

Chariots of Fire

II Kings 2

Introduction

The biography of Elijah ends as dramatically as it began. The fiery prophet suddenly appeared before the corrupt court of Israel's king and queen and declared, according to I Kings, chapter 17, verse 1, "As the Lord, the God of Israel lives . . .".

With billowing hair and a leather belt wrapped around a camel hair cloak, he was a startling figure. He appeared suddenly and created a national crisis with his challenge and his judgment. There could be no one else like Elijah. Yet, the half brother of Jesus our Lord, the apostle James, wrote of this unusual prophet, in chapter 5, verse 17a, that, "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours . . .".

While we are not called to bring fire from heaven, nor to lock the rain inside the clouds, we, like Elijah, have the potential to live a life of purity, faith, and prayer. For, as one man wrote, "Since Elijah was a person like us, we can be a prayer warrior like him."

Broad Truths From the Life of Elijah

Through our study of Elijah, we have discovered some rather broad truths. Let me summarize them, as we conclude the biography of this ordinary believer.

Truth #1 – Faith is willingness to obey God, even when circumstances seem impossible

1. The first truth is, faith is willingness to obey God, even when circumstances seem impossible.

Can you imagine the sheer nonsense of standing before Ahab and Jezebel and declaring that the rain is going to stop? Can you imagine the incredible challenge of living by a deserted brook, being fed from the beaks of birds, and then, being told to go live in a widow's house when she is down to her last meal? Who would ever buy into that kind of plan? It would take great faith.

Lewis Carroll writes, in his book *Through the Looking Glass*, of a conversation between Alice (of *Alice in Wonderland*) and the White Queen.

The queen asked Alice, "How old are you?"

"I'm seven and a half exactly."

The queen responded, "You needn't say 'exactly,' I can believe it without that. Now, I will give you something to believe – I'm a hundred and one, five months and one day."

Alice protests, "I can't believe that."

"Can't you?" the queen inquires, "Try again. Take a long breath and shut your eyes."

Alice shouts, "There's no use trying. One can't believe impossible things."

To which the queen responds, "I dare say, you haven't had much practice believing impossible things. When I was your age, I always did it for a half an hour every day. Why sometimes I believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Frankly, ladies and gentlemen, to the average person and to many among those professing Christ as their Savior, that is the definition of faith – to take a

long breath, close your eyes to reality, and believe something which you know is not true.

Through the life of Elijah, we discover that faith is not closing your eyes and believing impossible things. Instead, we discover that faith is believing in God who does impossible things.

Faith is not an intellectual exercise that you do before breakfast, faith is an active physical obedience. And, when it is all said and done, we have done nothing impossible, we have simply obeyed our God, with whom nothing is impossible.

Elijah goes down in sacred history as a great man and a great leader, not because he had great physical ability, since he was a man just like us, and not because he had incredible intellectual capacity, since he had a mind just like ours, but simply because he obeyed His great God.

Truth #2 – Faith is willingness to follow God, even when faithfulness seems useless

2. We have also been reminded of a second truth. Not only is faith a willingness to obey God when it seems impossible, but faith is a willingness to follow God, even when faithfulness seems useless; even when faithfulness does not really seem to be paying off.

Imagine the testimony of Elijah, who followed God by going right into the courtroom of wicked Ahab and sleazy, slippery Jezebel to announce the truth. Then, God sends him into three years of personal suffering. And, at the end of his ministry, what does he have to show for it? He has three small schools, with about one hundred students, Baalism is still rampant in the land, and Jezebel is still on the throne!

You might think, “Lord, since deciding to follow You, I have fewer friends, more pressure, a busier schedule, worse grades, angrier relatives, a car that breaks down more often, worse allergies, and a dog that has started biting me.”

Do you ever feel like the man that I read of recently, who was praying rather tongue-in-cheek, “Lord, if this is the way You treat Your friends, no wonder You don’t have more!”?

You have experienced that, haven’t you? You have probably felt that way when following God, like Elijah, and your faithfulness seemed useless. When everything, from our culture to your corporate setting,

to your unbelieving family, remains unchanged, you wonder if you are accomplishing anything at all.

We have walked with Elijah and studied his life. We have seen him go through the deepest valleys of despair after accomplishing his most courageous acts of obedience. We have discovered that living, breathing faith follows God, even when it may seem useless or impossible.

Two tests for Elisha

Now with that under our leather belts, let us turn to the last chapter in Elijah’s biography – II Kings, chapter 2. Many of my commentary friends believe that this chapter suggests a test of Elisha’s loyalty to the cause of Elijah.

A test of spiritual endurance

1. The first test is a test of spiritual endurance.

Let us read what happens in verses 1 through 6 of II Kings, chapter 2.

And it came about when the Lord was about to take up Elijah by a whirlwind to heaven, that Elijah went with Elisha to Gilgal.

Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here please, for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel.” But Elisha said, “As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel.

Then the sons of the prophets who were at Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, “Do you know that the Lord will take away your master from over you today?” And he said, “Yes, I know; be still.”

(Elisha is literally saying, “Be quiet, don’t talk to me about it.” The implication is, “It’s too painful for me to think about.” Or perhaps, “Don’t worry about it, God is in control.”)

Elijah said to him, “Elisha, please stay here, for the Lord has sent me to Jericho.” But he said, “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they came to Jericho.

The sons of the prophets who were at Jericho approached Elisha and said to him, “Do you know that the Lord will take away

your master from over you today?” And he answered, “Yes, I know; be still.”

Then Elijah said to him, “Please stay here, for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan.” And he said, “As the lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So the two of them went on.

Can you imagine what you would like to do if you knew this was your last week on earth? I am convinced that you would not work overtime at the company, with the thought, “I really need to finish that project for my boss before I go.” I doubt anyone would wallpaper their dining room. No one would spend one minute worrying which market to invest more money in.

If we knew this was our last week on earth, we would do exactly what Elijah did. We would take a tour of the special places and make a visit to the special people in our lives. Elijah spent his last days in the company of his young prophets, the seminary students who were preparing for the ministry in the school that Elijah had founded with his own blood, sweat, and tears. He goes back to say, “Farewell, dear friends, stay the course!”

Elijah goes to remind them, “Listen, when it’s bleak, dismal, and dark, God is faithful.”

Robert Jarboe wrote of a farmer who had a weather vane on which, at its base, he had marked the words, “God is faithful”. His pastor was visiting one afternoon, and noticed the wording. The pastor was puzzled and asked the farmer, “Do you mean that God’s faithfulness depends on the direction the wind is blowing?”

“Oh, no,” the man replied, “I mean to say that regardless of which way the wind is blowing, God is faithful.”

Now, look at verses 7 and 8.

Now fifty men of the sons of the prophets went and stood opposite them at a distance, while the two of them stood by the Jordan. Elijah took his mantle and folded it together and struck the waters, and they were divided here and there, so that the two of them crossed over on dry ground.

Imagine being among the fifty Bible college students receiving, what I believe to be, from their old founder and teacher, an illustration of God’s power. This was a lesson for them!

Continue to verse 9.

When they had crossed over, Elijah said to Elisha, “Ask what I shall do for you before I am taken from you.” And Elisha said, “Please, let a double portion of your spirit be upon me.”

Now, you need to understand exactly what Elisha was asking. The Bible does record that Elisha performed twice as many miracles and that he lived in ministry twice as long as Elijah. However, Elisha is not asking for a magic wand that is twice as powerful as Elijah’s, nor is he asking for twice the prestige or twice as many miracles.

First, notice that he asked for a “double portion”. These Hebrew words come directly from the law which stated that a man was to give his first born son a double portion of all that he had. In other words, a first born son, at this time in Israel’s history, would carry on the family practice, the family properties, and the family name.

Elisha is asking, in effect, if he can carry on the work of God as Elijah’s heir. Elisha recognized that, in order to do that, he needed the first born son’s inheritance. This was not property or business, but the only thing Elijah had, which was his character; his spirit of faithfulness and courage. Elisha is asking to inherit the character and ministry of Elijah. “Elijah, I want to be used by God; I want to speak for God; I want to walk with God as you have done; I want to inherit that kind of life. May I, please?”

Now that is a request that only God can grant, because only God can bestow the office of prophet. Look at verse 10.

He said, “You have asked a hard thing. Nevertheless, if you see me when I am taken from you, it shall be so for you; but if not, it shall not be so.”

Was this a trick? No, but it was a wonderful test.

A test of spiritual sight

2. The second test for Elisha is a test of spiritual sight.

Look at verses 11 and 12 of II Kings, chapter 2.

As they were going along and talking, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire which separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven. Elisha saw it and cried out, “My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and

its horsemen!” And he saw him no more. . .

Now, a few verses later, we are told that the other prophets, who are standing nearby, will want to search for Elijah’s body. Why? Because, while they saw the whirlwind envelop Elijah and carry him upward, they did not see the fiery chariot and horses.

Elisha saw them, however. God allowed Elisha, for a brief moment, to see the invisible world that exists as much as this world exists. God answered his prayer and called him into the ministry as His leading prophet.

By the way, God is still looking for those who will pray Elisha’s prayer of, “Oh God, my greatest desire is to honor You and glorify You and serve You!”

Elisha never forgot that sight. We will discuss, in detail in a later study, the episode when Elisha asks God to remove the blinders from his fearful servants eyes. For now, however, turn to chapter 6, verses 15 through 17 of II Kings.

Now when the attendant of the man of God had risen early and gone out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was circling the city. And his servant said to him, “Alas, my master! What shall we do?” So he answered, “Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” Then Elisha prayed and said, “O Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.” And the Lord opened the servant’s eyes and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

Can you imagine?!

In the book of Revelation, chapter 5, verse 11, (King James Version), John records seeing ten thousand times ten thousand angels around the throne of God. That is one hundred million angels that are around the throne of our great God alone!

While we may not see the angelic world, if our eyes were opened to it, we would see that this room is filled with angels who are listening intently to this declaration. Some of them are probably saying to each other, “Did you hear that?! That preacher actually believes we exist!”

Faith does not see less, it sees more. Faith does not take a deep breath and then, close its eyes to reality, it opens its eyes to sovereignty. Faith acts,

seeing as accomplished that which is based upon God’s command.

Many of the people in both the Old and New Testaments are called to act without the benefit of seeing anything.

Noah, for instance, acted by faith in obedience to God. He did this, even though he would never see anything for one hundred twenty years, while he built the ark and preached coming judgment.

In one book that I read, it was said that one of the greatest acts of faith in all of history occurred when Noah cut down the very first cedar tree. Can you imagine, in a ecosystem that had not yet experienced rainfall, a conversation between Noah and his neighbor?

“What are you doing, Noah?”

“I’m building a boat.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s going to rain.”

“What’s rain, Noah?”

“I don’t know. As you know, we’ve never seen it before. But I believe it’s wet and boats float on top of it.”

Introducing the rapture!

Now, let me take some time to mention that the home going of this Old Testament prophet, Elijah, provides a powerful illustration of the rapture of the New Testament believer.

As we have studied Elijah’s life, perhaps you, like me, have said, “I’d love to have experienced the moment when the first flock of ravens brought Elijah bread and meat. I would have been thrilled to see Elijah emerge with the little boy, who had just come back to life, as he placed him in his mother’s arms. It would have been incredible to be on Mount Carmel as Elijah lifted his hands toward heaven and a fireball streaked downward and exploded the altar into flames.”

Now imagine, chariots of fire and prancing steeds blowing fire from their nostrils, as Elijah stepped on. Imagine being caught up and taken to heaven without experiencing death! Imagine having our bodies changed and glorified in flight, from mortal to immortal, from corrupt to incorrupt.

Three signals that the rapture has occurred

Will there be some signal; some moment of preparation? The Word, in chapter 2 of II Kings, tells us that the fiery chariots and horses actually separated Elijah and Elisha and then, a whirlwind came and swept the fiery caravan to heaven.

The apostle Paul tells us that we will have a signal also. Turn in your Bible to a description of something that may very well be your experience. If you know Jesus Christ as your Savior, you are awaiting the rapture. “Rapto” is Latin for the Greek words which are translated “caught away” and appear in I Thessalonians, chapter 4.

Turn to that truth. It may be the last chapter of your biography! Verse 16 of that chapter, gives us three signals or warnings that will let us know that it has happened.

A shout

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, . . .

That is the first warning – a shout.

The voice of the archangel

. . . with the voice of the archangel . . .

That is the second warning – the voice of the archangel.

The trumpet of God

. . . and with the trumpet of God, . . .

That is the third warning – the trumpet of God.

Then verse 16 tells us,

. . . and the dead in Christ will rise first.

Continue to verse 17a,

Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air . . .

Two things are happening in these verses about the rapture. First, deceased bodies are resurrected and reunited with their spirits. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. If I died right now, my spirit would go to be with the Lord and my body would, as it were, sleep; it would be placed in the coffin to await that resurrection and reuniting with my spirit; my body would be glorified, immortalized.

Secondly, living believers ascend to meet the Lord in the air.

How do we know this, by the way? Look at verse 15 of I Thessalonians, chapter 4, which tells us,

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, . . .

By the word of who? The Lord. And that is important because, when it comes to eternity, when it comes to death, when it comes to the grave, when it comes to the future, I do not really care what a preacher says, I do not care what the church or institutional faith says, or what the latest poll of public opinion says, I want to know what God says. You can buy the latest New Age book and listen to what the author says, but I am hanging on to the Bible and what the Lord says. Then, when the time comes, I am going up. How about you?

Continue with verse 15.

. . . that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

Now, the resurrection and rapture are marked by three things.

- First, there is a shout.

This is literally, a shout of command. The Greek word was used often by officers in the first century, when shouting a command to their soldiers in the thick of battle. It was used by a charioteer when commanding his horses as they raced. We are not told what this shout is or what it says. Perhaps it is, “Get ready, here I come!”

A man, who is a preacher, told me that the Bible only tells of two times that the Lord shouted. One was when He stood at the grave of Lazarus and shouted, “Come.” The other was when He was on the cross and, with a loud voice, said, “It is finished.” He said, “Maybe, this command is, ‘Come, it is finished.’”

- Secondly, there is the voice of the archangel.

This informs us of the highest created angelic beings joining in with this command. Now, if we have a hundred million of them around the throne of God, then to our eyes and ears, that can now see and hear spiritual things, imagine that shout! Wow!

- The third thing that the text mentions is the trumpet of God.

This meant more at that time than it does to us now. We simply enjoy the sound of the trumpet, but in that day, the trumpet was used for a number of things. It was used as a signal to gather people who were about to embark on a journey. For example, in the book of Numbers, Moses was told to have two silver trumpets to be used to call the congregation together. A trumpet was used in the Roman empire as well, to announce the arrival of the emperor. It was also used to announce a special time. So imagine, the trumpet will sound to call people together who are about to embark on a journey, and to announce the arrival of the Emperor, who is the Emperor of all emperors, and to announce a special time when we are about to be lifted off the earth!

Now, Paul continues in verse 17, of I Thessalonians, chapter 4.

Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.

The words “caught up,” in this verse, are translated from the Latin “rapto,” from which we get our English word “rapture”. It literally means “to carry away”. Imagine, every one of us who have received Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, have two potential things guaranteed in our future. One is death and the immediate relocation of the spirit to be with the Lord awaiting the resurrection. The second is the rapture, when, in a snap, we will be gone. Will the world see us leave? No. It cannot see spiritual things. They are not given that by God, just as God did not allow those fifty prophets to see Elijah being swept up in a fiery chariot drawn by horses aflame.

So, what do we do while we wait? Abraham Lincoln once said that, while he could find a whole company of men who would give their last drop of blood for the union, he was looking for people who would give their first drop.

God is still looking for people who will not say, “Lord, I’m willing to give You my last nickel. I’m willing to give You my last year of college. If You will be patient, I’ll give You the last years of my life.”

No. He is looking for people who will give Him their first, beginning today.

A. W. Tozer wrote, “God is looking for people in whose hands His glory is safe.”

Broad Truths From the Ordination of Elisha

Let me apply what we have learned with a couple of broad truths from the ordination of Elisha.

God never paints carbon copies, He only paints originals

1. First, God never paints carbon copies, He only paints originals.

God never asked Elisha to mimic the tone, accent, and style of Elijah. God never says to Elisha, “Yes, I’ll allow you to be My prophet, but only if you act like Elijah; only if you look like Elijah; only if you talk like Elijah.”

No. God is not interested in using a divine cookie cutter to make everyone look alike, walk alike, talk alike, and act alike. Instead, God is so creative that He has each of us in a unique position to do something original. That is His plan. If that were not the truth, we would all have to go out and buy leather belts and eat locusts and honey and spend time in the wilderness. However, that is not what He is asking. Elijah was one of a kind. Elisha will be one of a kind. You are one of a kind.

When a Christian servant dies, the work of Christ continues

2. Secondly, when a Christian leader or servant dies, the work of Christ continues.

One author put it this way,

When a man or woman of God dies, nothing of God dies. When the work of a great person is finished, the beginning of another is started. When Elijah’s earthly wick snuffed out, Elisha’s wick burst into flame with God’s blessing and power.

Notice verse 13 of II Kings, chapter 2.

He also took up the mantle of Elijah that fell from him and returned and stood by the bank of the Jordan.

Elisha had to validate that he indeed, is a prophet of God. Then, in verse 14, there is the test.

He took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him and struck the waters and said, “Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?” . . .

Elisha did not say, "Where is Elijah?"

He said, "Oh God, I believe Elijah is gone. You are still present. You are still sovereign and powerful. Will You mark that by the fulfillment of this miracle?"

Continue in verse 14.

. . . And when he also had struck the waters, they were divided here and there; and Elisha crossed over.

What a moment that must have been! Then, verse 15 tells us,

Now when the sons of the prophets who were at Jericho opposite him saw him, they said, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha." And they came to meet him and bowed themselves to the ground before him.

In other words, Elisha is the appointed heir. The first born heir, as it were, of Elijah. He is the God ordained mouthpiece of divine revelation to his generation. God answered his prayer.

The lives of God's servants, who have gone on before us, bear a wonderful testimony that God is alive and powerful. The mother of one of the ladies in our fellowship went home to be with the Lord recently. Her final words were nothing more than a testimony that gives the assurance that there is a living, powerful God who is capable of taking someone through that brief valley with confidence and security.

The home going of God's servants reveal the truth that, when we stand before the Lord, He will not say to any of us, "Well done, thou good and talented servant," or "Well done, thou good and prestigious servant," or "Well done, thou good and popular

servant." He will say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

I do not know how the Lord is going to write the final chapter in your biography, or in mine. It could be by death or by the rapture. But, as a believer in Jesus Christ, your future is eternally secure.

Let me read the words of two men who have died. One is D. L. Moody, who started a Bible school. When he was aware that death was at hand, he said, "Earth recedes and heaven is at hand."

Those around Moody's bed thought he was dreaming. One remarked to another, "He's dreaming."

Moody opened his eyes and said, "I am not dreaming. This is no dream. It is beautiful. If this is death, it is sweet. There is no valley here. God is calling me and I must go."

A famous Welch preacher, who lived a few generations ago, although you may never have heard of him, was named Christmas Evans. He had a remarkable ministry. He was dying and had family and friends around his bedside. He looked toward heaven and waved to his friends rather majestically, and said, as his last words, "Drive on, drive on, Elijah."

I would like to die like Christmas Evans. Wouldn't you like to die like D. L. Moody, or like Elijah?

The question remains, "Are we willing to live like Elijah? Are our lives marked with the spirit of courage and faith?"

The methods God uses may change, but His message never changes.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/17/1995 by Stephen Davey.

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