

One of the things that we must understand as we interpret the Bible and seek to understand its meaning for our lives is that much of it has to do with the big picture of the fulfillment of God's purposes for the world. We are concerned about the practical application of any part of Scripture for our lives and there are many passages which address the nitty gritty of our lives, but there are many more which focus on the big picture of the unfolding of the plan of God which involves both judgment and salvation and the application for our lives comes as we understand them in the light of the big picture of God's purposes.

We see this in the message of Jesus as that is related to us in the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Especially in the first three, the great summary of Jesus' message had to do with the coming of God's kingdom. When John the Baptist appeared on the scene as the forerunner of Jesus Christ his message was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And when Jesus began his ministry his message was the same. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Now there is always a personal application. In the case of John the Baptist's and Jesus' preaching it was a call to repentance. But that personal application was rooted in the big picture of the coming of the Kingdom of God.

And that is a vital point for our understanding of the Scriptures. There is always the overarching story of what God is doing in the world and what he is working towards, and the personal application for us is always some form of conforming our lives to that larger reality. It is wonderfully true that God is interested in each of his people as individuals. His love and his concern are personal and specific. But at the same time it is also true that the overall concern and focus is not on us and our wellbeing in the first place, but on God and his purpose and his glory. An awful lot of Scripture is focused on this big picture that teaches us about God and what he is up to as he directs the events of history for his own glory. While we are each significant to God in our peculiarities, a huge part of spiritual growth is coming to see that we are a small part of something that is much bigger than ourselves – namely the glory of God and the coming of God's kingdom.

I begin with this thought because as I was reflecting on our text I was thinking of how it is relevant to the people sitting in church. How does this passage apply to us in our everyday lives? And the answer is that in order for it to be relevant to us, we must care about the big picture of how God is working out his purposes as he works in the world towards the goal, first to Jesus Christ and his mission on earth and then to the renewal of all things at the end of the age. Much of the Bible calls us to care more about God and his kingdom and less about ourselves and the nuts and bolts of our lives. The everyday things of our lives are important but only as we understand them in the light of the whole which is the goal for everything which is the glory of God and the coming of his kingdom.

This is what Paul meant when he wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:15 that Jesus "died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised." Part of living for Christ and not for ourselves is to be vitally interested in what the Bible tells us about God and his ways of working towards the coming of his kingdom in this world.

And that is what these stories of Elijah are about and what our text for this morning is all about. It is about how God was working among his people so that through them he could bring salvation to the whole world. In this passage God wants to encourage us as we observe Elijah calling Elisha to be his successor.

The background, of course, is Elijah's discouragement when it seemed to him that his ministry had been a failure and that that meant that God's purposes had been thwarted by the apostasy of Israel. They had chosen the pagan God, Baal over the true God who had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and taken them to be his special people. Elijah had said to God, "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." For Elijah, at that moment, this is what had become of the kingdom of God on earth. "I, even I only am left, and they seek my life to take it away."

That is very sad if we care about the glory of God and the kingdom of God. If we are passionate about the glory of God, the situation as Elijah describes it is very sad. God is the great creator God whose glory fills heaven and earth. God is the great covenant God who had chosen Israel to be his people in order that through them he might bring about a kingdom which would fill the world with God-worshippers – people who love God and one another. It's very sad to see it come to this.

But God's perspective is not the same as Elijah's perspective. And so he tells Elijah that things are not as they appear to be – that his ways of working out his purposes often include working quietly directing the historical process and that he still had work for Elijah to do. One of the tasks that he had for Elijah to do was to anoint Elisha to be his successor.

So verse 19 says, "So he departed from there...." Elijah is back on track. Elijah is once again taking up his responsibilities as a prophet of God. He is going to go and call Elisha to the office of prophet according to the word of the Lord. God was calling Elisha to be Elijah's successor and Elijah was to be the one to deliver that call.

This meant that God had plans for the future of his kingdom beyond Elijah. Elijah was not completely finished yet either, but this story of God appointing a successor for Elijah makes the point that God's purposes are not tied to Elijah. Elijah was one of many who served God generation after generation. Each servant of God fulfills his ministry in his generation and God raises up new generations to continue the work after the older generations have fulfilled their mission. And what actually happens through any one servant is up to God. Elijah's ministry did not seem to accomplish much. There was no great revival in Israel as a result of his preaching. He had had a pretty dramatic day – that day on Mount Carmel when fire came from in response to his prayer, but in the end nothing much had changed.

But God is not at a dead end. He is still at work in the world in both judgment and grace. And he has need for another prophet who will carry on Elijah's work in a new generation.

This perspective is encouraging for us because while things look pretty dismal at the moment for us in the west, God is still raising up leaders for the next generation. In our own presbytery we have for students for the ministry at the moment. Beyond that there are a number of faithful seminaries in North America and in other places which are training a crop of church leaders to carry on the work into the future. In our own congregation, we have recently been blessed with two new elders and there are younger men among us who are showing signs of leadership.

What this all means is that God is providing for leadership for his church in the future. God has his plan for his church in the future and he is preparing for that future by providing leaders who will be able to serve in the near and in the more distant future. God plan involves building his church and preserving it through the generations all the way until the return of Jesus Christ. And all along the way he is calling people, not only to serve him as leaders, but also to serve him as members of his church so that the numbers of those who belong to God's kingdom continue to grow until the full number of those chosen to serve God in eternity has been gathered.

So God tasked Elijah with the call of Elijah and through that call God was showing Elijah, and also us, that he was not done with his plan to eradicate sin and evil from the world and bring about a new heavens and a new earth.

Another point that is related to this is that God has a purpose for history. In the call of Elisha we see the succession of one generation to the next and that reminds us that God is working out his purposes through many generations of history. This is a very interesting subject to think about. God could have just created what he envisioned all at once. He could have created the new heavens and the new earth in one great act of creation and filled it is perfect people. Instead he created one pair, Adam and Eve, and told them to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. That meant time and that meant history. Furthermore after the fall, God did not do one great thing that would either fix everything or destroy everything. He came up with a plan to overcome sin and death. A very long-term plan as it turned out. Many, many generations. His plan of salvation, likewise, has involved many generations. It has involved fantastic promises for a glorious future and slow and incremental fulfillment of those promises in history – almost always differently from what people expected.

Psalms 22:27 says, "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you." Psalm 86:9 "All the nations you have made shall come and worship before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name." Zechariah 9:10 [H]is rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth."

This is what God is working towards. But he is taking a long time getting there. That is the meaning of history. Much of it is not pretty. Indeed compared with the number who are living in rebellion against God, the

number of those who are faithful to God are often a small remnant. And they are always weak and often very compromised in their obedience. What a strange story this is! Why is God pursuing such a convoluted path through history to the glorious end that he is working towards? We do not know exactly, but we can trust that God knows what he is doing and that all of it some how contributes to his glory.

Certainly one of the reasons has to do with gathering up a people who will serve him forever. That people comes from every period of that long history. Psalm 145:4 says, "One generation shall commend your works to another and shall declare your mighty acts." Psalm 79:13, "But we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will give thanks to you forever; from generation to generation we will recount your praise."

We get a hint of this in this call of Elisha by Elijah at the command of the Lord. The background is Elijah's discouragement because things had gotten to be so bad in his generation that things looked hopeless from the perspective of the purposes of God in history. But God's response to Elijah's discouragement was to tell him to get back to work and to anoint Elisha as a successor. Elisha would carry on Elijah's work for another generation. And then someone else. And then someone else. Generation after generation. God would be working out his plan for the world and his people would be part of that plan generation after generation.

One of the implications of this is that the ministry of any one prophet is always incomplete. The servants of God serve the Lord during their lifetime, but it is always necessary to train and ordain replacements because no one servant of the Lord wraps things up. The work of a lifetime is a small part of something that is much bigger than any single person. The work of a lifetime is never anything more than a small contribution to something that is vast and very long term.

And here all the servants of God stand in contrast to Jesus Christ. Just before he died on the cross, Jesus was able to say, "It is finished." (John 19:30). When Jesus died on the cross he finished something and in that way was greater than all who were before him and all who followed him. When Jesus died on the cross, he accomplished salvation, he conquered sin, he won the decisive battle of good over evil. And when he said "It is finished" the most important mission ever undertaken was complete. All of history until that moment was leading up to that moment. There was a completion here that was unlike anything that had ever been completed.

But while that was one of the pivotal tasks completed in all of history, there is one more still to come and that will be brought about by the same Jesus when he comes to wrap up history at the end of the age. In Matthew 24:14 Jesus says, "And the gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end shall come." In verse 30 we read, "Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." And that will be the end. Anything that any human being does is always provisional. It is only Jesus who actually finishes things when it comes to the

unfolding of the plan and purpose of God. And those things that Jesus has finished or will finish are the immovable points that give perspective to the whole and in the light of which our lives find meaning.

We live in the light of this story – a grand story of God at work in history bringing his kingdom and saving a people to populate his kingdom. This is the story that gives meaning to our lives. This is the story that determines what is more important and what is less important. This is the story in the light of which we understand who we are as the people of God and the significance of our lives. This is the story that gives us hope in the midst of catastrophe caused by sin and evil and which gives us hope as we live under the shadow of death. This is the story that gives our life meaning, but at the same time it humbles us because it teaches us that we are not at the centre. We are a small part of something much greater than we are. We are a small but significant part of what God is up to in the history in the midst of which we live.

So the calling of Elisha meant that God still had plans for the future and that he still had plans for his people. The calling of leaders from among God's people is always a sign of hope regarding the future as is the birth of covenant children.

So we come to the actual description of Elisha's call. Elijah finds Elisha plowing in a field. It must have been a big field because his yoke of oxen was the last of twelve yoke of oxen. This does not mean that Elisha was driving all those oxen by himself. No doubt there were twelve men, each one plowing behind a yoke of oxen. The point seems to be that Elisha was from a rich family. This is a big operation.

Elijah does not speak. The text says, "Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him." This is clearly the call to the prophetic office. Elisha leaves his oxen and runs after Elijah and asks permission to say goodbye to his parents. Elijah gives him permission to do so. The rest of what Elijah says is not understood. He says, "Go back again, for what have I done to you.?" This is one of those parts of the Bible that no one really knows what it means. Regardless, Elisha is portrayed in a favorable light here. He takes his yoke of oxen, sacrificed them and cooked the meat on a fire made with the yokes that he had been using to plow with. That signified a definitive break with his life up to that point. He recognized the call of God on his life and he burned his bridges, as it were. He was leaving his old life behind.

And after the goodbye party, we are told, "Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him."

A couple of things to note here. Elisha was being called to succeed Elijah as a prophet, but first he had to be trained. He did not become a full-fledged prophet the moment he left his fields. He began his life as a prophet as Elijah's assistant. This is an example of the need for training for those who are called to office. There are more examples of this sort of thing in Scripture. Think of the disciples and the time they spend with Jesus. Those who are called to office in the church need to be trained.

However, while there are still special offices of leadership in the church, some of the aspects of Elisha's call reflect the call that every Christian receives to be a disciple of Jesus. There are similarities between Elisha's call to the office of prophet and Jesus' call to all people who hear the gospel to follow him.

Jesus calls all who hear the gospel to follow him, which means to be his disciple. And that calling is a calling to put Jesus and serving him before anyone and anything else. In Luke 14:26, Jesus says, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." Now hate here does not mean that we are to despise the members of our families. It means that we are to put Jesus before our parents, wife, children and siblings. Indeed, serving Jesus involves loving and serving our family members. But what Jesus is saying is that he must come first.

In some cases that may mean leaving some of our family members behind to take up the work that Jesus calls us to do. Think of missionaries and pastors and others who are called to serve Jesus in places far away from home. But even if Jesus' calling on our lives does not involve leaving home, we are still to love Jesus more than our parents, spouse, children and siblings. It may mean going out at night to a meeting when we would rather be at home with our family. It may mean seeking what is best for our children rather than always pleasing them. It may mean giving away money that we might rather spend on our wife or children. The point is that Jesus' call trumps everything else – even our own physical lives. Thankfully Jesus' call includes being a faithful and loving husband or wife if we are married or a parent if we have children and caring for our parents when they are old. But there are many situations in which putting Jesus' first will mean putting our loved ones second. And the way Elisha responded to God's call on his life is a good illustration of what that means even if we are not all called to leave them behind the way that Elisha was.

Another insight into this subject comes from Jesus' remarks about his own biological family recorded in Matthew 12:46-50 among other places. Jesus is speaking to the people and he has told that his mother and his brothers were outside wishing to speak to him. And this is his response: "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And stretching out his hand towards his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Now we can be sure that Jesus loved his mother and his brothers perfectly. If not, we are all still in our sins because our salvation depends on Jesus' perfect obedience. The proper way to understand and apply these words of Jesus is not that we are to love our mother and brothers less, but that we are to love our spiritual brothers and sisters more. Jesus does not mean that our loved ones should not be precious to us. But he does mean that loving our loved ones may not so dominate our lives that there is no room for love for our fellow believers. Faithfulness to following Jesus means sometimes tearing ourselves away from loving our loved ones to love others outside the family circle and especially the church family. Many times loving the church family will mean sacrificing family time to give of ourselves to the fellowship of the church.

Now we know of stories of some people who were so involved in the church that they were neglecting their families. That is not what Jesus is telling us to do. But there are only a few people who need to be told to spend less time serving the church and more time serving their families. For most of us the call of Jesus must pull us in the other direction. Jesus does not call us to love our families less, but rather to love him and his people more.

And Elisha is a good example for us to follow. He obviously still loved his family. But when the call of the Lord required him to sacrifice time with his family, he was willing to make that sacrifice. We are not all called to leave our families the way that Elisha was called to do. But we are called to love Jesus more than our family members and we are called to love the family of God enough that we are willing to give of our time to significantly participate in the life of that family.

And the call of Jesus is such that sacrifice leads to enrichment. We are never impoverished if we sacrifice for Jesus. Jesus assures us in Mark 10:29–30, "²⁹Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, ³⁰who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life."