

“ELIJAH, ELISHA AND A CHARIOT OF FIRE.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Text for the Sermon: II Kings 2:1-18

Introduction.

We have been following Elijah the Tishbite since the Word of the Lord first came to him. We have followed him east to the Brook of Cherith and then west to Zarephath in Sidon to the widow's house where he multiplied her oil and raised her son from the dead.

Then back to Israel and up to Mt. Carmel and then down again and fleeing south to sit under a broom tree in the wilderness before journeying 40 days to Mt. Horeb where he heard the still small voice of God. We ended with two confrontations, one with Ahab at the end of his reign and one with the next king, Ahaziah at the end of his brief two year reign.

Now in his old age we come to the story of Elijah's mysterious departure from the earth and the passing of the mantle of prophetic leadership to Elisha. He came like a whirlwind out of no where, he burned like a fire, and in fire and whirlwind he disappeared.

II Kings 2:1-6, Elijah and Elisha preparing Elijah to be taken to heaven.

II Kings 2:1 Now the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind.

This is a day of tension, an elephant in the room, everyone knows this is Elijah's last day, but when, where, how? We are privileged here to witness the succession of a prophet, the transition of spiritual authority and power.

What is the meaning of this journey, three times God tells Elijah where to go and three times Elijah tells Elisha not to go, to stay behind?

Elijah's preparation is his loyalty to God. Elijah died the way he lived, following the Word of the Lord. Three times he went where the Lord told him. He ended well, in obedience.

Elisha's preparation is his loyalty to Elijah. He too was tested three times. With each journey came a test of Elisha's affection and dedication and commitment. Like Naomi telling Ruth to return to her country. Like Jesus asking Peter three times do you love me.

Our Lord will draw out our love and earnestness, test our loyalty. There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother (Proverbs 18:24). One who sharpens us like iron.

II Kings 2:7-8, crossing the Jordan to depart.

As Moses used his rod, Elijah used his mantle, each a symbol of his office and authority. The last miraculous crossing of the Jordan was by Moses' successor, Joshua. This is the last miracle, a long journey from the widow in Zarephath in Sidon.

Don't overlook the supernatural world we live in. There is a God and He has all power and authority. He has power to do anything in His creation. His power is inexhaustible. It sustains everything in the entire universe. What was manifest then, is still able to be manifest now.

Paul prays we would know this power.

Ephesians 1:17-20 may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the *immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe*, according to the working of his great might 20 that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

The Jordan has long been a symbol of death, God provides a way through and protects us in the journey to the other side.

I spoke on Friday of the importance of funerals and reflecting on death and crossing over to the other side. Moses' Psalm 90 has the prayer, "Teach us to number our days that we might gain a heart of wisdom."

II Kings 2:9-10, "Tell me what I can do for you before I am taken from you?"

It is interesting to think about how we would answer such a question. It is the genie in the bottle kind of question. If you could have one thing, anything, what would it be?

My most earnest request and prayer is that the circle of faith in my family would be unbroken, that my sons and their families, their children and their children's children would be called to salvation by the Holy Spirit, given the twin gifts of repentance and faith, that they would be sanctified for eternal life.

If I can have that, I would die a happy and rich man. There is nothing this world has that I need or want more than that.

“Ask what I shall do for you before I am taken from you.” Such a question is another test of Elisha’s character as when God ask Solomon what he wanted. Solomon asked not for riches but for wisdom.

Might Elisha ask for some instructions, what is the key to success as a prophet? What should he do? He doesn’t ask for wealth, nor honor, nor freedom from trials and trouble. He knows the thing he has been called to do is difficult, take up Elijah’s mantel and be a prophet in Israel.

He asked for what is spiritual, he asked for the best gifts, to be equipped and anointed for the work God had prepared him to do.

Perhaps mindful of Elijah's greatness, and his own weakness, and the shoes he must fill. He keenly felt his weakness and inadequacy, his need for Elijah’s power, a power from God. He is not asking to be greater than Elijah, he is asking for the elder brother’s share of an inheritance. A *double portion* of inheritance was the right of the firstborn.

Deuteronomy 21:17 He shall acknowledge the firstborn, ... by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the firstfruits of his strength. The right of the firstborn is his.

A true disciple will desire nothing more than a portion of his master’s spirit. We covet wisely when we most desire those spiritual gifts that will serve us in serving God.

Don't you desire more of God's Spirit, more of His power, more of His love, more of His truth?

Desire the best gifts. Desire those gifts that will most glorify God, will most help us in the service of God.

What spiritual provision have we made for those we will leave behind? What are we passing on and leaving as a legacy, as a testimony?

II Peter 1:12-15 Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have. 13 I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder, 14 since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. 15 And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.

II Kings 2:11-12, Chariot of Fire.

This is one of the most mysterious stories in the OT. Suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appear out of nowhere and a whirlwind carries Elijah into heaven.

Not so long ago Ahab rode in a chariot and Elijah ran on foot. But now Elijah has a chariot and horses of fire, and a whirlwind to carry him to heaven.

What in this story is instructive or helpful to us or others? Does this have anything to say to the 21st century?

About God.

In Genesis 3:19 God pronounced the curse on our sin, “for dust you are and to dust you will return.” Since that time it seems only two humans have escaped returning to the dust of death. First Enoch and now Elijah.

Why does God make distinctions among men, bestowing His favors and dividing His blessings in different measure on His chosen ones? We must humbly submit ourselves to His wisdom and will and ways. God is God, He is perfect and He does as He pleases. Does He not have the right to do whatever He pleases with what is His own?

Psalm 115:3 Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.

Psalm 135:6 Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth.

God’s sovereignty is a free sovereignty, He does whatever He pleases, and only what He pleases. He takes pleasure in all He does as it is always for His glory.

About Heaven.

There is another realm. We live in an open universe where heaven breaks in to our realm. There is life after death, a place beyond this earth.

“He gave a glimpse of that life and immortality which are brought to light by the gospel, of the glory reserved for the bodies of the saints, and the opening of the kingdom of heaven to all believers” (Matthew Henry).

Elijah was a man like us. A supernatural exit is promised to all the righteous. Our bodies are transformed by His power to be like His glorious body (Philippians 3:21).

1Thessalonians 4:15-18 According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven, with a loud

command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.

Elijah "would now teach them by his being taken alive into heaven that there is a future state, that there is a world beyond the skies into which the righteous are admitted, where they shall henceforth dwell with God and all the angelic hosts in glory everlasting. Future bliss shall infinitely compensate present sacrifices and sufferings: he that humbles himself shall be exalted. Elijah's supernatural exit from this world also demonstrates the fact that the human body is capable of immortality!...his corporeal removal to Heaven furnished undeniable evidence that the body is capable of being immortalized and of living in celestial conditions" (Pink, p 312).

The purpose of ascensions is to make clear to the observer of the reality of the invisible life or spiritual world. The apostles ministered with great power and passion because they knew Christ was alive, He was very real and very near to them.

Our life and courage, our faith and power in prayer increase the more we are sure by faith in the invisible/unseen realm where Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father interceding for us.

II Kings 2:13-15, the succession of Elisha.

The question on everyone's minds is, is Elisha really the successor? When the water separated the answer was clear. Elijah's last miracle, is Elisha's first. His confirmation. He begins where Elijah left off.

Was that arrogance, was it over zealotness? Was that putting God to the test? In a sense he was risking his entire career as a prophet. If the water didn't part, he was toast.

Was it courageous confidence in God? This is his first step of faith.

God's servants pass on, His work carries on. Moses to Joshua, Eli to Samuel, Elijah to Elisha, David to Solomon, Paul to Timothy.

No one is indispensable. Though God remove one, He will provide another. Though God remove one of us, He will provide. The God who sent ravens to Elijah and oil to the widow will provide for those who put their trust in Him.

Conclusion and application.

Elijah knew something very few of us get to know. He knew the day of his departure, and he was of sound mind and body when it happened. Notice the complete lack of fear and panic.

So what would you do if you knew your last day on earth? Where would you go? What would you do? Who would you talk to? And what would you say?

What would you rather have? A quick, sudden death, like while you are asleep, so some time knowing the end is coming soon?

There is a prayer in the Book of Common Prayer that makes one think about this question.

From lightning, tempest, and earthquake,
from fire and flood,
from plague, pestilence, and famine,
from all disasters by land and by water,
from battle and murder, and from sudden death:
Good Lord, deliver us.

We can't ask to be spared from death, but why sudden death?

Why ask to be delivered from sudden death? Surely, it is so that we may escape being unprepared, with our house not in order, with business not taken care of, with words not said, with forgiveness not asked or received.

And on the other side of the coin, may we wisely prepared for the deaths of those around us? Have we taken care of business? Are our relationships in order?

“Lord, be pleased to shake my clay cottage before you throw it down. May it totter a while before it tumble. Let me be summoned before I am surprised. Deliver me from sudden death” (Thomas Fuller).

May Elijah's death encourage us to consider our passing from this life into glory and that having lived well we might also be preparing to die well.

In the words of Moses, may we learn to number our days so that we might gain a heart of wisdom (Psalm 90:12), and be found faithful and fruitful in our Lord's service.