

Because that's exactly what Jesus did for you. Can you imagine if Jesus had lived his life the way we live ours? "I'll be the Savior as long as it's convenient for me." "I'll be the Savior as long as everybody likes me." "I'll be the Savior until I start to feel some pushback." "I'll be the Savior as long as I don't have to give up anything fun." "I'll be the Savior as long as it doesn't take up too much of my time." How long would he have lasted as our Savior? Thankfully, from the moment Jesus left heaven, there was no turning back. Not when people humiliated and rejected him. Not when the nails pierced his hands. Never. Jesus never turned back!

Because he loves you! Jesus loves you just as much as he loves Elisha and Peter and James and John. And because he loves you, when Jesus saw there was something between us and God—our sins—he got rid of them. Jesus had no backup plan. Because no backup plan could have won our forgiveness. Just his death on the cross. So he didn't look for an out, because he wants you and your children to be in heaven. And now the One who loves you more than his life is calling you. He has thrown a robe over your shoulder. Not a prophet's cloak—his blood and righteousness that cleanses us from all our sins. And he's calling you to follow him, without turning back.

So what do you say? God has a habit of using everyday people—like farmers and fishermen and you and me—to do great things in the world. You don't have to leave your occupation and become a pastor to be God's instrument in the world. He wants to use you right now. To bring healing to people who are hurting. To bring joy and hope to those who are sad. To smile at those who need a smile. To serve your family and your community and your church. And whatever is getting in the way of that—a sin, a love, a hobby—look to Jesus for the strength to burn it. How do fishermen leave their nets in the boat? How does a farmer kill his oxen and burn his plow? Trusting in the One who gave himself for you! You don't need a back-up plan. You've got Jesus!

This Temazcal thing in Mexico is supposed to be very relaxing. The guide kept encouraging us to let go of all our cares and concerns and stress. But the reason it wasn't one bit relaxing for me was because I refused to trust her voice. I kept turning to other things for my sense of security—the light, the door, ... then they were gone. And panic set in. How many of your worries are a result of simply not trusting Jesus' promises? How many of our discouragements are a result of refusing to burn the bridges to sin? How much of your guilt is failing to believe Jesus' promise of forgiveness? Jesus is calling you every day to a better way. Follow him. And don't look back!

1 Kings 19:19-21
Rev. Nathan Nass

Epiphany 3
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19 So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. 20 Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. "Let me kiss my father and mother good-by," he said, "and then I will come with you." "Go back," Elijah replied. "What have I done to you?" 21 So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant.

No Turning Back

Some of you have asked me what I learned in Mexico. Here's one word I learned: Temazcal. We were staying at some cabins in the jungle when our guide told us it was time for the temazcal. I know a lot of Spanish, but I didn't know temazcal. So I did what I often do—smiled and nodded. Temazcal! Until I saw it. Then I wasn't so sure. A temazcal is a sweat lodge—like a tiny mud-brick igloo. Burning rocks are placed in the center, and then water is poured on the rocks to fill the hut with hot steam. So all nine of us were going to cram into this little circle hut about four feet high and ten feet wide. And the truth is I don't really like small, dark, hot places.

So my mind started racing. To calm myself, I started to think of backup plans. "I'll be okay as long as I'm by the door." Except I ended up furthest from the little door. So "I'll be okay as long as the door stays open." Of course, it got closed immediately. "So I'll be okay as long as it isn't too hot," until it got so hot I could hardly breathe. So I told myself, "I'll be okay as long as I can see the rest of the group," until the guide blew out the candle in the middle and it was completely dark. Little by little my "outs" disappeared. All my back-up plans went out the window. I learned what a temazcal is, and I learned that when you enter a temazcal, there is no turning back.

I did make it out. But this idea of "no turning back" is exactly what God wants us to learn from Elisha today. No, Elisha wasn't naively led into a sweat lodge. But he did face a life-changing decision. Elisha was a farmer, and one day he was happily plowing his fields with 24-oxen—he must have been wealthy. When, out of the blue, the prophet Elijah walked up, put his prophet's cloak around his shoulders, and silently walked away. Elisha knew what that meant. He was being called to be God's next prophet. And suddenly Elisha's mind must have started racing—a little like mine in the temazcal. What had he gotten himself into? What should he do?

Now, we need to pause here for a second, because these two prophets—Elijah and Elisha—have probably the most confusing combination of names in the Bible. They are two different people. Elijah came first. Can you remember something about Elijah? He was the one who preached to wicked King Ahab. He defeated the 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. He later appeared with Jesus and Moses at Jesus' Transfiguration. Elisha came second. Can you remember something about him? He healed Naaman the leper and did more miracles than probably any other prophet. Both lived about 800 B.C. Both are names you should know—Elijah and Elisha.

And now Elijah is choosing his successor. So he walked up, threw his prophet's cloak on Elisha, and walked away. It seems like Elisha had about a minute to decide what to do. Can you imagine all the reasons to say "No" to God and Elijah that must have come into his mind? He was a wealthy, content farmer. Did he really want to give it all up? Elijah was a wanted man. The king and queen were trying to kill him. So Elisha had a lot to lose following God's call. Who knew what he would gain? His mind was racing, but he dropped what he was doing and raced after Elijah with one request: *"Let me kiss my father and mother good-by, and then I will come with you."*

Is that what you would have said? What happens next is even more amazing. *"So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah."* I doubt I would have said "Yes" to Elijah in the first place, but if I had managed to say "Yes," I'm sure I would have saved the oxen and plow, just in case I changed my mind. But once Elisha made up his mind to answer God's call to be a prophet, there was no turning back. He didn't need a backup plan. In fact, he saw the potential for his farming past to get between him and his new calling as a prophet. So he burned it! For Elisha, there was no turning back.

That's a good definition of faith. Faith in God is living without a spiritual backup plan. It's burning the bridges to whatever our life was like before Jesus—just like Elisha burned his oxen—because we know we won't want to go back. Because when you believe in God, you realize no backup plan is needed. When you trust God's promises, you know that no turning back is necessary. Because you know that your life no longer depends on your plans, it depends on your loving God's plans for you. It depends completely on Jesus. And anything that gets between you and your Savior immediately becomes a concern. Following Jesus means no turning back!

Just like Jesus' first disciples. When Jesus began preaching, one of the first things he did was go to the Sea of Galilee to call some fishermen to be his disciples. And how did they respond? "How hard is it going to be, Jesus? How many hours will we have to put in?" No! *"At once they left their nets and followed him"* (Mark 1:18). Just like Elisha, when Jesus

called them to be his disciples, Peter and James and John recognized the need to make a complete break with their past. And that's what they did, because they trusted in Jesus. There was no turning back!

That's why faith is so hard for us. That's why following Jesus—not just with our mouths but also with our lives—is so difficult. Because our society does not understand selfless commitment to someone else. How often do you hear things like this: "Keep your options open." "Don't get tied down." "Do what's best for you." How many backup plans or insurance policies do you have? Those are necessary for life, but faith in God is different. Our society teaches us to follow Jesus with as little commitment as possible: "I'll follow Jesus as long as it's easy." "As long as he doesn't make me feel uncomfortable." "As long as I have an out when I need it." That's not faith!

So what's holding back your relationship with God? What has you following Jesus with your head looking back over your shoulder? Start with this: What sins do you refuse to let go of? Jesus and sin don't go together. That's why he died to forgive us—to take our sins away! So why are we content to say, "Sure, I'll follow you Jesus, just let me bring along my anger and my bitterness. Just let me continue to enjoy my adultery and at least a couple nights a month to really let go." That's like dragging oxen with you as you follow Jesus. It doesn't work! Today's the day, with God's help, to burn the bridges to the sins we enjoy but keep us from following Jesus.

Then, on the other side, ask this: Which blessings from God have I begun to love more than my God who gave them? God, today, isn't saying to you, "Quit your job, burn down your house, and follow me." Elisha received a special, full-time call from God. God hasn't called you to do exactly what he did. But God has called you to follow him. And when Elisha saw that there was potential for something to get between him and God, he got rid of it. Maybe for you it's a relationship pushing you in the wrong direction. Or a job squeezing out time for God. Or friends. Or a hobby. There comes a time to burn those bridges too. Anything that turns us away from Jesus.

Because the devil is always tempting us to go through life the same way that I endured that sweat lodge: When the pressure and the heat and the worries come, we think: "I'll be alright as long as I have a good job." "I can handle it as long as my relationships are going well." "As long as my team keeps winning." How often don't those thoughts fill our minds, and yet what's missing from those thoughts? Jesus! Why do we treat God like an insurance plan? Like a backup? One pastor once wrote in a book, "I thought I was following Jesus. I wasn't. I had invited Jesus to follow me." Faith is not having a backup plan. Following Jesus means there's no turning back.