

THE LIFE OF FAITH Chapter 8 Elisha's Testings

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Transcript

THE LIFE OF FAITH

Chapter 8

Elisha's Testings

The peculiar relation which existed between Elijah and Elisha foreshadowed that which pertains to Christ and his servants, and the early experiences through which Elisha passed are those which almost every genuine minister of the gospel is called upon to encounter. All the preliminary details recorded of the prophet before his mission commenced must have their counterpart in the early history of any who are used of God in the work of his kingdom. Those experiences in the case of Elisha began with a definite call from the Lord, and that is still his order of procedure. That call was followed by a series of very real testings, which may well be designated as a preliminary course of discipline. Those testings were many and varied. There were seven in number, which at once indicates the thoroughness and completeness of the ordeals through which Elisha went and by which he was schooled for the future. (1) The testing of his affections This occurred at the time he received his call to devote the whole of his time and energies to the service of God and his people. A stem test it was. Elisha was not one who had failed in temporal matters and now desired to "better his position", nor was he deprived of those who cherished him and was therefore anxious to enter a more congenial circle. Far from it. He was the son of a well-to-do farmer, living with parents to whom he was devotedly attached. Response to Elijah's casting of the prophetic mantle upon him meant not only the giving up of favorable worldly prospects, but the severing of happy home ties. The issue was plainly drawn: which should dominate—zeal for Jehovah or love for his parents? That Elisha was very far from being one of a cold and unfeeling disposition is clear from a number of things. When Elijah bade him remain at Bethel, he replied, "I will not leave thee" (2 Kings 2:2); and when his master was caught away from him, he evidenced his deep grief by crying out, "My father! My father!" and by rending his garments asunder (v. 12). No, Elisha was no stoic, and it cost him something to break away from his loved ones. But he shrank not from the sacrifice demanded of him. He "left the oxen" with which he had been ploughing and "ran after Elijah" asking only, "Let me, I pray thee, kiss my father and my mother, and I will follow thee" (1 Kings 19:20). When permission was granted, a hasty farewell speech was made and he took his departure; and the sacred narrative contains no mention that he ever returned home even for a brief visit. Dutiful respect, yea, tender regard, was shown for his parents, but he did not prefer them before God. The Lord does not require his servants to callously ignore their filial duty, but he

does claim the first place in their hearts. Unless one who is contemplating an entrance into the ministry is definitely prepared to accord him that, he should at once abandon his quest. No man is eligible for the ministry unless he is ready to resolutely subordinate natural ties to spiritual bonds. Blessedly did the spirit prevail over the flesh in Elisha's response to this initial trial. (2) The testing of his sincerity This occurred at the outset of the final journey of the two prophets. "And it came to pass when the Lord would take up Elijah into heaven by a whirlwind that Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal. And Elijah said unto Elisha, Tarry here I pray thee" (2 Kings 2:1-2). Various reasons have been advanced by commentators as to why the Tishbite should have made such a request. Some think it was because he wished to be alone, that modesty and humility would not suffer that his companion should witness the very great honour which was about to be bestowed upon him. Others suppose it was because he desired to spare Elisha the grief of a final leave-taking. But in view of all that follows, and taking this detail in connection with the whole incident, we believe these words of the prophet bear quite a different interpretation, namely, that Elijah was now making proof of Elisha's determination and attachment to him. At the time of his call Elisha had said, "I will follow thee", and now he was given the opportunity to go back if he were so disposed. There was one who accompanied the apostle Paul for a while, but later he had to lament, "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica" (2 Tim. 4:10). Many have done likewise. Daunted by the difficulties of the way, discouraged by the unfavorable response to their efforts, their ardor cooled, and they concluded they had mistaken their calling; or, because only small and unattractive fields opened to them, they decided to better themselves by returning to worldly employment. To what numbers do those solemn words of Christ apply: "No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). Far otherwise was it with Elisha. No fleeting impression had actuated him when he declared to Elijah, "I will follow thee." And when he was put to the test as to whether or not he was prepared to follow him to the end of the course, he successfully gave evidence of his unwavering fidelity. "As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, Twill not leave thee" was his unflinching response. Oh for like stability. (3) The testing of his will or resolution From Gilgal, Elijah and his companion had gone on to Bethel, and there he encountered a subtle temptation, one which had prevailed over any whose heart was not thoroughly established. "And the sons of the prophets that were at Bethel came forth to Elisha and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head today?" (2 Kings 2:3). Which was as much as saying, Why think of going on any further, what is the use of it, when the Lord is on the point of taking him from you? And mark it well, they who here sought to make him waver from his course were not the agents of Jezebel but those who were on the side of the Lord. Nor was it just one who would deter Elisha, but apparently the whole body of the prophets endeavoured to persuade him that he should relinquish his purpose. It is in this very way God tries the mettle of his servants: to make evident to themselves and others whether they are vacillating or steadfast, whether they are regulated wholly by his call and will or whether their course is directed by the counsels of men. A holy independence should mark the servant of God. Thus it was with the chief of the apostles: "I conferred not with flesh and blood" (Gal. 1:16). Had he done so, what trouble would he have made for himself; had he listened to the varied advice the other apostles would offer, what a state of confusion his own mind would have been in! If Christ is my Master, then it is from him, and from him alone, I must take my orders. Until I am sure of his will I must continue to wait upon him; once it is clear to me, I must set out on the performance of it, and nothing must move me to turn aside. So it was here. Elisha had been Divinely called to follow Elijah, and he was determined to cleave to him unto the end, even though it meant going against well-meant advice and offending the whole of his fellows. "Hold ye your peace" was his reply. This was one of the trials which this writer encountered many years ago, when his pastor and Christian friends urged him to enter a theological seminary, though they knew that deadly error was taught there. It was not easy to take his stand against

them, but he is deeply thankful he did so. (4) The testing of his faith "And Elijah said unto him, Elisha, tarry here, I pray thee; for the Lord hath sent me to Jericho" (2 Kings 2:4). "Tarry here." They were at Bethel, and this was a place of sacred memories. It was here that Jacob had spent his first night as he fled from the wrath of his brother. Here he had been favored with that vision of the ladder whose top reached unto heaven and beheld the angels of God ascending and descending on it. Here it was Jehovah had revealed himself and given him precious promises. When he awakened, Jacob said, "surely the Lord is in this place... this is none other but the house of God and this is the gate of heaven" (Gen. 28). Delectable spot was this: the place of divine communion. Ah, one which is supremely attractive to those who are spiritually minded, and therefore one which such are entirely loath to leave. What can be more desirable than to abide where such privileges and favors are enjoyed! So felt Peter on the holy mount. As he beheld Christ transfigured and Moses and Elijah talking with him, he said, "Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses and one for Elijah." Let us remain and enjoy such blessing. But that could not be. God still tests his servants at this very point. They are in some place where the smile of heaven manifestly rests upon their labours. The Lord's presence is real, his secrets are revealed to them, and intimate communion is enjoyed with him. If he followed his own inclinations he would remain there, but he is not free to please himself: he is the servant of another and must do his bidding. Elijah had announced, "The Lord hath sent me to Jericho" and if Elisha were to "follow" him to the end then to Jericho he too must go. True, Jericho was far less attractive than Bethel, but the will of God pointed clearly to it. It is not the consideration of his own tastes and comforts which is to actuate the minister of Christ but the performance of duty, no matter where it leads to. The mount of transfiguration made a powerful appeal unto Peter, but at the base thereof there was a demon-possessed youth in dire need of deliverance! (Matthew 17:14-18). Elisha resisted the tempting prospect, saying again, "I will not leave thee." Oh, for such fidelity! (5) The testing of his patience This was a twofold test. When the two prophets arrived at Jericho, the younger one suffered a repetition of what he had experienced at Bethel. Once again "the sons of the prophets" from the local school accosted him, saying, "Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head today?" Elijah himself they left alone, but his companion was set upon by them. It is the connection in which this occurs that supplies the key to its meaning. The whole passage brings before us Elisha being tested first in one way and at one point and then at another. That he should meet with a repetition at Jericho of what he had encountered at Bethel is an intimation that the servant of God needs to be especially on his guard at this point. He must not put his trust even in "princes", temporal or spiritual, but cease entirely from man, trusting in the Lord and leaning not on his own understanding. Though it was annoying to be pestered thus by these men, Elisha made them a courteous reply, yet one which showed them he was not to be turned away from his purpose: "Yea, I know it, hold ye your peace." "And Elijah said unto him, Tarry, I pray thee, here; for the Lord hath sent me to Jordan." This he said to prove him, as the Saviour tested the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, when he "made as though he would have gone further" (Luke 24:28). Much ground had been traversed since they had set out together from Gilgal. Was Elisha growing tired of the journey, or was he prepared to persevere to the end"? How many grow weary of well doing and fail to reap because they faint. How many fail at this point of testing and drop out when Providence appears to afford them a favorable opportunity of so doing. Elisha might have pleaded, "I may be of some service here to the young prophets, but of what use can I be to Elijah at the Jordan?" Philip was being greatly used of God in Samaria (Acts 8:12) when the angel of the Lord bade him arise and go south "unto Gaza, which is desert" (v. 26). And he arose and went, and God honored his obedience. And Elisha said to his master, "I will not leave thee," no, not at the eleventh hour; and great was his reward. (6) The testing of his character "And it came to pass, when they were gone over (the Jordan), that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken

away from thee" (2 Kings 2:9). Here is clear proof that Elijah had been making trial of his companion when he had at the different stopping places, bade him "Tarry here" or remain behind, for certainly he would have extended no such an offer as this had Elisha been disobedient and acting in self-will. Clearly the Tishbite was so well pleased with Elisha's devotion and attendance that he determined to reward him with some parting blessing: "Ask what I shall do for thee." If this was not the most searching of all the tests, certainly it was the most revealing. What was his heart really set upon? What did he desire above all else? At first glance it seemed surprising that Elijah should fling open so wide a door and offer to supply anything his successor should ask. But not only had they spent several years together; Elisha's reaction to the other testings convinced him that this faithful soul would ask nothing which was incongruous or which God could not give. "And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me." He rose above all fleshly and worldly desires, all that the natural heart would crave, and asked for that which would be most for the glory of God and the good of his people. Elisha sought neither wealth nor honours, worldly power nor prestige. What he asked for was that he might receive that which marked him out as Elijah's firstborn, the heir of his official patrimony (Deut. 21:17). It was a noble request. The work to which he was called involved heavy responsibilities and the facing of grave dangers, and for the discharge of his duties he needed to be equipped with spiritual power. That is what every servant of God needs above everything else: to be "endued with power from on high". The most splendid faculties, the ablest intellect, the richest acquirements, count for nothing unless they be energized by the holy one. The work of the ministry is such that no man is naturally qualified for it; only God can make any meet for the same. For that endowment the apostles waited upon God for ten days. To obtain it Elisha had to successfully endure the previous testings, pass through Jordan and keep his eye fixed steadily upon his master. (7) The testing of his endowment When we ask God for something it is often his way to test our earnestness and importunity by keeping us waiting for it, and then when he grants our request, he puts our fidelity to the proof in the use we make of it. If it is faith that is bestowed, circumstances arise which are apt to call into exercise all our doubts and fears. If it is wisdom which is given, situations soon confront us where we are sorely tempted to give way to folly. If it is courage which is imparted, then perils will have to be faced which are calculated to make the stoutest quake. When we receive some spiritual gift, God so orders things that opportunity is afforded for the exercise of it. It was thus with Elisha. A double portion of Elijah's spirit was granted him, and the prophetic mantle of his master fell at his feet. What use would he make of it? Suffice it now to say that he was confronted by the Jordan—he was on the wrong side of it, and no longer was there any Elijah to divide asunder its waters! We turn now from the testings to which Elisha was subjected unto the course which he had to take. The spiritual significance of his journey has also to receive its counterpart in the experiences of the servant of Christ. That journey began at Gilgal (2 Kings 2:1), and none can work acceptably in the kingdom of God until his soul is acquainted with what that place stands for. It was the first stopping-place of Israel after they entered Canaan, and where they were required to tarry before they set out on the conquest of their inheritance (Josh. 5:9). It was there that all the males who had been born in the wilderness were circumcised. Now "circumcision" speaks of separation from the world, consecration to God, and the knife's application to the flesh. Figuratively it stood for the cutting off of the old life, the rolling away of "the reproach of Egypt". There is a circumcision "of the heart" (Rom. 2:29), and it is that which is the distinguishing mark of God's spiritual children, as circumcision of the flesh had identified his earthly people. Gilgal, then, is where the path of God's servant must necessarily begin. Not until he unsparingly mortifies the flesh, separates from the world, and consecrates himself unreservedly to God is he prepared to journey further. From Gilgal Elisha passed on to "Bethel", which means "the house of God". As we have seen, it was originally the place of hallowed memories, but in the course of time it had been grievously defiled. Bethel had been horribly polluted; for it was there that Jeroboam set up one of his

golden calves, appointed an idolatrous priesthood, and led the people into terrible sin (1 Kings 12:28, 33). Elisha must visit this place so that he might be suitably affected with the dishonor done unto the Lord. History has repeated itself. The house of God, the professing church, is defiled, and the servant of Christ must take to heart the apostate condition of Christendom today if his ministry is to be effective. From Bethel they proceeded to Jericho, a place that was under God's curse (Josh. 6:26). The servant of God needs to enter deeply into the solemn fact that this world is under the curse of a holy God. And what is that "curse"? Death (Rom. 6:23), and it is of that the Jordan (the final stopping-place) speaks. That too must be passed through in the experience of his soul if the minister is to be effective.

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