

The Sound of a Low Whisper
1 Kings 19:9-21
October 18, 2020
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CenterPoint Church

Read 1 Kings 19:9-21

“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”
(Hebrews 4:12)

Introduction

During the 16th century Protestant Reformation, a man named George Wishart travelled all around Scotland preaching repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. But there were many who opposed him and sought to hurt him, so he had a man travelling with him who carried a sword to protect him, a man who was both his spiritual apprentice and his bodyguard. That man’s name was John Knox, and Knox would become the much more famous name in church history. The Presbyterian Church in Scotland was helped in its formation and strengthened by John Knox. But before he took on his own ministry, he accompanied and attended to George Wishart, so that “when Wishart was burned at the stake, Knox was ready to take his place as a minister.”¹

One of the hardest pieces of advice that I’ve heard for people in ministry is: “Work yourself out of a job.” The first time I heard it, I thought, “What? I’m supposed to be working as hard as I can and keeping my job. I don’t get it.” But as I saw that different people are called to different positions, and that God moves people in and out of various ministries and churches, I realized the wisdom of training up the next generation of leaders and passing on the ministry to those who carry it on after I am gone. A healthy ministry reproduces leaders, it doesn’t just keep the same people doing the same things forever. As I’ve left youth ministry and music ministry positions, it’s been wonderful to see God use those who worked in the ministry with me take over after I left.

No matter what field of work or area of life you find yourself in, it is wise to realize that you need to work towards equipping those who will take on your position next. You need to pass the torch. The most obvious place that we see this principle is in parenting. Our job is not just to make our kids succeed in school and get a good job, we are looking to form them and shape them with values and tools to be great parents someday themselves. In the workplace, no one is irreplaceable, so it’s wise to plan and work towards handing off your position to whoever will take over when you leave or retire. This morning’s text is going to cover a good bit of ground, but the text will be driving towards our main man, Elijah, looking to appoint several leaders, one of whom will be taking his job when the Lord calls him home to heaven.

As we come to the text, you’ll remember that the last passage that I preached on saw Elijah very worn out from everything that happened on Mt. Carmel and afterwards, and weary from having his life threatened. The Lord ministered to him through His angel, and the text ended with Elijah heading to a mountain. The last time that Elijah was on a mountaintop (Mt. Carmel), God spoke in a very dramatic way, the fire from heaven that consumed the altar. This passage happens on a different mountain and brings a very different delivery. The first four verses show us how

¹ Phillip Graham Ryken, *1 Kings* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2011), p.549.

I. God Gave Elijah Reassurance (vv. 9-12)

⁹ There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰ He said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." ¹¹ And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. ¹² And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper.

God's question for Elijah – "What are you doing here?" is in the grand tradition of God asking questions that He already knows the answers to; He asks them to draw out a conversation and to get the person to admit what they are thinking or feeling. "Adam, where are you? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" in Genesis 3. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked a blind man in Mark 10:51.

Now Elijah didn't exactly answer the question. He gave God his perspective on his circumstances. He said that he had proved how much he was committed to God, he claimed to be "very jealous" for the Lord. And from all we know of Elijah, that seems to be true, particularly despite the fact that the people of Israel had completely rebelled, which he characterized in 3 ways: 1) forsaking the covenant, 2) throwing down God's altars, and 3) killing God's prophets. The events on the top of Mt. Carmel for a short time seemed to have changed things, but they had not. Israel was still in rebellion, led by the evil royal couple, Ahab and Jezebel. And poor, pitiful, lonely Elijah – he thought he was the only one left and they wanted to kill him too. Had he completely forgotten that Obadiah told him that he had hidden 100 prophets in caves? He probably didn't forget, he probably just didn't count them because they weren't out there actively doing the Lord's work. He was the only one pushing back against the darkness, against the false religion.

What was Elijah doing there? If you listen past his self-pity, he was bringing his case to the Judge on the mountain. It's implied that he was saying, "I have these problems, fix them!" And God might be demonstrating three ways that He could appear and bring judgment to these covenant breakers in Israel: He could send a hurricane of wind and tear the people as He tore the rocks. He could send an earthquake or He could send fire. But He was not going to do any of those things, the text says that "the Lord was not in" them.² He spoke in a whisper. Perhaps the contrast of God's small voice with the hurricane, wind, and fire is a way of saying that God's kingdom more often advances in small, quiet acts of obedience rather than large flashy signs and wonders. That the word of God quietly working in someone's heart will accomplish more than the big miracles like the one on Mt. Carmel. Perhaps it's a reminder that while God can be powerful and intimidating, that He also whispers to us in a close relationship that we should find quiet to be able to hear Him. Be still and know that He is God, tune out the noise all around you. Perhaps Elijah was so beaten down and discouraged that the only tone of God's voice that he could bear was the whisper. It was God's way of being gentle and restoring. Because God was not going to leave Elijah in this cave. In the next six verses

II. God Gave Elijah Work (vv. 13-18)

¹³ And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴ He said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only,

² Content suggested by Ryan Baker's sermon "The God Who Whispers" from April 5, 2020, found at gracestillwater.com.

am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.”¹⁵ And the Lord said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria.¹⁶ And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place.¹⁷ And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death.¹⁸ Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”

If there was a copy-and-paste function for the original writer of 1 Kings, they could have copied verse 10 and pasted it into verse 14. Elijah’s answer is exactly the same despite all that happened in between. Both times God doesn’t either confront or coddle Elijah. He doesn’t say, “Snap out of it; your little pity party is a little over the top, don’t you think?” But He also doesn’t say, “You’re right, you’ve done a great job staying faithful when everyone else has deserted Me. Don’t worry, I won’t let anyone kill you because I’m so thankful that I have a good person that pleases Me.” No, both times God gave him something to do; He had made future plans that needed to be put into motion:

1) Syria was getting a new king, Hazael. Remember that Syria was not part of Israel, but God uses His prophet to make His will known there anyways. As with the drought, Elijah’s ministry affected more than just Israel.

2) Israel was getting a new king, Jehu. This shouldn’t be a surprise to anyone, as we’ve seen what a complete disaster Ahab’s kingship has been. There will be a king in between that we’ll read in two weeks, Ahab’s son, but Jehu was coming.

3) Israel was getting a new prophet. Elijah was to anoint his own successor, Elisha.

This passage makes it sound like all three of these men will be anointed by Elijah, which means that he will put oil on them and officially recognize them and charge them with their office. But it was actually never recorded that Elijah anointed any of them, and the two kings didn’t even come to power until after Elijah was gone. So, we have 3 possibilities:

- 1) Either those anointings happened and just were never recorded,
- 2) Elijah was disobedient and just didn’t do what God asked him to do,
- 3) “God’s words in vv. 15-16 were an outline of future prophetic tasks rather than specific commands for Elijah himself to perform immediately.”³

I would lean towards that last one. Verse 17 makes it clear that these men will be placed in their positions because there is judgment and bloodshed coming. We know that Elijah just triumphed over and slaughtered 450 priests of Baal, but God has decreed that these kings are going to be His instruments of judgment on evildoers. The work of ending the influence and worship of Baal was to take a while and work itself out through the time of these three men, it wasn’t all getting solved in Elijah’s day. The point is that God had already figured out who would carry on Elijah’s work.

Have any of you participated in the event “See You at the Pole”? It was a big deal when I was a youth pastor in Florida in the 1990s; it’s still happening, though I’m sure they had to figure out some way to do it online this year. Students in Middle School and High School were encouraged to take one day, the last Wednesday of September, to meet at their schools’ flagpole before school started and pray for the school, their classmates, their community, their churches, the nation, revival, their own hearts, all those things. I would always encourage the kids in my youth group to be involved, and I would usually show up to one or two schools. And kids would always be shocked by how many Christians went to their schools. And they would say things like, “I didn’t know Jason from chemistry went to church” or “I’ve known Jessica for years, didn’t know she was one to come

³ John Woodhouse, *1 Kings: Power, Politics, and the Hope of the World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), p. 547.

pray with a bunch of Christians.” It was almost always a huge encouragement to these students who had assumed that they were one of only a small handful of Christians students at their schools.

Elijah was so discouraged and lonely – “I’m the only one who’s following You, Lord.” Well, according to verse 18, that number was only off by 6,999!⁴ I’m sure that’s not an exact number, but there were 7,000 believers who had not bowed the knee to Baal; God had preserved a remnant. “You haven’t been around them, you haven’t heard word from them, but I know them and I will use them,” God was saying. Like Elijah, we can feel isolated and like we’re the only ones following God when all around us seems to be following the ways of the world instead. So God looks to encourage us with Christian community and fellowship. And no matter how much opposition the church faces, God will always direct the growth of His church, advance His Kingdom, and save His people. It’s not totally up to us! He uses us, but He’s in charge. Never forget that!

The Apostle Paul refers to Elijah’s story in the latter part of the book of Romans, drawing parallels between the remnant in Elijah’s day and his own day. (Open your Bibles to) Romans 11:1-5: *“I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? “Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.” ⁴ But what is God’s reply to him? “I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” ⁵ So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.”* Be encouraged! God always keeps a remnant of His people in every age: in Elijah’s day, in Paul’s day, and in ours. It sometimes seems like Christianity is on the decline in America and it certainly has dried up in post-Christian Europe. But then we hear about the huge growth of Christianity in Latin America, in Africa, in Asia, the Middle East (Christianity is growing the fastest in Iran!). Never forget that God is directing the growth of His church whether we can see it or not.

The last three verses show us that

III. God Gave Elijah a Companion and a Successor (vv. 19-21)

¹⁹ So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him. ²⁰ And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” And he said to him, “Go back again, for what have I done to you?” ²¹ And he returned from following him and took the yoke of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him.

Young Elisha was doing his everyday, ordinary activity plowing the fields when the call from God through Elijah came. It’s so reminiscent of how Jesus came to His disciples in the middle of their jobs, fishermen and tax collectors, and He said, *“Come, follow me.”* Apparently having twelve yoke of oxen meant that his family was well-off. So for Elisha to leave a lucrative family business and a secure future for the unknown of following in Elijah’s footsteps was truly a leap of faith. Elijah had been under a death sentence, this was not a smart, safe career choice. But when you’re called by the Lord, you go, and Elisha was certainly called.

“Pass down the mantel” is a saying that we use from time to time without really knowing where it comes from, such as when a business executive hands over his position to the next leader. Well,

⁴ Ryken, p. 534.

now you know where it comes from: 1 Kings 19! A mantel is a cloak, and in verse 19, Elijah places his cloak or his mantel on Elisha. There's nothing magical about the cloak, it doesn't transfer powers from one person to the next. It merely symbolizes that Elijah has handed off the responsibility to the next generation. This same cloak will figure in prominently at the end of his life, you'll have to wait for the last sermon November 8th.

What was happening in verse 20 when Elisha asked to kiss his parents goodbye first? And Elijah replied, *"Go back again, for what have I done to you?"* Those who know the New Testament well will think of when Jesus rebuked a man who hesitated when He had asked to follow Him. Luke 9:61-62: *"Yet another said, 'I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'"* At first glance, that seems to be what is happening here – Elisha wants to go back and Elijah rebukes him. But it's more likely that this is not a negative thing. Elisha's heart was eager to follow and obey, while the man who interacted with Jesus was reluctant, even unwilling, looking for excuses not to follow. "When Elijah said, *"what have I done to you?"* it's not so much a rebuke for hesitancy on the part of Elisha but as an assent: Why shouldn't you go back to take fond leave of your parents? I have made no unreasonable demands of you."⁵

Conclusion

Elisha shows us what it's like to leave everything behind and follow the Lord. He symbolically left his old life by burning his plow and cooking the oxen with his parents or his neighbors. It's both a farewell dinner and a declaration that he won't be back, and he won't be using those things in his new life. What a great reminder to consider the call of Jesus as the most important thing in our lives and not be hanging on to our old ways. Jesus said it very directly in Luke 14:33 – *"Any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."* Paul said it in Philippians 3:13-14 – *"one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."* Forget what's behind – both the successes and the failures – and press toward what God has planned for you in the future.

Sometimes it's easy to treat our relationship with God as one more option to do in life. Like, when I'm done with work, when I've spent time with my family, after I get my "me" time with my hobbies, when I've watched some things on my Netflix list or my DVR recordings, maybe I'll grab my Bible, maybe I'll try to do something that's godly, something ministry-like. Those are all good things, I'm not bashing those things. But what we need to constantly be examining is our priorities. Because God presents Himself as our top priority, He's not content to be second place to anything in your life. *"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field"* (Matthew 13:44). *"Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you"* (Matthew 6:33).

God created you and even when you were dead in your sins, God called you out of your darkness into glorious light. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection were used by God to accomplish your salvation. Like Elijah's call to Elisha, at some point in time in your life, God called you, He threw His mantle over you and said, "Follow me." And more likely than not, there was no earthquake or fire or hurricane that accompanied that call, it was a still, small voice that said, *"Follow me; I have forgiven your sins by the blood of my Son."* Have we responded to Him like Elisha and looked around and said, "None of this other stuff matters. I'm willing to give all of this up to follow Jesus"?

⁵ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2019), p. 513.