

"Elijah: Passing the Mantle"
Series: Part 4

In the first 3 sermons in this series I've tried to show how and why Elijah was a bright and shining light for God in a dismal period of Israel's history. He was able to impact his generation for God. But no one lives on this earth forever! Even the most effective, Spirit-guided ministries are temporary. What would happen when Elijah was gone? Who, if anyone, would continue the work Elijah started? Would there be someone else God would use to curb Israel's temptation to give in to the apostasy and evil embodied in Baalism, and other false religions?

In our time, every generation of Christians must produce its own leaders to carry the message of Jesus to the succeeding generation. This is our focus today. In the case of Elijah, God provided a successor! Who was it? It was *Elisha*. (No, they weren't twins, and they weren't brothers!). We're not really told much about Elisha, other than that he was to succeed Elisha. "Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, 'Stay here, for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel.' But Elisha said, 'As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.' So they went down to Bethel. The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, 'Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?' And he said, 'Yes, I know; keep silent'" (2 Kings 2:1-3).

Elijah knows the end is near. He's about to travel to Bethel, and he says goodbye to Elisha, but Elisha refuses to leave him. Okay, Elijah says. As they near Bethel, a band of prophets come out to meet them, and they say to Elisha, "Do you know that today the Lord's going to take your master away from you?" "I know," Elisha says. And then there's this interesting tag: "Keep silent." The New International Version translates it, "So be quiet." I'm not sure what he intends to say here! Is it, "Shhh. Don't upset the master any more than he already is"? Is it, "Shut up! I already realize that!" Whatever he meant, it was a sad day.

If you're a serious Christian, maybe you've had to say goodbye to someone who was very important to you in your faith. A godly parent. A pastor. A close Christian friend. As a youth, several pastors had a big influence on my life. It was a sad day when I learned that each was leaving our church to serve another congregation. It's even more painful when that Christian friend or mentor died. Billy Graham had a great influence on my life in my younger years. And many of you know and have met Rocky Riedel, a pastor who became a friend and mentor. They both died within days of each other. Billy Graham died first. Rocky was near the end, and wanted to go. But his wife said something like this, "You have to be patient. You know the Lord is busy with Billy Graham!" You know what I mean here, don't you? It's hard to say goodbye to Christians who have guided and inspired us!

Elisha knew those feelings! 2 Kings 2:11-12 tell us that: "As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, 'Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!' But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces." He's overwhelmed with grief. He cries out "Father, father!" He tears his clothes – a sign of grief and mourning. Later, a group of 50 prophets say, "Well, maybe he

was just whisked off to another place around here." (After all, most of us don't depart this life by hitching an Uber ride on a chariot like Elijah!). "Why don't all of us hunt for Elijah and see if we can find him." Elisha says, "Don't bother." But they insist. Elisha finally gives in, but after hunting for Elijah for 3 days and coming up empty handed, they give up.

It's hard to let go! Who's going to fill that empty part of my soul when my mom or dad or aunt or uncle who loved the Lord - and me - so much, are gone? Who's going to be the spiritual leader I need when the pastor I love leaves? Who's going to replace the Sunday School teacher from whom I learned so much? Who's going to fill the shoes of the well-known Christian leader, the TV preacher, the radio ministry, that's meant so much to me? During my college days, I did a lot of traveling in the car. The last 2 years of college I was going to college and serving a church. I often listened to a radio program at 9 a.m., a devotional program that fed my soul. I turned the radio on one morning, and the voice of someone else came on and mentioned that the host, Ralph Neighbor, had suddenly passed away. Tears came to my eyes, and I felt an emptiness inside. And I thought, "Now what? Can this ministry continue?"

Every generation must come to grips with the changing of the guard, and the need for a new corps of Christians able to make an impact for Jesus Christ. Elijah' gone. Now what? Let's look more closely at what happened, and the lessons it teaches.

There comes a time when a person's ministry must end. No one is indispensable! No one is indispensable *but God!* It's really important to know when it's time to quit! Sometimes, e.g., someone is in a position in the church for a long time, and maybe that person is no longer effective, or has an attitude like, "This is *my* job, and don't anyone dare to think they're going to take over my turf!" I served a church where a man had been Lay Leader for 28 years or so. He was a good man, a committed Christians, but at times as Lay Leader he tried to manipulate the congregation to do things his way. Right before I came to that church they instituted a tenure system, where no one could serve in a position for more than 3 consecutive years. It was getting to the end of the third year since the tenure system was set up, which meant he had to leave that position. Several times he came into my study and would drop hints that maybe he should be allowed to continue as Lay Leader. Thank God, I was able to hold my ground, and I think his giving someone else a chance to do that was good for the church (and probably for him). I've often prayed that I don't stay at a church longer than what's best for that church. Rather leave a little too soon than stay on a little too long!

By the way, this doesn't mean we "retire" from serving the Lord. So let's not ever have this attitude: "Well, I've served in the church and put in my time." Or, "I've served in this ministry and paid my dues. Now it's time to just take it easy and do some things *for me*, things *I want to do*." There is no such thing as "retiring" from serving the Lord in one way or other! Elijah served until the day the Lord took him.

But here's perhaps the most important thing we see in the story of Elijah and Elisha: God provided someone to keep things going! Let's back up a bit in the story to 1 Kings, chapter 19. Elijah is going through a spell of deep depression. Queen Jezebel, after Elijah's defeat of the

prophets of Baal, is now out to kill Elijah. He's scared, and depressed. Elijah is singing the blues: "Nobody loves Yahweh but me! Nobody's left to serve the Lord but little ole me!" "Wrong, Elijah," God says. "There are 7,000 people in Israel who haven't bowed the knee to Baal. And besides, note this: "Then the Lord said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; *and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah as prophet in your place*" (1 Kings 19:15-16). Did you get it? God says, "I've got someone in mind to succeed you – *to be a prophet in your place!* Israel still needed prophets to guide them spiritually!

When a ministry is of the Lord, and the work is not finished, God calls someone to keep things going – maybe even to do it more effectively! I spent my first year of seminary at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. The head of the church history department at that time was Doug Chandler – a beautiful Christian, soft spoken, a leading authority on John Wesley and Methodist history. But now, the newest member of the faculty in the church history department was a young man who had been an engineer, but changed professions. He was a brilliant young man and a spellbinding lecturer (compared to Dr. Chandler, who – bless his heart – could be sometimes a bit dry and boring). One day Dr. Chandler spoke to the class about his young understudy. He said, "I hired him. I know he's brilliant and dynamic. I know my limitations. I'm so glad we have him." He went on to say how confident he was that the days ahead for their church history department would be even better under Professor Goen's eventual new leadership. I was so moved by the graciousness of this elderly professor.

When I was leaving the one church, we were talking in a meeting about my leaving, some saying they were sorry to see me go, and one man chimed in, "Maybe we'll get someone better!" (He was a friend, I was close to him and his wife, he had a great sense of humor - - at least, I hope he was just kidding!)

When there's work to be done, and a ministry needs to continue or expand, God has a way of providing the person to do it. The writer of 1 Kings describes how Elijah passed by Elisha while the young man was plowing – and he threw the prophet's mantle over the young man – enlisting him as a prophet to be. Notice the last sentence of 1 Kings 19:21, "Then he arose and went after Elijah, and ministered to him." Did you notice whom God chose? *A farmer!* Elisha never went to college, never heard of a theological seminary or the United Methodist Board of Ordained Ministry. He was a *farmer!* *Often God picks the most unlikely people to do the work He wants done.* I know! Proof of that is me – that he chose me for the ordained ministry.

When God wants a ministry continued, God has a way of providing the person to do it! Maybe you're thinking, "Now wait a minute. I can show examples of how ministries fell apart or dried up when the person who started them left, or died." That's true. I look back over the churches I've served, and what happened after I left. In some cases the church got stronger and flourished more. In other cases, the church declined and things got bad.

So what can we say about this? Here are just a few thoughts. Maybe God intends some

ministries, some of His works, to end, or to change. And perhaps the Christian organization, the church, or the person coming in was unable to see that, and tried to keep the work going "the way it was always done". But other times I believe God wants a ministry to continue, even after the key player is gone. So here is how we can work with God in seeing this happen:

First of all, pray that God will send the person or persons He wants. Jesus once said this: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Matthew 9:37-38). Pray for God to send the help needed to keep a viable ministry going.

Second, when someone comes to replace a servant who has left, support that person, give that person a chance to grow. Elisha didn't step in right away and take over. He "ministered" to Elijah. It was like an apprenticeship period, getting to know the ropes, learning how to flesh out his call to be a prophet. Give the new person a chance!

Thirdly, you have to have people willing to say "yes" to God. God calls ordinary people in every generation to step up and step in – to make an impact for Christ – to be the salt and light a lost world needs! *Elisha was willing to accept the mantle Elijah passed on to him!*

Notice how the story continues: "When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, 'Tell me what I may do for you before I am taken from you.' Elisha said, 'Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.' He responded, 'You have asked a hard thing, yet if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.' As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" (2 Kings 2:9-12a). Elijah says to the young man, 'Before I die, tell me what I can do for you.' Elisha replies, 'Give me a double portion of your spirit!' Elijah says, 'Boy, that's a hard one! But if you see me when I'm taken up from you, it will be granted. And Elisha did see the old prophet taken up in a chariot to heaven!

What was Elisha asking for when he asked for a double share of Elijah's spirit? The double portion was the inheritance that the firstborn child received – twice as much as the other children (Deuteronomy 21:17). Elisha was asking to be acknowledged as the worthy successor to the prophet – to receive the full blessing and power he needed to fulfill that calling and task.

Some of us are solid, committed followers of Jesus because of the witness and example of people who came before us. And now the question is: *Can we follow in their footsteps, assume the mantle of their commitment to Christ, and impact others and our slice of life for the Lord?* We too can ask for a double portion of God's Spirit so we can do that, and be that example and model for our time! God will be delighted to answer our prayer!

God used a young farmer named Elisha to keep the work of Elijah going! God can use ordinary people to do extraordinary things if we make ourselves available to Him!

