

Chariots of Fire

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[0 : 00] Well, I hate to break the news to you that while September 21st is the first day of fall, I think tonight is the eve of the last day of summer.

As summer ends and fall begins, school is on a lot of students' minds. Who will be my teacher and what will be the subject they're thinking? There's also the federal election that's also on our country's mind.

Who will be our ruling party, our prime minister, and our members of parliament? In both cases, it's a matter of who will follow or what is called succession.

Who will follow last year's teacher or who will follow last term's politicians? It's a big idea, succession. If you look at the end of the section of the text today, the first word that you'll see in capital letters at the top of that is about Elijah succeeding.

Not about being successful necessarily, but succession. So that's a big word, succession. Here comes another one. Last Sunday, we learned about what C.S. Lewis called the rule of undulation.

[1 : 09] I don't know how many of you heard Jeremy actually use that word. Can I see a show of hands? How many of you heard him use the word undulation? That's good, because he didn't use that word. But undulation is the condition or trough of dullness or dryness.

It is exploited by Satan. Sorry to give you a heart attack, Leo. But it's this condition that Satan will exploit it to tempt us to pleasures because our experience for some reason fails us.

But while exploited by Satan, it is maximized by our Lord to draw us into his presence, to show us his grace and truth. I won't say any more about the rule of undulation.

If you actually missed that, you can listen to Jeremy's sermon online, but you could also look at C.S. Lewis' ninth entry in his book called The Screwtape Letters. It's the rule of undulation. Now, if last Sunday was the rule of undulation, this Sunday could be the rule of exaltation.

I know the title of the sermon is The Chariots of Fire. But that's a total distraction, you must admit, because for some of you who are about, I don't know, 45 years or older, you're just thinking Eric Little and the movie The Chariots of Fire.

[2 : 24] I tested this out with my daughter this morning, but if you're at least the age of 18 and maybe under the age of 45, or maybe, as Chris is thinking right now, you're being distracted by Rowan Atkinson or otherwise known as Mr. Bean and the 210 Olympics in London.

Some of you may remember that scene. If you hadn't, you can look that up as well. Well, here's the thing. The Lord uses all things and anything for his glory as we look at this rule of exaltation.

He doesn't lose any opportunity to show us his grace. And so life isn't all undulation, and it's not all exaltation. Neither is it all exaltation and no undulation.

It's actually both of those. It's just like the Lord, when he's revealing himself to us, he's doing it through his word, but he's also doing it through his works. It's not an either-or situation.

It's both and. So we have undulation in life, but we also have exaltation in life. And we see this in the life of Elijah as he passes on the torch, as it were, in succession to Elijah.

[3 : 32] Elisha, that is. So we're going to look at this exaltation this morning of Elijah as he passes on the torch to Elijah because it draws out this idea of succession.

It all points us in the direction of our Lord's sovereignty and his continuity. So this is it, right? This exaltation discloses to us God's sovereignty, but also this continuity.

So those are just kind of two things that we'll look at today, and let's do that now. First of all, the sovereignty of our Lord through the ascension, the exaltation of Elijah. Now, let me ask you a question.

Do you believe in coincidence or accidents? In the kingdom of God, there is no such thing as an accident. And nothing happens in the days of Elijah by accident.

From the beginning to the end of Elijah's life, the signature of the Lord's grace is written all over this story. It's written all over this prophet's life, Elijah, and the next prophet's life, Elisha.

[4 : 32] The signature of the Lord's grace is sovereignty. It is all over this story. And at first, this story may look a little bit like déjà vu.

If you know the story of salvation, there are some familiarities in this story. The places are even familiar, and so too are some of the people. They look a little bit like some of the other ones who've gone before.

So Elijah and Elisha travel from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho to Jordan. Those are all familiar places. Nothing new to us if we know the Bible. But then there's also Moses and Aaron who are kind of in the background of this journey through the wilderness.

And it sounds a little bit like Elijah and Elisha. And it's all meant to be this way. But it's not déjà vu. It's the sovereignty of God that's at work.

God is preparing the way for Elisha. And even though the Lord didn't speak to Elijah earlier, you remember this last week in the wind and the earthquake and the fire, he did that in a very strong and though soft voice, the Lord is going to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind.

[5 : 46] It's stated in verse 1 that he's going to be taken up, and then we get more of a description of it in verse 11. And this is the sovereign work of the Lord and something only he can do. This is his sovereignty, his order, and his rule in their life.

And this is probably the whole point of Elijah and Elisha's movement from one place to another. There are lots of subtexts I know here. And time doesn't permit me to go through them in detail, but I'll just name them in passing.

For instance, Elisha's covenant love for Elijah in these words in verses 2 and 6. He says, as the Lord lives and you live, yourself live, I will not leave you.

And he tries to get Elisha to kind of go on and not keep following him. Beautiful loyalty from Elisha to Elisha. And then the sons of the prophets in verse 3 and 5 and 7, they witness this ascension of Elijah, but they also warn Elisha that his master, as it says, is going to be leaving him.

And he says, well, be quiet. He's just going to keep following. The really big point of this story is this. It points us to the Lord who lives and rules like no other.

[7 : 00] The Lord is sovereign over all creation. And at the end of Elijah's life, he demonstrates his exclusive rule over death, like no other and in comparison to the god Baal.

In fact, just as God conquered death in the life of the widow's son when he died, we're also going to see that he's going to conquer death in the life of Elijah as he's taken up into heaven.

And this is only by the grace of the living Lord. He will take Elijah up by whirlwind and, yes, chariots of fire. He will not do this because Elijah is perfect and he's a man who deserved not to die.

But the living Lord is sending a message about his rule over all things pertaining to life and death. And this ultimately points us into the direction of Jesus Christ.

God is progressively revealing himself to us by his name and his nature. And he'll send his only son who will die like the widow's son.

[8 : 07] But the Lord will not just be revived, but he will be resurrected and ascend into heaven. And here's the amazing thing about Christianity that's being revealed or at least foretold here or a picture of something in the future.

That God's conquering of death through Jesus Christ, as we know, doesn't protect us from death. The sovereignty of God, we will find out, comes through Jesus dying.

And that's what conquers death. Eliza doesn't die, but you and I know that Christ will die and he will do that willingly. And through the cross of Christ that death is then conquered and defeated.

So the sovereignty of the Lord is fulfilled in Jesus. Death is terrible, but is also triumphant in Christianity. And Elijah points us in that direction, but Jesus completes the script by the sovereignty of God.

Okay, so this is what's happening is being revealed in the sovereignty of God. That God will come, but also showing us through Elijah that he'll conquer death by ascending him into the heaven.

[9 : 22] And it points us in the direction of Jesus, who will conquer death by death and also ascend into heaven. That's sovereignty. Next is the continuity of our Lord.

The Lord's sovereignty isn't only about his rule or order. The Lord's sovereignty serves his continuity. And the Lord is all about passing on this message from one generation to another by his word and his works.

And the Lord brings his life to bear on all creation without interruption. Now, our life isn't something we make up along the way.

We know this. This life-giving message of the Lord begins and ends with God. But here's the thing. He uses faithful servants like Elijah and Elisha and like all of us.

And he revealed how he wants to do this all through people like the Apostle Paul. Let me point you to a place where the Apostle Paul reveals how God is intensely interested in seeing to it that this message is faithfully passed on from one generation to another.

[10 : 33] Paul spoke at the end of his letter to the church in Corinth in the chapter 15. He said this, Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel that I preached to you, which you received, and in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word that I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

And then he says, For I deliver to you as of first importance what I also received. This is this idea of continuity. Paul knows that he received this message of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

He didn't make it up. He received it, and now he's actually passing it on to those who will receive it as well. This is the continuity of God, passing things from one generation to another.

And the Lord is intensely interested in seeing to it that people are gripped by the grace of this story. The Lord sees to it by succession of his servants. And the Lord's message of grace passes through his people.

In the days of Elijah, it was the prophets. Now we're in this book called First and Second Kings. But the kings are actually there to warn us of what it looks like when people turn from God.

[11 : 52] They're only worth actually remembering as a warning. And the priests, which is another kind of order of leaders in the church, or sorry, of God's people at the time, are almost unmentionable.

And of course, there were false prophets too, but there were faithful prophets and remnants of that. And Elijah, and Elisha, and then these other prophets that show up in these towns.

Well, we learn of these sons of the prophets in verses 3 and 5, but in verse 7, we learn something else about them. I want to look down with me. We're told the number of prophets.

There are 50 that stood by the Jordan to witness Elijah's ascension, Elijah's succession. And the official passing of the torch, as it were, was witnessed this day by those 50 prophets.

And the cool thing is that Elijah isn't assuming the role of Elijah in isolation. There are these witnesses, these faithful prophets, these remnants that are right there. And as the story unfolds in, instead of a staff like Moses, you might remember that when he's at the Dead Sea, Elijah rolls up his cloak and he smacks the Jordan River, verse 8.

[13 : 06] Like Moses before the Red Sea, Elijah before the Jordan, both of them cross over on dry ground. And it becomes the ground for Elijah, prompting Elisha to make a request of him.

What is it that you want? And Elijah says, I want a double portion of your spirit. Now, I don't know what you think of that. I know that it's not like a double-double at Tim Hortons.

But I'm not really sure what to make of this. Other than this, maybe. Elisha's saying to Elijah, all that I know that you're twice the prophet that I am, and I need all the help that I can get.

There's a reference to a father passing on to his first son a double inheritance. And maybe Elijah had this in mind, but I think he knew that he wasn't quite like Elijah, but the mantle that he was going to receive, the cloak that he was going to have to wear, that we see representatively at the end, was just more than he could handle.

So he needed a double portion of the spirit. Well, the point of Elijah's succession is what he leaves for Elijah.

[14 : 18] Sorry, the point of Elijah's succession is what he leaves for Elisha. And I think the way he leaves it helps us understand what all this means.

Look down with me at verse 11. How does Elijah leave? What does he actually leave for him? He says this, And as they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them.

And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. So now remember, just a week ago from 1 Kings chapter 18, it wasn't actually in the earthquake, the wind and the fire that God revealed himself to Elijah.

It was in the strong, soft voice. But now there are these two elements, both wind and fire. And what might those represent?

Which gives us an idea of what this is all about. And I think that the wind represents the Holy Spirit and the fire represents the purity of God.

[15 : 28] There are commentators who think that as well. And this is what Elisha and all of God's people need to bear witness and to boldly proclaim the gospel of God.

The Spirit of God and the purity of God. And not only that, but this is in fact what another Elijah in the name of John the Baptist said about his cousin, Jesus.

Do you remember? When there were rumblings about John the Baptist who thought that he was maybe the Messiah or the Christ and he denied that and he said that one would come after him and he would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

The same two elements that are actually here. It sounds a lot like this scene. This is the continuity of God reliably passing on his grace to us for faith by way of his spirit and his purity.

And let me ask you, what do you think it takes to remain faithful to the gospel or to maintain this continuity from person to person?

[16 : 37] Well, here's the good news in the mission of the church. We don't have to wait until some giant of the faith dies like Elijah. We don't even need a double portion of his spirit.

But what we do need is the baptism of the Holy Trinity. We need the Holy Spirit who turns us toward Jesus and we need the purity of God which is the very character of Christ.

It's this power of the Holy Spirit that brings about a penitent life where we're always turning back to God.

But it's more than that or in addition to that, it's this change that comes about in our life by the power of the Holy Spirit. And this is what it takes for the mission of the church.

This is what it takes to know God is sovereignly ruling in the world in which we live in and there's this continual reality of his relationship being brought to bear in our lives.

[17 : 41] And through that, we remain faithful and steadfast in the gospel. Let me point to us by way of application and this is just the last thing tonight, the Alta verse 14.

There's this really interesting thing that when Elijah is taken up into heaven, Elijah remains there that Elijah says. The text reads like this, Then he took the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him and struck the water, saying, Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?

This is the million dollar question, I think. Where is the Lord? For Elijah, he knew and learned that it wasn't in the wind and the earthquake and the fire.

But for Elijah, Elisha who's looking up, he's hearing the wind, he's seeing the fire and he's still asking, Where is the Lord?

Elijah heard it. Elisha will learn it. And I wonder if you were listening to Aaron just a little bit earlier when he made the announcement about that daily prayer booklet.

[19 : 00] I was listening to you, Aaron. You said that the center point is being with Jesus. That's the answer to the where question.

We also find in other places in the New Testament that wherever two or three are gathered, there Jesus is in the midst of them.

And so that's the answer to the where question. By his spirit, as he purifies it, he is with us. That is where he is when we're praying.

And that's where it all begins. I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.