

Elijah and Chariots of Fire

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[0 : 00] This is the AM service on September the 27th, 1998. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Elijah and Chariots of Fire and is from 2 Kings 2, verses 1-12.

We've all heard of chariots of fire. Bring me my bow of burning gold. Bring me my chariot of fire.

I shall not cease from mental fight, nor shall my sword sleep in my hand until we have built Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land. We've all heard of chariots of fire.

Eric Liddell running the race in the 1926 Olympics for God and for country. We've all heard of chariots of fire. Swing low, sweet chariot.

[1 : 02] Come in forward to carry me home. We've all heard of chariots of fire. Elijah, the prophet of God, over 2,500 years ago being taken up to heaven with chariots of fire.

In the first three examples, there are examples of success and completion. A job finished. A job succeeded. The negro gone home to God.

Jerusalem built in England. The runner succeeding in the Olympics. But in Elijah's case, it seems that there's more to do. It seems that it's the wrong time for him to go to God.

He's in the prime of his life or maybe just beyond it. Certainly not an old man. And certainly it seems that his task in Israel is incomplete. Yes, King Ahab is now dead.

He died at the end of 1 Kings 22, a couple of chapters before. The bad king, the idolatrous king that we've seen in recent weeks. Even his son Ahaziah is dead.

[2 : 07] He died at the end of the preceding chapter, 2 Kings chapter 1. But another son of Ahab is on the throne, Jehoram. As bad as his brother, as bad as his father, as idolatrous as both.

And what's more, Jezebel, King Ahab's queen, still lives, still reigns, still is influential, still is powerful, still is leading people to worship the false gods, the idols and so on.

The struggle between the God of the Old Testament, the real God, Yahweh, the God of the Bible, the struggle between that God and the idols, the Baals, the gods of the Canaanites, that struggle's not complete.

It's not yet finished. Still it seems that the nation, along with its royal family, worships the idols by and large. Elijah's job doesn't seem finished.

And yet God is taking him home to heaven. We're told that in verse 1, now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal.

[3 : 17] But Elijah is not taken home immediately. What happens in the next few verses builds up a bit of suspense to the story. We're told what's going to happen, but we don't know when or where.

And indeed, what happens in the next few verses is a sequence of three things repeated. They go to one place and the same conversation happens. They go to the next place, the same conversation happens.

They go to the third place and the same conversation begins, but it doesn't quite complete the same way. Now what's going on there is just good storytelling, building up suspense.

It's a bit like any story or any joke really that has three parts. You know, the Englishman, the Irishman and the Scotsman and one does this and one does pretty much the same thing, but the punchline's always in the third.

Well, that's what's happening here. They go firstly to Bethel, then they go to Jericho, then they go to the Jordan River and it's at the Jordan River that the punchline occurs. But what's happening is the repetition is building up a bit of suspense to the crunch, the punchline when Elijah is taken up to heaven by God.

[4 : 27] Three times in each of these places, Elijah with Elisha, his successor in tow, comes to a place, to Bethel, to Jericho, to the Jordan River. Three times, Elijah wants his successor, Elisha, to stay behind.

So he says to him in verse 2, for example, stay here, for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel. The next place. And so on. Stay here, he says, stay here.

But three times, Elisha says back to Elijah, no, I'm going to stay with you. Indeed, more than that, he actually swears an oath that he will stay with him.

Now, we don't know why Elijah was saying to Elisha, stay behind. Is it because he just wants to be by himself when he's taken to heaven? Is it because he doesn't want to trouble Elisha by seeing him being taken to heaven?

Or is it perhaps a test of faithfulness? How loyal are you, Elisha, to me, Elijah, the senior prophet? Well, if it's a test of faithfulness, Elisha passes with flying colours because three times he pledges and swears an oath.

[5 : 38] As Yahweh lives and as you live, I will never leave you or forsake you. And at every point he continues on the journey with Elijah. In the first two places there are groups of prophets who come out and each time they say to Elisha, not the chief prophet Elijah, but to Elisha, his successor, twice they say to him, do you know that God's about to take him?

It seems that Elijah being taken to heaven is common knowledge or at least knowledge of the prophets and these seem to be faithful prophets and they're probably the prophets that are referred to as we saw a few weeks ago when God said to Elijah, Elijah, you're not by yourself.

There's in fact nearly 7,000 others that are faithful to me. Well, these are some of them it seems of Bethel and Jericho. And twice to that same question, Elisha says to these prophets, yes, I know, but keep quiet.

Verse 3, the company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you? And he said, yes, I know. Keep silent.

The same thing two verses on when they get to Jericho. Keep silent. Keep silent as a mark of respect, perhaps.

[7 : 03] Keep silent as a mark of grief and sorrow. Oh, I just don't want to talk about it. whatever the case, it seems it's a serious business. Now in this repetition, one thing is very clear.

This is God's doing. Verse 1 begins by saying, now when the Lord was about to take Elijah, it is the Lord God who is causing these things to happen.

So it's when God is about to take Elijah and then Elijah himself acknowledges God's direction.

Three times at each point, verses 2, 4 and 6, he says, stay here for the Lord has sent me on to the next place.

It is God's guiding and directing that leads Elijah from place to place to place and eventually to the place where he would be taken to heaven. And then when the prophets come twice and speak to Elisha and say, do you know what's happening today?

It's not just, do you know what's about to happen? But do you know that the Lord is taking Elijah? It is God who's bringing this about. And at every point, his direction, initiative and sovereignty is stressed here.

[8 : 14] It is God, the God of the Old Testament, who is the Lord of life and death. It is he who is taking Elijah up to heaven. It's not the Baals and the idols that is in charge of life and death, but the God of the Bible.

And he's calling his servant home. When we get to verse 8, they cross the Jordan River. This is full of importance as well as being rather extraordinary.

When they got to the Jordan, Elijah took his mantle, his cloak, coat thing that would have doubled as a blanket at night probably, and rolled it up. His job was finished.

He no longer needed the cloak that was the mark of his prophetic office. And with it, he struck the water of the Jordan River. And the water was parted to the one side and to the other until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

that ought to ring bells for those who know their Old Testaments. It ought to have rung bells for the readers of this in Israel. Because a few hundred years before Elijah, another great prophet of God had struck water and the water had parted to the one side and to the other.

[9 : 38] And he, but not only he, the whole army of Israel, the whole people of Israel, fleeing Egypt, had crossed on dry ground. This is what Moses had done when he led Israel out of Egypt and crossed through the Red Sea.

This is not the first time that somebody has parted water so extraordinarily. Elijah is bringing about reminiscences of Moses here, the great prophet of the Old Testament.

Crossing on dry ground is again a miracle. You see, the water's on both sides. It's not just that it coincides with a bit of a drought and therefore the Jordan's dried up so it's quite convenient that they get there and they can just walk across on dry land.

The water stops but it stops on both sides. It's not just that it stops on the upper end and what's there just keeps on flowing down to the Dead Sea and this bit's empty. It's water on both sides. And they cross on dry ground, not the mud that's at the bottom of the riverbed. Not only did the water part, but what was left there was dry. This is God's doing. It's not just a natural event.

[10:45] God has brought this about. Now the links with Moses here are deliberate and important. What is happening here is another exodus.

Not from Egypt to the promised land, but now out of the promised land. It's a reverse if you like. A reverse exodus. We might even say a reverse conquest because when the people of Israel entered the land under Joshua, Moses' successor, they went straight to Jericho.

Bethel was one of the first places they went to. Gilgal the same. The places that are mentioned here are the places of the conquest, the initial conquest. What's happening is a reverse of that and exiting from the land rather than a triumphal entry.

What's going on? God's prophet is in a sense being directed by God to retreat. More than that, God himself is perhaps withdrawing from the land.

He's bringing out his word as we'll see in a minute from the land. You see, this is an act of judgment against a sinful nation. These are people who've refused God's prophet, refused God's word, refused God and now God is in a sense symbolically withdrawing from the land.

[12:04] An act of judgment on a people who have failed to reform. There's another link to Moses too because when they cross the Jordan they're in a land called Moab.

It is precisely in that vicinity that Moses dies. At the very end of Deuteronomy Moses alone goes up a high mountain, Mount Nebo, and dies.

God's timing. And none of the Israelites knew where his body was buried by God himself. Here is another mysterious end to life in the same sort of place.

Elijah of course does not die and his bones are not buried there. He's taken up to heaven. But like Moses nobody knows where his body is or can find a grave. Elijah is a second Moses.

coming out of the land across the river and dying in the same sort of place in the same sort of way. Now what's the point of the links that are being made here?

[13:09] Moses was preeminently the spokesperson of God's word. The law, the Torah. Elijah the same though his words fell on deaf ears.

God is in a sense commending Elijah by these parallels. He's showing Elijah to be a true prophet, to be a true spokesperson of God's word.

But it's also saying something about God. The God who declared his word in Moses has kept his word in Elijah. The same word abides. God is faithful in providing a spokesperson for his word.

He bears witness to what he's on about. In every generation really in the end. God is the one who raises up people of his word for different even desperate times.

Now that also is made clear in the next verses. When they crossed the Jordan River Elijah said to Elisha tell me what I may do for you before I'm taken from you. One might think it should be the other way around.

[14:12] Elisha sort of you know what's your final request? a final cigarette before you go or something. But no it's Elijah saying to Elisha what can I do for you? And Elisha's response is please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.

Now that's not a greedy request as it might look. The double portion was what was due to the eldest son. So if you died and left a few sons.

they would share your inheritance but not equally. The eldest son would have double what the other sons would have. That was law in Deuteronomy 21.

What Elisha is therefore asking for is not something of greed but rather he's asking to be the rightful heir of Elijah the prophet of God.

he asks for his spirit not for wealth or property or land or anything else but for God's spirit. Just like Solomon had asked God for wisdom not wealth so Elijah asks for God's spirit not wealth.

[15 : 26] Just like Jesus says to us to seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness. righteousness and then all these things will be added to you as Solomon indeed found himself wealthy.

You see what Elisha is saying here is that he knows that he's called to be Elijah's successor. That was clear a few chapters before. But what he's asking for is the spiritual power to do the job. He's asking Elijah for his spirit so that he can fulfill what he's called to do as the successor of Elijah. He knows that human ability without God counts for nothing as indeed the same is true today. All the capabilities and abilities and skills that we as Christians may have in the end may count for nothing unless God imbues us with his spirit and uses us and our gifts for his glory. But the point of the problem with the request is that Elijah's spirit is not Elijah's to give. It's God's to give. That's why Elijah responds so cryptically in verse 10.

[16 : 34] You have asked a hard thing. That is hard of me. I can't give you my spirit. It is God's spirit and it is God's to give. Elijah gives him a bit of a test.

Not so much a test but as a way of discerning whether or not he will receive this request. He says if you see me as I'm being taken from you it will be granted you.

But if not if you don't see then this will not be granted to you. You see Elijah recognises that it is God's to give. And maybe under God's own provocation he says to Elisha this is how you'll know whether God's given you his spirit or not.

Now that again remains true today doesn't it? It is only God who can give his spirit to Christian people. It is only God who can give his gifts to Christian people. So never be fooled by any charlatan so-called Christian leader who says to you oh I can give you some spiritual gifts or I can give you God's spirit in power in abundance.

Never. Only God can do that. It is God's prerogative alone. And that's what Elijah recognises. Now of course for us as Christians we all have God's Holy Spirit.

[17 : 49] Every Christian has been given God's Holy Spirit. we've been given if you like spiritual power to accomplish what we're called to do by God. In the Old Testament that was not obviously the case.

So having dealt with that issue and set up this possibility of Elisha seeing Elijah being taken up to heaven and therefore receiving God's spirit we come to the actual time of him being taken.

They continued walking and talking. We can imagine Elijah preparing Elisha for the task and the difficulties ahead. And then perhaps without announcement a chariot of horses of fire separated the two of them and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.

What an extraordinary verse. Amazing verse. Three things it shows. God is sovereign over life and death.

Not the idols, the Baals and so on. Not people. Not even clever modern scientists with all their techniques for controlling life and death.

[19 : 06] In the end it's God who's sovereign over life and death. And he takes Elijah without dying straight to heaven. Only the second person ever to do for that to happen.

Enoch being the first in Genesis chapter 5 way back at the beginning of the Bible. Not even Jesus ascends like this. Jesus had to die first before he ascended to heaven.

But Elijah is taken straight living from this life to heaven. Hence the expectation develops later in the Old Testament in the prophet Malachi in the New Testament as people wondered about John the Baptist in ancient and modern Judaism that Elijah will return because he ascended without dying and one day he will return.

Jews today still set an extra place at the Passover festival because they think Elijah will return one day and if he does it's probably going to be at a Passover festival so let's be ready. Now the New Testament tells us that he's already returned in the form of John the Baptist.

That just as Elijah was a second Moses, John the Baptist is a second Elijah. And all of them are forerunners to key people as we'll see in a minute. But the thing here about this life and death is that God has taken Elijah home.

[20 : 26] That's where he belongs. He sent his car or chariot to round for Elijah to pick him up and take him home. But in fact he's done more than that in this sense in which he's actually got himself to get him.

Because so often fire is a symbol of God's own presence. So to send chariots of fire may suggest that God himself has come down to pick up Elijah and take him up to heaven.

There to be with him forever. This is the reward of a faithful servant. This is commending the ministry of Elijah. It may be that the nation is still idolatrous. That the king is still an idol. An idolater. And the queen is still nasty and evil. But Elijah's work on earth is finished. Humanly speaking they may wonder how on earth can we survive without Elijah. But God's timing is always right.

Elijah avoiding death is a foretaste of what will happen for all of God's people. The New Testament makes it clear that Christians too will in a sense avoid death and go to be with God in heaven.

[21 : 31] Not the way Elijah, it happened for Elijah, but because of Jesus' own resurrection from the dead, death holds no sting for Christian people now. So when we die we live.

Death is the doorway to life eternal with God in heaven. And so when Christians die they're going home, they're being taken home by God. Not because he needs them.

He didn't need Elijah. Sometimes people say, oh God must have had need for so and so in heaven. God doesn't need anybody. But he's taking his people home in the right time.

Paul thought that in the New Testament as well. He thought of death as being the door of the prize or the crown of glory. Being called up to be with Christ in heaven forever. When Jesus died and rose from the dead, he went to prepare our places for us and then he'll come back to take all these people to be with him forever to home.

So Elijah is, if you like, a glimpse, a foretaste of what it will be like for all of us. No wonder the Negroes saying swing low, sweet chariot coming forward to take us home.

[22 : 37] Because home is heaven for Christian people. Well, the second thing that this ascension of Elijah teaches us is that God is judging his sinful nation.

We've already seen hints of judgment in the early verses, but the same here. Ahab the king had relied upon his chariots for defense of the nation. So when he would fight his enemies, the chariots would be out in force, but ironically, ha ha, bad king Ahab dies in his chariot.

But the real chariots of power are not the military armies, the armies chariots. They're gods, the chariots of fire, the ones that are going up with Elijah to heaven.

You see, God is judging the nation. He's withdrawing his defenses because the real defender of the nation had not been the armies of Ahab, but Elijah the prophet via God's word, which he spoke.

But now in an act of judgment on an unrepentant nation, God is withdrawing all that defense and taking it up to heaven, to his own place. The whirlwind the same.

[23 : 44] Elijah actually ascends in the whirlwind, not in the chariots. The chariots are there accompanying him, it seems. But the whirlwind is literally just a storm and often in the prophets a symbol of God's judgment.

So here, God is judging Israel. But the final thing is that God's word of judgment is not final. Because again, he raises up a spokesperson, Elisha.

You see, Elisha does see Elijah's ascension. He sees what's going on. He calls out in verse 12, Father, Father, the chariots of Israel, the horsemen. You see, he sees.

He sees the chariots and the horsemen. Probably to other eyes, they couldn't see that vision. But Elisha saw. And remember what seeing was so important for him?

Because it was a sign that God's spirit would be on him. And if you read on in the next verses and in the next few chapters, it's clear that that's true. The spirit that was on Elijah is on Elisha.

[24 : 49] He is the rightful heir of Elijah. He is God's real prophet. He performs miracles as Elijah had done. He crosses the Jordan miraculously, parting this water on both sides and crossing on dry land, just as Elijah had done coming out.

Now Elisha does going back in. See, as God has withdrawn in judgment, now he re-enters in triumph and conquest. And Elisha does what one of his predecessors did.

Joshua, who also parted the Jordan River when he went in to conquer the land. It's no coincidence that Elisha and Joshua have the same name in effect.

God saves. That's what it means. So Elisha looks back to Joshua. And as Moses was the forerunner of Joshua, so is Elijah the forerunner of Elisha.

And just as Elijah was the forerunner, was a sort of model, if you like, for John the Baptist, so is Elisha looking forward to Jesus, who also has the same name, God saves.

[26 : 05] Three forerunners, Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist, and three ones to whom they looked forward, all with the same name, Joshua, Elisha, and Jesus Christ.

See, in the end, this passage is pointing us towards Jesus, the one on whom God's spirit forever dwells and perfectly dwells. The one who finally saves God's people.
The one who brings eternal life from death. The one who prepares a place in heaven for all his people and who is coming again soon to take us there.
That's why we can sing, along with those Negro slaves of last century, swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to take me home.
Thank you.