha is called and will receive the power He needs to take over where Elijah leaves off. Now, if we fast forward from this prophet to the end of the Old Testament and to the last of the prophets, we get to the book of Malachi. And there at the very end of the book of Malachi, in chapter 4, verse 5, we get this anticipation. The Old Testament closes with the anticipation that a second Elijah will come, and this second Elijah, he will prepare the way for the Lord to come. And in the Gospels, we discover that John the Baptist is the second Elijah, and the Lord he's preparing the way for is none other than the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, God in the flesh. And so the Old Testament anticipates this great moment when God will send the final and the great prophet, His own Son, the one who speaks the Word of God, the one who is the Word of God. And as he speaks with the authority of God, he begins his ministry calling people to repent and to believe, because the kingdom of God is at hand. It is a time of turning hearts and minds and lives back to the living God through trusting in

Jesus. Jesus is the prophet who is so bold as to translate the whole Old Testament, saying, ultimately, it's all about me. If you want to have access and relationship to God, you need to know me and come through me. And remember, again, this was in the book of Acts as well this morning. John the Baptist spoke about baptizing with water, but the greater one coming would baptize with the Spirit. So there is this promise that when Jesus comes, the great prophet, he will send the Spirit, give the Spirit to his people.

And this actually captures something that Moses in the Old Testament looked forward to. In Numbers chapter 11, we hear Moses saying, I wish all the Lord's people were prophets. I wish that the Lord's Spirit was on them all.

What Moses wished for is what we experience as believers today. Because as we'll discover in Acts chapter 2, Pentecost happens. The Spirit is sent. And the apostles are enabled to preach and to live as witnesses for Jesus. And as we said this morning, everyone who believes, we become Spirit-filled witnesses to. So one of the reasons why, as Christians, we value Sundays, opportunities to worship, is here we have this equipping. We hear God's Word together, we are reminded of the gospel together, and then we are sent out to live for Jesus. We too are those who are clothed with the Spirit so that we might go for God to make disciples, knowing all the while we have his power and help and his purpose.

[8 : 46] So as you scan ahead and think about, what's my week going to look like? You know, whether we're thinking about times that we'll be spending with our family, or whether it's getting to know new flatmates and all the excitement of Freshers' Week, whether you're just thinking about, okay, here's these conversations that I'm going to have.

Maybe it's just in the way we're going to approach life. You and I, as Christians, are Spirit-filled so that God will have his witnesses here in this church, here in this city, or here where you happen, wherever you happen to be.

That's the cloak. Verse 20 moves our story along, so we need to think about the kiss. Elisha leaves his oxen, ran after Elijah, and he makes this request, let me kiss my father and mother goodbye, and then I will come with you.

Go back, Elijah replied, what have I done to you? This is a really short little section of the Bible, but every little detail matters. So if you have your Bible, you can look up at verse 18, which reminds us of our context.

So Elijah has been spoken to by God, and he hears these words, I reserve 7,000 in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal, and whose mouths have not kissed him.

[10 : 15] Okay, so there's 7,000 people who are this kind of little group, we can call them the church, and everybody else in the nation, they have literally been kissing the idols, which is a symbol for them. I trust this little God. I'm going to show loyalty to what this icon represents. This is the thing that I trust is going to give me life and prosperity and security.

So the whole nation is, you know, kissing idols over here, and then we get to Elisha, Elisha's kiss is very different, because it is a goodbye kiss to his parents, which stands as an expression of his total loyalty to God. I love my God, I serve my God, he's the one I worship, therefore I'm saying goodbye to my family to go where he calls me.

Maybe we can think of pictures and scenes of soldiers waiting at stations or waiting at docks, going off to war. And if you look at any of those crowd scenes recorded in photos, you will inevitably see final kisses taking place. And in those moments, there is as well that sense of there is love for family and love for family and loved ones, but there's this greater call on a person's heart, the call of king and country. So there's that sign of sacrifice in order to express commitment.

What we're being told by this kiss is that Elisha will be single-minded and single-hearted in his witness and as a worshiper. In stark contrast to basically everybody else in the nation, he will stand and he will worship God alone. His kiss speaks loudly.

Now just to think about some scenes from the life and ministry of Jesus. Remember Jesus when he's age 12? There's this moment where he and his mom and dad have been at Jerusalem for a festival and his mom and dad have headed home and they presume Jesus is with them and he's age 12, but actually he stayed behind in the temple. And so after three days, they find him and they're really anxious about him. And what does Jesus say? Didn't you know I had to be in my father's house and he had to be on his father's business? Jesus was so clear that first loyalty belonged to his God and Father.

[13 : 10] He had come to establish the kingdom of God. He too has come to win people's hearts away from their idols to love and serve Him as the one true and living God. There's some wonderful scenes of that loyalty being expressed to Jesus in the Gospels. Maybe the most intimate is the one that we find in Luke 7.

There is a sinful woman who enters into a feast and she's weeping and she's kissing Jesus' feet because King Jesus has forgiven her and welcomed her and saved her. And so these kisses too speak of love and loyalty for Jesus, her Savior. Of course, we know that the mission of Jesus is one that will take Him to the cross. And as Jesus dies on the cross, justice and mercy meets and kiss.

God's just judgment on sin is satisfied. Wrath is satisfied as Jesus takes our sin and pays the punishment in full. Mercy is shown in that we don't get the punishment we deserve. Jesus, the Son of God, takes it so we can receive God's love and God's grace. But again, as we think about the story surrounding the cross, we remember too there's another kiss, isn't there? There's the kiss of Judas, the betrayer, the traitor.

As people hear the call of Christ, for some there is that expression of worship and love, but for others there is rejection. Some have soft hearts. Some have hard hearts.

And tonight is as good a time as any for us to reflect and where we need to, to redirect our love, our loyalty, our worship, that we, like Elisha, might be single-minded and single-hearted.

[15 : 38] You know, we began our time together in Romans chapter 12. Paul says, In view of God's mercies, we should present our bodies as living sacrifices. What mercies does he have in mind?

Well, perhaps it's God's mercy in giving his Son to be our Savior. Perhaps it's his mercy and his willingness to cancel our debt of sin in giving us new life, of being always with us, of promising eternal glory as ours.

In light of God's mercies, we hold nothing back. In the spiritual battle and struggle, in the situations that we find ourselves in, we are invited to kiss goodbye to those things that would keep us from wholehearted loyalty to Jesus.

In our call to be witnesses, we are invited to count the cost. So again, we need to kiss goodbye to aspects of our own comfort, maybe to our desire to blend in, maybe our desire to return to the old way of life.

It's the call of Psalm 2. Kiss the Son. Kiss Jesus the Son. Receive him by faith. Give him your heart.

[17 : 01] To avoid judgment and instead to find refuge and to find life. Well, there's one last scene, and it takes us to the yoke.

Verse 21, the plowing equipment. Elisha left 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. So we need to think about this bonfire. Now, but before there, when I was a student, one particular lecturer was reaching the point of his retirement.

And it became something of a running joke with us as a class, because it was his last class ever. He would end every class by pulling out the lecture notes and ripping them up and chucking them in the bin.

Now, this life is done. There's no going back. Retirement beckons. Elisha's dramatic moment is way more spectacular than that, because what happens is Elisha goes back, he kisses his mom and dad goodbye, and then he makes a bonfire of all his farming gear.

[18 : 18] And incidentally, Elisha's clearly very wealthy, because he's got 12 pair of oxen, but he makes a bonfire of all his farming gear, his plowing gear, and then he prepares the oxen for sacrifice, to make a fellowship offering to share with the people around him, and then he goes.

And the message is loud and clear. Now that he has heard God's call, he is totally committed to putting God first. There's going to be no going back for Elisha.

For him, enjoying life with God, worshiping and serving, comes before anything his career could offer, anything his money could buy.

And it's there demonstrated in the bonfire, in the sacrifice, and the going. We read from Luke chapter 9. And I wonder whether, as Jesus in his context speaks about the urgency of responding to the call of the kingdom, I wonder whether he had Elisha in mind.

There are a number of people who are asking questions, and it sounds like their intentions are good, but all of them are putting the brakes on. Let me first do this.

[19 : 44] Let me first do this. Let me wait until a more suitable time. When Jesus says, no one who puts their hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the service, for service in the kingdom of God, he could almost be saying to us, remember Elisha, he didn't look back.

He couldn't put his hand to the plow because he burned it. He was so committed. And the striking thing about Jesus is he never talked a good game without himself putting the principle into practice.

So here he is talking about the need within the kingdom to urgently respond, to be committed. And then here what we discovered just a few verses earlier.

And there is no turning back for Jesus. He is determined to become the sacrifice to deal with your sin and mine so that we can know God, so we can have the privilege of serving God.

Give up living for yourself. This is the kind of witnesses, these are the kind of people that the Lord Jesus wants. He wants us to be burning our papers kind of people.

And like Elisha, we do that as we hear the call of God, as we depend on the power of God that he gives us by his Holy Spirit.