

# THE CHARIOT OF FIRE

*SERIES: FIRE FROM HEAVEN*



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2 Kings 2:1-12  
7th Message  
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In this message we'll say goodbye to Elijah. We've been studying the texts in the book of 1 Kings that tell the story of this great prophet. We've noted along the way the extraordinary influence Elijah has had. In every generation, including today's, Elijah's stories have awakened hope that God will act, intervene, and come with power.

We've also observed that Elijah is one of the most unusual characters in the Bible. He lived a life that was unlike that of most other important figures in the history of Israel. He burst onto the scene from obscurity, not rooted in a family or place. Most of those we meet in Scripture come with a pedigree, if you will, of the generations before them. Elijah wrote no document and made minimal speeches. He wandered incessantly. At the end of his life he was not honored at his burial, in fact, he did not die.

That brings us to the most memorable story of Elijah, the account of how he was swept up to heaven by God in a whirlwind.

Our text in 2 Kings 2 begins with these words:

**<sup>1</sup>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.**

The narrator is doing something noteworthy in this first sentence. In the earlier stories, the text would lead us up to a dramatic event in which God miraculously intervened. That was particularly observable in the story of the miracle on Mount Carmel. But in this case, the narrator tells us at the beginning that Elijah is going to be taken up in a whirlwind. So what we are invited to give our attention to in this case is not the miracle, but the two men who are journeying toward that event.

We might regard this day as a double graduation day, if you will. Elijah graduated to the world to come, to the presence of God in a new way, and began the adventure that all of us will begin in resurrection. And Elisha graduated to responsibilities that he hadn't had before, to servant leadership that was new and frightening for him.

Some of us are nearer the end, and realize that the day

is coming when we will step into the next life. We would do well to ask whether we're ready for that day, whether we have longed for the presence of Christ, whether we're eager for the world to come, as Elijah was here. It's also good to ask whether we're ready for the day when the Lord will say to us that it's time to serve, time to join, time to throw off some of the things that have held us back and become involved in the things of God, as Elisha will in this story. Is it time for us to graduate into eternity or graduate into service? I hope this text will help us engage these questions.

## Crossing the Jordan

2 Kings 2:1-3:

**<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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's name hasn't come up much before; we have been focused on the older man, Elijah. Elijah's restoration took place on Mount Horeb after he had cried out in despair. In a cave he finally heard the still, small voice of God speak truth and encouragement to him. Then he was sent off to act on God's behalf, and the most important commission he was given on Mount Horeb that day was to appoint a successor to himself, the next prophet who would lead as he had led. God named Elisha. Elijah did what he was told, went to Abel-meholah, found the young man Elisha, and put his cloak on him, called him into ministry. Elisha then traveled with the older man and learned to speak for God.

Returning to 2 Kings 2, note on this final day of their journey the place names. They walked first to Bethel, then as we'll see, from Bethel to Jericho, from Jericho to Gilgal,

from Gilgal to the edge of the Jordan River, and across the river to the place where the whirlwind will catch up the old prophet. Each of these places is important in Israel's history. They will remind perceptive observers of God's faithfulness.

2 Kings 2:4-5:

**<sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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."**

The sons of the prophets were young men whom Elijah and Elisha were training. They helped them to get ready to lead in their generation. There was a school for the sons of the prophets in Bethel, one in Jericho, and one in Gilgal. On this journey, these two men visited the schools. Each one raised the question to Elisha, "Do you not know that your mentor and guide is going to be taken from you today?" The young students knew that it was Elijah's last day, it was clear that both Elijah and Elisha knew that it was his last day, and all Elisha said was, "I know, but please don't talk about it." He didn't want to face what he knew was true.

2 Kings 2:6-8:

**<sup>6</sup>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.**

**<sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>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.**

Of course many hundreds of years before, the nation crossed the Jordan on dry ground in a miracle of God (Joshua 3). Now these two men were crossing the Jordan on dry ground. They were going the opposite direction, but clearly this was a miracle reminiscent of the earlier one.

What do we make of the speeches repeated in these verses? Three times the old man said to the young man, "Stay here, Elisha. I must go on." Three times the young man said to the old man, "I will not leave you." What are their messages to each other? I believe Elijah is saying this: "The day has come for me to leave, much as we wish it had not. You're going to have to face life without me. There is no avoiding it. So you should stay where there are others who care about you, who will help you get through the loss that you're going to face. You should stay with those whom you will have to lead. They need you, and you need them." Elijah is trying to make it easier for his young friend, his son in the faith. He tried to make the separation less stark and hurtful.

What is Elisha saying to the old man? He's saying, "Elijah, I love you. My heart is knit to you. I can't give you up until God makes me, because of the place you have in my heart, the concern I feel for your welfare, and the debt of love that I owe you." In verse 12 when Elisha saw the old man caught up in the whirlwind with the angels of God, he cried out very profoundly, "*My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!*" (Italics added.)

## The things God has prepared

One observation we must make is that God has given a tender gift to Elijah. What has been the outstanding characteristic of this crusty, powerful prophet of God? We can hardly miss that he has lived his life alone. He came into the story without any reference to family, wife, children, or companions. He remained an outsider even while he lived with the widow and her son in Zarephath. He ministered at every point by himself, in the palace of Ahab and on Mount Carmel. Later he was by himself in despair under a juniper tree and before God on Mount Horeb. In agony, he cried out to God, "I alone am left." This was not just the cry of a moment, but it was almost certainly the cry of a life that he wished had been different.

Now at the end, what gift has God given the old man? He gave him a son, a brother, and somebody who will not let him go. "You can't make me leave you. You don't realize how much I love you." God knows how to give us good gifts. He knows the best time to give them, he knows how we must be shaped in order to receive his gifts. He knows what we long for and need and what is best for us.

Look carefully again at the way this is written.

Verse 6:

## **So the two of them went on.**

Verse 7:

## **While the two of them stood by the Jordan.**

Verse 8:

## **The two of them crossed over on dry ground.**

Our attention is directed to the fact that throughout this whole journey they were always together, stood together, talked together, walked together, and experienced life together. This was God's beautiful gift to Elijah in the final years of his life.

Another observation we can make is that Elijah did not know the future, and probably misunderstood the significance of his own life. When he stood on Mount Carmel, having gathered the people and the prophets of Baal, he said, "How long will you hop from foot to foot, from opinion to opinion? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, follow him." He told the people the truth, and he expected them to respond. But there was very little response. In fact, Elijah's nation, Israel's ten northern tribes, would someday be lost forever because they would not turn back to God. He wanted to see revival in his time, and he never saw it. He believed he had been called to articulate important things, and he said them faithfully, but not much came of it.

So at the end of his life he had just a remnant of young people that he'd trained. He poured himself into the next generation, these sons of the prophets, taught them the Scriptures and challenged them to be faithful in their generation. He trained Elisha to lead that ministry once he was gone. But he must have thought, "My life has petered out." These schools of the prophets were made up of poor, young people on the margin of society. We'll see later that they barely survived. So if Elijah was asked to summarize his life, he probably would have said, "I served my Lord till the end, and I'm grateful for all he's given me, but it's too bad it didn't amount to much."

Of course what he couldn't know, as we do, was that his life would be recounted over and over again. The stories of Elijah have created hope and faith that God would act and awakened longing for God in generation after generation over many hundreds of years. Elijah would be integral to paving the way for the Lord Jesus Christ to come to Israel, through the ministry of John the Baptist (Matthew 3; Mark 1:1-11; Luke 1:5-17, 57-80; 3:1-22; John 1:19-34). One day Elijah and only one other, Moses,

would stand on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36). He couldn't know how his life would be used by God in years to come.

The same is true for us. We don't know enough to draw negative conclusions about what God will or will not do with the love we've shown, the service we've offered, and the faith we've exercised. There's no way for us to know. Surely one of the lessons of Elijah's life is that extraordinary things were yet to come, although he had no possible way of discerning them himself.

We can also learn from Elijah's commitment to the next generation, and his example is very important. Elijah believed that if he couldn't change the world, he could at least care for some younger folks, and he gave himself to that. The lives of Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament show the same priority.

Now, what about Elisha on his graduation day? From this day forward he will have to trust the God who established Elijah. And it will be enough. We'll find out in the remainder of this series that he himself became a powerful servant of God. Someday all of us have to step from the sidelines to the field. Somebody will hand us the torch. It will be our turn to take the gifts and opportunities we've been given and step in to care for the people God cares for. Often we will fear that we are not the equal of our teachers, but the power of God does not diminish and is available to us in abundance.

## **Seeing the invisible**

In verses 9-12 the journey is over. They've crossed the Jordan and come to the place where the whirlwind will descend. The end of Elijah's life is before us.

2 Kings 2:9-12

**"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." <sup>10</sup>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." <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>Elisha saw it and cried out, "My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its**

## horsemen!” And he saw Elijah no more.

The phrase “a double portion” refers to inheritance. Elisha asked to be the one who replaced Elijah. In order for Elisha to serve his generation, he didn’t need Elijah’s techniques, voice, demeanor, or cloak. He needed Elijah’s spirit. He needed to know God the way Elijah had known God. And Elijah told him that the test was this: If he could see what was invisible, if he could believe in realities that one cannot detect with the five senses, then he had faith—which was all that was required for service.

A disinterested reporter at this scene would have observed that two men were walking together and that one of them disappeared. Maybe the old man tripped and fell in the ditch. But a man or woman of faith would have seen that God took Elijah, that the whirlwind was miraculous, that angels were present.

That is essentially what faith is. Remember the Apostle Paul’s description: “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” (2 Corinthians 4:18). And the writer of Hebrews says, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1).

Most of us are unaware at a given moment that we are forgiven, approved of, and clothed with the very righteousness of Christ himself, so that when God sees us, he sees his Son. That’s true, but it’s invisible. We already have everything we long for. We are royal children in disguise. We are members of one another. As much as you might disagree with some Christian brother or sister, we all belong to one another in a profound yet invisible way. This world’s threats and promises will fade and be forgotten. Our Lord will have the last word. Do we believe it and can we act on it?

The final paragraphs of this chapter tell the story of how Elisha first attempted to lead. He had some stumbles along the way. He picked up Elijah’s cloak and touched the water as Elijah did, but nothing happened. So he cried out to God, “Where are you?” Then he touched the water a second time and it parted. You have the sense that he’s trying to use his old mentor’s ways and means and hadn’t quite learned how to pray. He went back to these young sons of the prophets, and they bowed down before him as

their leader, but as soon as he told them what to do, they did something else. He wasn’t accorded the stature that he will have someday. But it remained true nonetheless that he was the right man for that assignment, and he learned the lessons and he was given his own place by God.

How shall we conclude this story of the old man’s graduation to new life, and the young man’s graduation to new responsibility? Elijah did not outlive Jezebel. She was still on the throne when he was taken. In Discovery Paper 5203 we talked about the story of how Ahab and later Jezebel died in shame and rejection. But Elijah was taken to heaven in honor and glory by the call of God. If we put the two stories together, the question that comes back to us is, are we living our life with a longing for the next one? If today were our last day, would our life just end, or would it be completed? Would we have loved the best things, anticipating the great day?

What about Elisha’s lesson? Are we postponing responsibility that we shouldn’t postpone, making excuses of entanglements, distractions, not enough time, or not being ready? Somebody else should do it . . . I will someday, but not now. Are we saying over and over again, “I won’t go,” when it’s time for us to go? The answer is, God is present. It doesn’t matter if we’re not ready, not strong, and not mature. The Spirit of God is able to take folks like us and do with us what is best.

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