

“Friends Do Not Brag”

Ecclesiastes 4:9–12; 1 Kings 19:19–21; 2 Kings 2:6–15 (NRSV)

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 I began work on this series, I had a flash of insight: What if we read the “love” 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 nor 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 standing right next 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.

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.”

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.

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.

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.

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.