

HOW WOULD YOU SPEND YOUR LAST DAY ON EARTH?

SERIES: ELIJAH: GOD'S INSTRUMENT OF GRACE

by Ron Ritchie

A reporter for the *Palo Alto Weekly* named Karen Jordan walked along University Ave recently and asked a most profound question of those who were passing by: "If today were your last day on earth, how would you spend it?" She reported the following answers: Tony said, "I would get drunk as hell, do as much dope as I can, and be with two pretty women. That's my dream." Chris responded, "I would spend it in the desert or a very peaceful place. I would just try to enjoy every moment and get connected to God and nature." Vera, an older woman, said, "I would phone my family and visit my friends." Lou Ann said, "I would ride around in my new, old convertible. I just bought a 1968 250 SL." And finally Jacqueline said, "I would spend my last day with Gene."

As we turn to 2 Kings 2:1-18, we will gain some wonderful spiritual insight from the lives of Elijah, *God's wonderful* instrument of grace to Israel, on his last day on earth, with his young disciple Elisha. As we go through this passage I would like us to be asking ourselves as followers of Jesus Christ, How would I spend my last day on earth?

Elijah prepared Elisha for his departure

2 Kings 2:1-6

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

What an interesting prophet Elijah was, and what an amazing ministry he had! We have been privileged to view only a few years of his apparently long life in the ninth century BC. This hairy man with a leather belt around his waist came onto the stage of Israel's history from the village of Tishbeh in Gilead as a prophet of the one and only living God, *Yahweh*, in some of Israel's darkest days of idolatry. We know that he was a righteous man of prayer (James 5:16-18) and that he was used by God as an instrument of grace during the reign of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel to challenge God's "holy people" in the northern tribes to leave the state of double-mindedness in which they were trying to serve both Baal and *Yahweh* at the same time. We also know that he was a "natural man" like we are; he could be the most faithful and powerful prophet of God one moment, with the courage to slay 850 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, and then in the next moment he could allow a single woman, Jezebel, to frighten him into a hundred-mile run into the desert, where he fell into a deep depression. But the Lord confronted, healed, encouraged, and commissioned Elijah; and with his eyes back on the Lord again, he anointed Elisha to succeed him in his ministry and in turn anoint Hazael king of Syria and Jehu the new king of Israel (1 Kings 19:16).

Let me give you a quick overview of the historical context of Elijah's last day on earth. At that point King Ahab had been killed in battle with the Syrians, but Jezebel was still alive. Their evil son Ahaziah had become the eighth king of Israel with a reign that lasted only two years (852-850 BC), cut short by an accidental injury. He sent servants to call on the god Baal-zebub to see if he would live, but the angel of the Lord told Elijah to intercept them and send back this message to the king: "Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub the god of Ekron? You shall not get up from your bed; you shall surely die." The king was furious and sent fifty men to arrest the prophet, but they were consumed by fire from heaven. He sent another fifty and they too were consumed by fire from heaven. Finally he sent a third fifty, and the captain pleaded for mercy and went with Elijah, who told the king personally that he was going to die. (1 Kings 22:51-53; 2 Kings 1:1-16.) Because he died childless, Ahab's second son Joram became king in his place. (2 Chronicles 21:12-15 for his word to Jehoram, king of Judah during this season)

The next and final event in Elijah's life, before his departure to heaven, we find him having left Samaria with Elisha and they walked some seventeen miles south to Gilgal. Apparently the Lord had informed Elijah that this was to be his last day on earth, so the old prophet may have wanted to test his young disciple to see if he would be with him to the end, by telling him to stay in Gilgal while he went on to Bethel by himself. Elisha would have none of it; he was going to make sure that he remained faithful until the last moment of Elijah's life on earth. So together they walked another eight miles south to Bethel. But now in spite of the slaughter of many of the prophets of *Yahweh* by the hand of Jezebel, it was a town that still housed a school for the sons of the prophets.

If you had asked Elijah how he would spend his last day on earth, he would have replied, "I want to spend the day with my disciple Elisha and my seminary students in Bethel and Jericho who will need a word of encouragement from the Lord." It appears that Elijah had told the sons of the prophets that the Lord was going to take him that day. Elisha was either told by Elijah, or he had direct revelation or a strong suspicion that his mentor was not going to be on earth much longer. So when he was informed by the sons of the prophets of this reality after they arrived in Bethel, Elisha told them that he knew. He wanted them to "be still," which may be interpreted either, "I don't want to talk about it" (out of his heart of love for Elijah), or, "No tears, no party, no speeches---let's give glory to God rather than to the prophet."

Once again Elijah tested Elisha as he asked him to stay in Bethel while he set out to go some fifteen miles southeast to the city of Jericho, which was on the north shore of the Dead Sea and just east of the Jordan River. But again Elisha would not leave Elijah. So they walked into the city of Jericho and met some fifty prophets of the living God. Like the others, they had received word that this was Elijah's last day on earth and informed Elisha, who again said, "Be still."

Twice Elijah had tried to get Elisha to stay put where he was, first in Gilgal and then in Bethel, while he moved toward his departure. And twice Elisha had refused to leave the prophet. Now finally the Lord moved Elijah five miles east to the Jordan River, where the history of Israel had begun under Joshua so long ago; where the presence, power, and protection of God had been so real for Israel. For the third time Elijah tried to convince Elisha that he should stay behind, but for the third time Elisha refused to leave his spiritual father. So the two of them walked toward the river. Notice that at no time do we get a sense of panic, anxiety, or regret in Elijah, but rather of peacefulness and trust in God even on his last day on earth. He knew he was going to die, and there isn't even any clue in this text as to how he thought it was going to happen.

Elijah spent his last day on this earth loving and caring for his disciple and God's anointed prophet Elisha, and encouraging the faithful sons of the prophets in Bethel and Jericho. As I read this, I couldn't help but remember Ray Stedman's doing this same thing in 1992. Knowing he had only a few months of life left on this earth because of cancer, he spent most of that time encouraging his wife, children, and grandchildren and his spiritual sons and daughters in the things of the Lord. He showed up at our men's conference at Mount Hermon, and I was one among many who were called into his room for a time of love, encouragement, and prayer. He also called all the elders from PBC North and South together during one of his final trips to Stanford Hospital, and in our fireside room most of us heard him for the last time encourage us to "preach the word of God" followed by a time of sharing, tears, prayers, and hugs. What a wonderful way to spend his last days on this earth, and what a meaningful life and ministry he had and still has among so many of us.

Then Elijah was moved by the Spirit to cross the Jordan river.

Elisha asked for "eyes to see"

2 Kings 2:7-18

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. And 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. Now it came about when they had crossed over, that 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." And 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." Then it came about as they were going along and talking, that 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. And Elisha saw it and cried out, "My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" And he saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. He also took up the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and returned and stood by the bank of the Jordan. And he took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and struck the waters and said, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" And when he also had struck the waters, they were divided here and there; and Elisha crossed over.

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. And they said to him, "Behold now, there are with your servants fifty strong men, please let them go and search for your master; perhaps the Spirit of the LORD has taken him up and cast him on some mountain or into some valley." And he said, "You shall not send." But when they urged him until he was ashamed, he said, "Send." They sent therefore fifty men; and they searched three days, but did not find him. And they returned to him while he was staying at Jericho; and he said to them, "Did I not say to you, 'Do not go'?"

As the old prophet Elijah and his young disciple Elisha walked some five miles eastward toward the Jordan River, fifty of the sons of the prophets quietly walked along behind them to see what God was going to do. When the two godly men came to the water's edge of the Jordan River they needed to go across, so Elijah took off his mantle, folded it to form a stick, and "struck the waters." The waters parted and they crossed over on dry land. Once again Elijah was acting in the spirit of Moses, who some five hundred years earlier had walked up to the Red Sea with six hundred thousand Israelites, the pursuing Egyptian army behind them and the Promised Land just ahead but out of reach on the other side of the Red Sea. But Moses was told by God, "...Lift up your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, and the sons of Israel shall go through the midst of the sea on dry land" (Exodus 14:16). Now, this was of course the Jordan River, not the Red Sea. But the same thing had happened to Joshua forty years later almost at this very spot; he had brought the people of God into the Promised Land after the Lord had parted the waters for them and they had crossed over on dry land (Joshua 3:14-17).

Elijah was very much in tune with the Spirit of God, and he realized that his hour was quickly drawing near. He asked his disciple what he could do for him in the final hour of his life on earth. Rather than wanting to be served he was willing to serve, just as our Lord Jesus was on the last night of his life on earth when he washed his disciples' feet.

Elisha answered as a spiritual firstborn son to his spiritual father, "Please, let a double portion of your spirit be upon me." According to Deuteronomy 21:17, the firstborn was to receive a double portion of the father's inheritance. But Elisha was not looking for materialistic gain, for he came from a rich family. Rather Elisha was thinking about his anointing to replace Elijah as the prophet to Israel, the task that lay before him, and his

youth. His desire was not for all the beer he could drink and two pretty women, but 'a double portion of the Spirit upon him.' He was saying, "Elijah, as I have walked with you and listened to you I have sensed that although you are on this earth, when you are walking in the Spirit your eyes of faith are able to see the spiritual world. You talk to the living God of Israel as if he were right here, and you told me he talked to you in 'the cave' at Mount Sinai. You are able to see the unseen realm of spiritual realities in which God is always at work to accomplish his will."

Jesus, his life threatened by a Jewish crowd for healing a sick man on the Sabbath and for calling God his own Father, would say to them: "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing...." (John 5:19-20.)

Paul as an apostle of the risen Lord would also, like the prophets of old, "see" beyond the physical into the spiritual world, and he said to the Ephesian believers (1:18), "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling [we are new creatures in Christ who are being transformed into the very image of Jesus], what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints [we belong to God and he delights in us and delights to use us], and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe [his power eliminates fear and is available to us for ministry]." Paul would also write in his second letter to the Corinthians (4:17-18), "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." Faith is seeing with the eyes of the heart.

Elijah, led by the Spirit, told his disciple, "If you see me when I am taken from you, it shall be so for you, but if not, it shall not be so. Elisha, this request is in the hands of God, and the only way you will know that God has heard you is if you see me leave this earth; then you can be reassured that he has blessed you with the eyes of faith in order to see into the spiritual realm of God's kingdom."

What a scary moment this young disciple was about to experience. One minute he was walking and talking to his spiritual father about his future ministry, and the next minute, as if out of nowhere, "...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." (Note that it was in the whirlwind, not the chariot, that Elijah went to heaven.) Chariots of fire are a symbol of the royal presence of God, appearing in power to bring salvation (Habakkuk 3:8) or judgment to the earth. Years earlier, King David had understood that the chariots of God ran into the thousands upon thousands (Psalm 68:17). And Isaiah some two hundred years after Elijah would encourage the nation of Israel that before they could have comfort in Jerusalem the Lord would judge their enemies (66:15):

"For behold, the LORD will come in fire
And His chariots like the whirlwind,
To render His anger with fury,
And His rebuke with flames of fire."

Jeremiah also spoke of God and his army in these symbolic forms (Jeremiah 4:13).

We live in an evil world in which the kingdom of Satan and the kingdom of God are at war. The chariot was in this case a symbol of war in the battle between Baal and the one and only living God of Israel, a war fought on a spiritual plane over the eternal souls of men and women. At this time the Commander-in-Chief of all the hosts of heaven, the one who met Joshua just before the battle for Jericho (Joshua 5:13-15), called one of his faithful warriors home and left the other warrior standing on earth in his place, for there were many more battles to fight before the final victory over Satan.

Elisha wanted to see spiritually what Elijah had seen with the eyes of faith: the presence and power of God behind the physical realities, especially how he would deal with Israel and its bent toward idolatry. The fact that Elisha saw the spiritual chariots of Israel and its horsemen was the first answer to his request. He saw how God was at work behind the curtains of time and space. And the eyes of faith in turn gave him the life of

faith--the same life of faith that Abraham and all his spiritual sons and daughters are given when they place their faith in God alone.

This would be dramatically illustrated later in Elisha's ministry. The evil king Aram of Syria was at war with Israel and wanted to kill Elisha because God was giving him spiritual insight about his movements, and then he would warn the King of Israel to avoid going in certain areas with his army. Finally King Aram found out that Elisha was living in Dothan and sent his army with chariots and horses and surrounded the city. When Elisha's servant got up early the next morning he walked out of the house, saw the surrounding army, and cried out to Elisha, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" Elisha answered, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Then Elisha prayed, "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. And when they came down to him, Elisha prayed to the Lord, "Strike this people with blindness," and God struck them with blindness (2 Kings 6:8-17). The servant was given the spiritual eyes to see the invisible but always present army of the Lord that was there for their defense. He saw as Elisha did "the unseen realm of spiritual realities in which God is always at work to accomplish his will" (to borrow a phrase from Dave Roper)

We need to keep reminding ourselves that the physical events we experience are only a cover for what is going on in the spiritual realm. When we see the news and the things that happen in our own lives---sickness, trouble, death---we always need to take a step back and ask, "What is behind this? What is God doing? Where is his army? And what does God want me to be doing?" What a tremendous difference this will make in our way of life! It won't eliminate the pain, affliction, and death, but it will eliminate the fear we naturally feel about those things.

David McCasland has just written a book entitled *Oswald Chambers: Abandoned to God*. Chambers, as you probably know, was the author of the well-known book *My Utmost for His Highest*. McCasland writes of Chambers' season as a young art student at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. Chambers wrote about his struggle with the Lord over whether he should become an artist or a minister:

"I hear a voice you cannot hear
That says I must not stay.
I see a hand they cannot see
Which beckons me away.

...if this is indeed the Spirit of Almighty God striving within me,
He will speedily open the door, I will not fear."

To return to the story at hand, "My father, my father," Elijah cried, "the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" (Joash king of Judah would use these same words of sorrow at the time of the death of Elisha [2 Kings 13:14].) Elisha tore his clothes in two, then picked up the mantle of Elijah, cried out to God, and in faith struck the waters of the Jordan. They divided again, and he returned to the western side of the river to be met by the sons of the prophets of Jericho. They had seen what had just happened at the Jordan, and when they all met again the prophets of the Lord said, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha" and bowed before him. Because they had not seen Elijah taken up in the whirlwind, they thought the Spirit of God may have just moved him to some other place, and they wanted to look for him. Elisha wouldn't let them, but then he was shamed into letting them form a search party. They looked for him for three days, then returned empty-handed and were rebuked by Elisha.

Elijah became the second man in Biblical history to not experience a physical death, Enoch being the first. He had passed the mantle on to his disciple Elisha, as do all the servants of the Lord who have invested themselves in discipling others to follow them. And yet Elijah's own ministry would continue in a peculiar and fascinating way.

Elijah's continuing ministry

Elijah is alive and well today! After his trip to heaven in a whirlwind, the prophet Malachi some five hundred years later wrote about the coming judgment on the wicked, at the same time giving a word of exhortation and encouragement: "Remember the law of Moses My servant...which I commanded him in Horeb [Mount Sinai] for all Israel. Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse." (4:4-6) This prophecy had a double fulfillment:

First, some four hundred years later it was said of John the Baptist by an angel, "And it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous; so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17). And Jesus would say of John the Baptist, "And if you care to accept it, he himself is Elijah, who was to come" (Matthew 11:14). Jesus would also say, "...Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him...." (Matthew 17:12), and his disciples understood that he was speaking about John the Baptist.

Second, both Moses and Elijah appeared on the mount of transfiguration with Jesus (Matthew 17:1-8; Luke 9:28-36), where they discussed the closing down of his ministry on earth, the cross, and his departure in order to return again to this earth as Lord of lords and King of kings.

(There may be one final ministry for both Moses and Elijah. Two witnesses who sound very much like Moses and Elijah are presented in Revelation 11. They will be sent to earth on behalf of God to be the light of truth in the terrible dark days of the last 3 1/2 years of the great tribulation just before our Lord's return. "These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. And if any one desires to harm them, fire proceeds out of their mouth and devours their enemies...These have the power to shut up the sky, in order that rain may not fall during the days of their prophesying; and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood, and to smite the earth with every plague, as often as they desire." (Revelation 11:4-6.) Then the beast will kill them and they will lie in public for 3 1/2 days, after which they will be resurrected to life and call back into heaven. In that hour seven thousand people will be killed in a great earthquake, and the rest will be terrified and give glory to the one and only living God [Revelation 11:13].)

Elijah, God's instrument of grace, was called to serve the Lord right up to the very last moment of his life on earth. And as we come back to the present, let's think about the question Karen Jordon asked the people on University Avenue: "If today were your last day on earth, how would you spend it? I would like to encourage all of us to live each day as if it were our last day on this earth. As followers of Jesus Christ we know that like Elijah we have no fear of physical death, for it is but a door into the wonderful presence of our Lord and Savior forever. But as long as we have life left in these bodies, I would like to encourage us to spend our time walking with the Lord, talking with the Lord, and asking him each day to "open the eyes of our hearts" so that we may be able to see the "unseen realm of spiritual realities in which God is always at work to accomplish his will." Then I hope that we will ask him to surround our lives with other believers whom we can help to see with eyes of faith and bring the next generation in turn along, until Christ comes again.

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