

Chariots of Fire

2 Kings 2:9-13; Acts 1:9-11

April 28, 2019

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The Lord has an amazing love and care for you, His precious elect, not only while you live, but also at your death (as we will see from the translation of Elijah into heaven). For Elijah's translation was not an immediate disappearance—one second he was there and the next second he was gone. But his translation into glory is given in a graphic way to impress upon Elisha and all of us a glorious hope that life does not end in this world; it actually truly begins when you leave this world. Death is not the end—it is just the beginning. And though the way you leave this world (by death) may be different than the way that Elijah left this world (by translation without dying), there is something similar and glorious that the Lord will show you, His beloved children, that will be of great encouragement to you as you contemplate your last day on earth.

Elijah's ascension into heaven prefigures Christ's glorious ascension and is given for your instruction and comfort in the Lord. The main points from our text are: (1) The Wise Request of Elisha (2 Kings 2:9-10); (2) The Supernatural Ascension of Elijah (2 Kings 2:11-12); (3) The Painful Sorrow of Elisha (2 Kings 2:12-13).

I. The Wise Request of Elisha (2 Kings 2:9-10).

A. The last day of Elijah's life has now come. The final lap in his spiritual marathon race is at an end and the finish line is in sight. Elijah has been preparing for this day his whole life. This is a day spent in loving fellowship with his beloved son in the faith, Elisha, and with the sons of the prophets. This is a day spent in doing the will of the Lord in going to the locations where God has sent him.

1. Elijah and Elisha supernaturally have crossed the deep waters of the Jordan River (2 Kings 2:8). Now they are on the other side walking together, and no doubt Elijah is giving to Elisha that which he believes is most important by way of parting words.

2. What parting words will you leave with your loved ones? Words of a mere financial inheritance or words of a heavenly inheritance? Words of doubt or words of assurance? Words of regret or words of hope? Words of mere happy times or words of faithfulness and perseverance in the truth and righteousness of Jesus Christ regardless of what it may cost? Today (not tomorrow) is the day to begin making final spiritual preparation for your last day.

B. Tenderly, Elijah looks to his son in the faith, Elisha, and asks what he can do for him before he departs (2 Kings 2:9). What blessing can Elijah leave with Elisha? Here was a test of Elisha's character and maturity in the faith. He did not ask for worldly wealth, fame, or an easy path to tread. As Solomon before him when asked by the Lord the same question sought a wise and understanding heart rather than wealth or might or happiness, Elisha asks for "a double portion" of the spirit that was with Elijah (2 Kings 2:9). What is the meaning of this unusual request?

1. It may on the surface appear that Elisha is asking for a two-fold portion (twice as much) of the Spirit of God upon him than rested upon Elijah ("Make me twice as great as you were"). However, this is not the case. The "double portion" Elisha requested was the inheritance of the first born son (Deuteronomy 21:17). Elisha's request was one in which he recognized that he was about to succeed Elijah. Elisha was admitting his own personal inadequacy to fulfil this calling ("I cannot do this in my own strength. I am weak. I am insufficient for the work set before me.").

2. Elisha's request implies that what Elijah had been talking with Elisha about while they walked was the ministry and office to which Elisha had been called in following in the footsteps of Elijah. Elijah sees the heavy weight Elisha expresses in his word and facial expressions, and, therefore, asks Elisha, "What

shall I do for thee, before I be taken away from thee?” And Elisha replies, “I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me.” In other words, “If I am called by the Lord to carry on this great work of ministry, I will need the spiritual inheritance of the first-born son in being filled with the Spirit of God as you were filled, Elijah.” What a testimony to the character, integrity, and ministry of Elijah that Elisha wanted the fruit of the Spirit and gift of the Spirit that he saw working in Elijah to be present in his life and ministry as well—a spirit of faith, of love, of obedience, and of courage

a. What each of us needs in serving the Lord is the humility of Elisha. “I cannot serve the Lord faithfully in my own strength. I am nothing in myself. I am corrupt by nature. I seek my own glory so often. I am ashamed of my many failures.” Without that humility before the Lord, you will serve yourself in all that you claim to do in serving the Lord. You will continually make what you claim to be doing for the Lord about yourself and promoting yourself. Your service and ministry to the Lord and others will become self-serving (whether in the home, work, school, neighborhood, or church). And when you do not get the attention, the thanks, the positive feedback that you think you deserve, you will grow weary and will feel like quitting. When you feel like quitting, your eyes are usually on yourself, rather than upon the Lord—you are not walking by faith, but by sight and by feelings (as was the case with Elijah himself when he fell into despair, 1 Kings 19).

b. But humility is not simply recognizing your weakness, but it is also trusting in God’s greatness and power. To simply confess your failure, your inadequacy, your powerlessness in serving and fulfilling God’s holy calling upon your life as a Christian is nothing without this second step—looking in faith to the power and the all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ to grant all that you need to be a faithful servant of the Lord. Paul asks a question as a minister of Jesus Christ that you have likely asked many times in your own individual calling as a Christian, “Who is sufficient for these things” (2 Corinthians 2:16). His answer comes in 2 Corinthians 3:5 (where both parts of humility are included). Humility is a gracious fruit of the Spirit in which you know you are insufficient and unworthy in yourself, but you are sufficient in an all-sufficient Savior (John 15:5; Philippians 4:13). A thankful heart comes from humility.

3. Note also that in 2 Kings 2:9 Elijah does not say, “Ask what I shall do for thee, AFTER I be taken away from thee”, but “BEFORE I be taken away from thee.” If Elijah believed he could answer Elisha’s requests from heaven as a saint to whom Elisha could pray, why would Elijah emphasize that Elisha’s request be given BEFORE he departed to heaven? Hearing prayers from heaven implies that the hearers are omniscient and omnipresent to hear all the prayers being offered to them at the same time. Since prayer is an act of worship, all worship is to be given to the God alone (including prayers). Of all the prayers offered by believers from earth in Scripture, how many are offered to “saints” or angels in heaven? None! How many are offered to God? All of them!

C. When Elijah hears Elisha’s request, he immediately recognizes that he is not the one who bestows the gracious benefits of God’s Spirit upon His ministers or people—it is the Lord alone who can do so (2 Kings 2:10).

1. All Christians have the same fruit of the Spirit given to them in regeneration in which we must grow, but not all have the same gifts which differ according to God’s will. What Elisha sought was not a mere grace in which to grow, but a supernatural gift to be received from the Lord.

2. Therefore, Elijah leaves this hard matter in the hand of the Lord by saying that if Elisha sees him depart, then he will receive that double portion (first-born inheritance) of the Spirit that filled his life.

II. The Supernatural Ascension of Elijah (2 Kings 2:11-12).

A. As Elijah and Elisha were discussing Elisha’s request of the first-born’s inheritance suddenly a fiery chariot and horses appear and separate Elijah from Elisha and Elijah is taken up in that chariot of fire in a whirlwind into heaven (2 Kings 2:11). How extraordinary is this departure of Elijah from this world. Even the

ascension of the Lord Jesus is not described in such a manner as that of Elijah. Perhaps there is more here that we are to understand than initially meets the eye.

B. The imagery that is used here of a fiery chariot and horses is used elsewhere in Scripture to refer to God's elect angels in their service and ministry to God's people (2 Kings 6:16-17; Psalm 68:17; Zechariah 6:2-3). Though the graphic sight of a fiery chariot and horses is what is described here, we are to understand that it was God's angels that carried Elijah from this world into the glories of heaven—they were the horsemen that were driving the chariot of fire.

1. What was the Lord communicating to Elisha and to us? Here was a royal welcome and escort of God's holy angels carrying Elijah into the throne room of the King. Elijah's body and soul were immediately glorified. This was not some common event or happening as far as God was concerned, but was a momentous event in sending out His royal escort to gather this beloved and elect servant to Himself. Elijah was a sinner, but was redeemed by the Lord Jesus. He, therefore, was precious in God's sight (an heir of God and a joint heir with Jesus Christ). Therefore, Elijah received the royal treatment in departing this world and being ushered into that heavenly world.

2. Now you may say, "Such a royal and angelic escort was true of Elijah because he was a mighty man of God." But do you not understand that all of you who are in Christ will likewise depart this world at your death being carried into the glories of heaven by the same royal and angelic messengers? You may not have the same visual and graphic exit from this world as did Elijah in a chariot of fire, but the soul of every child of God at death receives that royal treatment of being carried into the presence of God by God's royal messengers—His glorious angels (Luke 16:22). Calvin's description of how the poor beggar, Lazarus, was carried and ushered into heaven is beautiful and comforting to every child of God (*Calvin's Commentaries on Luke 16:22*):

[W]e see that in a body which was loathsome and full of rottenness there was lodged a soul unspeakably precious, which is carried by angels to a blessed life. It was no loss to him that he was forsaken, and despised, and destitute of every human comfort, when heavenly spirits deign to accompany him on his removal from the prison of the flesh.

3. The souls of God's redeemed in Jesus Christ are "carried" into heaven by God's royal messengers just as was true of their King, Jesus Christ (Luke 24:51). Elijah's ascension points to Christ's ascension. If Elijah received the royal treatment, how much more did the King of kings? And if you are in Christ by virtue of your union with Him, you, too, will receive the royal treatment of your soul being lovingly and tenderly carried by God's holy angels into the very presence of the Lord.

4. What difference does it make whether your redeemed soul ascends alone or is lovingly and tenderly carried by angels into the presence of the Lord? It is just another way the Lord reveals how precious to Him is the death of His saints (Psalm 116:15). You are carried and escorted through death by His mighty angels. You who were chosen in Christ Jesus and loved from all eternity will never be alone—not in life nor in death.

5. When Jesus (as to His human nature) was in need of help, strength, and comfort while upon earth, it was God's angels that were sent by His Father to minister to Him (Matthew 4:11; Luke 22:43). Angels are ministering spirits sent forth to minister to those who are heirs of salvation (Hebrews 1:14); and if they minister to you in crises throughout life (which they do), surely they will minister to you and be near you to carry you into the glorious presence of the everlasting God. As you cross the Jordan of death—you are not alone—there is a royal escort that awaits you. Elijah's ascension into heaven (which was a prefiguring of Christ's glorious ascension) is given for your instruction and comfort.

C. Elisha saw his spiritual father, Elijah, depart and cried out in the words we find in 2 Kings 2:12.

The double portion blessing was graciously granted to Elisha—not because he earned it, but due to God’s mercy.

III. The Painful Sorrow of Elisha (2 Kings 2:12-13).

A. Finally, note the sorrow of this beloved son in the faith as Elijah is taken from him (2 Kings 2:12).

1. Those who act as though it is some sign of immaturity or lack of faith to grieve the loss of a Christian loved one have forgotten here the sorrow of Elisha in rending his garments as a sign of sorrow. They have also forgotten the words of the Apostle Paul (1 Thessalonians 4:13). And finally they have forgotten the example of the Lord Jesus (John 11:34-36).

2. Someone has said, “The gospel does not make us Stoics; it makes us Christians.” We grieve, though not overwhelmed by grief.

B. There are those like the false prophet, Balaam, that want to die the death of the righteous (Numbers 23:10). They see the comfort of the righteous in death. But they do not want to live the life of the righteous. They want to be carried by the Lord’s royal messengers into the glories of heaven at death, but it’s too hard trusting in Christ, loving the Lord more than one’s pleasures, and fighting daily against the world, the flesh, and the devil. It takes too much effort to take up the cross and die daily, deny oneself, and follow Christ. Dear ones, be not like Balaam who simply wanted to die the death of the righteous.

1. Listen to the dying testimony of a faithful martyr for Jesus Christ, Donald Cargill (*No King But Christ*, p. 203):

I am no more terrified at death, nor afraid of hell, because of sin, than if I had never had sin, for all my sins are freely pardoned and washed thoroughly away, through the precious blood and intercession of Jesus Christ.... be not discouraged at the way of Christ, and the cause for which I am to lay down my life, and step into eternity, where my soul shall be as full of him as it can desire to be. And now, this is the sweetest and most glorious day that ever my eyes did see.

2. Your only hope is found in Jesus who died, was raised, and ascended into glory for everyone who will fall upon His mercy, trust in Him alone for salvation, and live to His glory. Where he is, there will you be also.

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