

Friends Do Not Brag

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a five-part series

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Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 (CEB)

⁹Two are better than one because they have a good return for their hard work. ¹⁰If either should fall, one can pick up the other. But how miserable are those who fall and don't have a companion to help them up! ¹¹Also, if two lie down together, they can stay warm. But how can anyone stay warm alone? ¹²Also, one can be overpowered, but two together can put up resistance. A three-ply cord doesn't easily snap.

1 Kings 19:19–21 (CEB)

¹⁹So Elijah departed from there and found Elisha, Shaphat's son. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen before him. Elisha was with the twelfth yoke. Elijah met up with him and threw his coat on him. ²⁰Elisha immediately left the oxen and ran after Elijah. "Let me kiss my father and my mother," Elisha said, "then I will follow you."

Elijah replied, "Go! I'm not holding you back!" ²¹Elisha turned back from following Elijah, took the pair of oxen, and slaughtered them. Then with equipment from the oxen, Elisha boiled the meat, gave it to the people, and they ate it. Then he got up, followed Elijah, and served him.

2 Kings 2:6–15 (CEB)

⁶Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here, because the LORD has sent me to the Jordan."

But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives and as you live, I won't leave you." So both of them went on together. ⁷Fifty members from the group of prophets also went along, but they stood at a distance. Both Elijah and Elisha stood beside the Jordan River.

⁸Elijah then took his coat, rolled it up, and hit the water. Then the water was divided in two! Both of them crossed over on dry ground. ⁹When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "What do you want me to do for you before I'm taken away from you?"

Elisha said, "Let me have twice your spirit."

¹⁰Elijah said, "You've made a difficult request. If you can see me when I'm taken from you, then it will be yours. If you don't see me, it won't happen."

¹¹They were walking along, talking, when suddenly a fiery chariot and fiery horses appeared and separated the two of them. Then Elijah went to heaven in a windstorm.

¹²Elisha was watching, and he cried out, "Oh, my father, my father! Israel's chariots and its riders!" When he could no longer see him, Elisha took hold of his clothes and ripped them in two.

¹³Then Elisha picked up the coat that had fallen from Elijah. He went back and stood beside the banks of the Jordan River. ¹⁴He took the coat that had fallen from Elijah and hit the water. He said, "Where is the LORD, Elijah's God?" And when he hit the water, it divided in two! Then Elisha crossed over.

¹⁵The group of prophets from Jericho saw him from a distance. They said, "Elijah's spirit has settled on Elisha!" So they came out to meet him, bowing down before him.

What makes a really good friend, the best of friends?

We use the term "friend" pretty indiscriminately, covering everything from a soulmate to those who are little more than acquaintances. In this series, we are going to talk about friendships that strive to be more, to love more, to do more. As we began work on this series, Arthur Jones had a flash of insight: What if we read the "wedding" passage from 1 Corinthians 13 differently, something like this:

Friends are patient; friends are kind; friends are not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Friends do not insist on their own way; friends are not irritable or resentful; friends do not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoice in the truth. Friends bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things.

How many friends do you have whose name you could read into that paragraph? More to the point, are you ever such a friend? I suspect that most of us would fall short. We are rarely the friend we hope we would be. But we try, we aspire to more. In this series, we aren't looking through the Bible for friendships that exemplify the paragraph in its entirety. I don't think we could find one in all those pages. But we will look at friendships that illustrate a few of these qualities.

A friend who is not boastful or arrogant

If there was ever a friend who had reason to be boastful or arrogant, it would be the great prophet Elijah. Of course, Elisha had heard the stories of Elijah standing up to Ahab. Who hadn't? The great Elijah facing down hundreds of Baal's prophets on the slopes of Mt. Carmel. And he had won. Well, alright, God had won. But still it had been the one and only Elijah who approached Elisha one afternoon as he was tilling the ground behind some oxen. Waiting for Elijah to make some big show or say something profound, Elisha was awed by the great man's simple humility. Then, Elijah tossed his mantle¹ around Elisha's shoulders and the young man knew, in a moment, what the prophet wanted. Elisha was to drop everything and follow this storied man of God. So, Elisha did just that. He even slaughtered the twelve oxen, for there would be no going back. That, he knew for sure. Everyone around joined in the unexpected feast. And when it was over, Elisha set out with Elijah, ready to serve the older man however he could. For the truth is that the great prophet had never boasted or bragged; he had been humble, never, even for a moment, self-important or conceited.

At the river

And now, Elisha stood wide-eyed, staring at the Jordan River. He had dropped everything to follow the prophet. But nothing had prepared him for this. The water of the Jordan River had folded back on itself. Just like that. He wasn't sure how he'd describe it to someone else. The water had simply parted, as if Moses himself had been right next standing to them, lifting his staff to the heavens. But all Elijah had done was to take the mantle from his shoulders, roll it up, and strike the dry ground of the riverbank with it.

The journey to the river had also been puzzling for the prophet-in-training. Elijah had repeatedly tried to go on alone, forcing Elisha to tell the old man, "No, I will not leave you." They had gone to Bethel, just north of Jerusalem, where a bunch of prophet types had come out to meet them. They had told Elisha that this would be his last day with Elijah, for God was going to take him away. To his surprise, Elisha somehow knew that they were correct. Indeed, he had known before they told him.

The same thing happened again. Elijah had said, in his usual cryptic manner, that he was going on alone to Jericho. Elisha had again reiterated that he was staying with Elijah. And again, some prophets had come out to tell him what he already knew.

Then they had pressed on a short distance to the Jordan River. Again, prophets had come out to meet them, but this time they had kept their distance. The whole thing made Elisha's head swim.

Elisha stared at the prophets as they stood in a group a short distance away. Perhaps they also were transfixed by Elijah's parting of the waters.

But Elisha snapped out of it when he realized that Elijah was striding across the now-dry river bed. Elisha hurriedly tried to keep up. Soon, they were on the far bank and the waters of the river closed in behind the two men.

¹ A mantle was a broad strip of cloth, much like a large shawl, that was worn across the shoulders as an outer garment. Elijah's mantle functioned for him much like Moses' staff. Still today, we use the phrase "passing the mantle of leadership."

At that moment, Elisha knew that Elijah was about to depart and, this time, Elisha couldn't follow. Perhaps, Elisha thought to himself, this is what Elijah had meant all along.

When Elijah asked the younger man what he could bequeath to him before leaving, Elisha's response was quick and certain. A double portion of Elijah's prophetic spirit! Elisha so wanted to be Elijah's "eldest son" and successor.

The Book of Kings

The stories of Elijah and Elisha are from the book of Kings. It is a single work, even though it is divided into 1 and 2 Kings. It was just too long to fit on a single scroll.

The book of Kings is aptly named. It tells the story of Israel from the time of King David's death until the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple at the hands of the Babylonians more than 400 years later. Throughout this period God's people were ruled by kings.

The book of Kings can get pretty confusing if you don't understand the division of the kingdom. David was succeeded on the throne by his son, Solomon. Solomon was succeeded by his son Rehoboam, who immediately alienated the ten tribes of Israel that lived in the northern portion of the kingdom. The kingdom split in two. In the north was the kingdom of Israel with the city of Samaria as its capital. In the south was the kingdom of Judah with Jerusalem as its capital.

Elijah and Elisha were prophets who worked in the northern kingdom of Israel.

Elisha felt a bit hurt by Elijah's response. If Elisha sees the old man taken away, he'd get the double inheritance. But if he didn't see it, then nothing. Like everything else, it seemed to be in God's hands.

So Elisha waited, unsure of exactly what he was waiting for it. If he'd known, he wouldn't have believed it anyway. It would make the parting of the river seem as ordinary as milking the family goat.

As the two men chatted, a fiery apparition swept in. It could best be described as a chariot made of fire pulled by horses of fire. In a single moment, Elijah had been swept upward and disappeared into a whirlwind that raced towards the heavens.

Elijah had not died. He had simply gone . . . or, more accurately, he had been taken away.

The old prophet's mantle had fallen out of the sky. It lay on the ground next to Elisha. He looked at it for a

moment or two, and then picked it up. He had seen everything that had happened; he was to be Elijah's successor. He couldn't say he understood much, but he guessed that was the way it would be most of the time.

Elisha walked back to the riverbank, mantle in hand, rolled it up, just as his teacher had done, and tapped the ground . . . the river parted for him. Incredible, he thought. This was going to take some getting used to.

Elisha walked slowly across the dry bed, enjoying the sheer novelty of the whole thing. When he reached the far side, the prophets, who were watching as best they could, rushed up to him. Some even bowed to him. Their pronouncement was straightforward: "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha."

Elisha hoped that he was up to the task ahead. But he caught himself. Of course he would be, for no matter what happened, he was now a genuine prophet of the LORD God Almighty, thanks to a really good friend.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. One way to view the relationship between Elijah and Elisha is as mentor/protégé. Have you been a part of a mentoring relationship? Were you the mentor or the protégé? You might make a list of important ways in which those roles differ. Have you been a part of a mentoring relationship that did not begin in friendship but

blossomed into one? In my own experience, it doesn't take long for mentor and protégé to become friends, often very close friends. Why would this be? Could at least part of this have to do with trust? Based on the biblical record, do you think Elijah and Elisha became friends?

2. In what ways might friendship among Christians differ from friendships outside the body of Christ? Think of some mature Christians you've known. Did they seem odd or different from other people? In what ways? In their capacity for compassion or kindness? In their gentleness or patience? Perhaps simply in the way they saw the everyday stuff that makes up our lives. Make a list of some ways that Christians ought to be different from non-believers. In what ways are you different? Does growing in our discipleship also mean growing in our "oddness?" How can we go about being a better friend?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: *More on Elijah and Elisha*

Monday, 1 Kings 17 We meet Elijah, who is fed by ravens and revives a dead boy.

Tuesday, 1 Kings 18 Elijah comes out of hiding and confronts the priests of Baal.

Wednesday, 1 Kings 22 The prophet Micaiah stands alone in the counsel of the Lord.

Thursday, 2 Kings 2 Elisha succeeds Elijah.

Friday, 2 Kings 4 Elisha's ministry of life

Saturday, 2 Kings 5 Elisha and the healing of Naaman

An archive with more than 700 of these studies can be found at www.scottengle.org

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the gospel of John.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Samuel.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *Rescue: Images of Salvation*

Beginning next week: *The Messiah Comes to Middle Earth*

There are still a few spots open for the October 2018 cruise to Israel with Robert Hasley, Pam White, and Scott Engle. For more information go to www.scottengle.org.