



GREAT MIRACLES

OLD TESTAMENT

2 KINGS 2

 LIVING WAY
BIBLE STUDY

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“Whether we are brought to our heavenly home by a whirlwind and a chariot of fire, or through the normal process of dying, we can be assured that the life we now know will not be extinguished in some sort of cosmic nothingness, but be renewed in a glorified and eternal existence with the Lord.”



A FIERY FAREWELL

The more theatrical among us enjoy a good exit. Anybody can walk out of a room. But few of us go out with a lasting impression. Even fewer of us go out of this world in a blaze of fiery glory. The prophet Elijah, however, did just that.

The opportunity to circumvent death itself and ascend from this earth directly to man's heavenly home has been offered to very few. After all, we are all sinners, and we know that the “wages of sin is death.” But, interestingly, two characters in Scripture seem to have avoided the otherwise inevitable process of dying. One of these individuals may have been Enoch. In Genesis 5, we are given a genealogy of the people who lived between the time of Adam and Noah. Usually, when a name is listed, we are told his age and the length of his life. Each name ends with “and then he died.” When we read about Enoch, we learn that he lived 365 years, but the length of his years is followed by this enigmatic statement: “Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away” (Genesis 5:24). This has led the Church to describe Enoch's departure in different terms than it uses for those of us who simply die. Enoch is said to have been “translated” into heaven, that is, he went directly from his earthly body to his glorified state without experiencing death. The author of Hebrews writes in 11:5: “By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found because God had taken him away.”



The other individual who appears to have passed directly from our world to God's without suffering the pangs of death was the prophet Elijah. Throughout his life, Elijah had been on a crusade against the religious and moral laxity of his time. When we read about Elijah's contest with the priests of Baal, we encountered only one example of Elijah's campaign. He experienced other confrontations with Ahab, Jezebel, and the sons of Ahaziah before his prophetic ministry drew to a close. And during his ministry, Elijah was led to choose a successor (1 Kings 19:19–21).

The man Elijah was led to choose was the son of a farmer who lived in the Jordan Valley, south of the Sea of Galilee. One day Elisha (not Elijah — notice the difference in spelling) was plowing a field with his twelve oxen. Elijah simply approached Elisha and threw his mantle on him. Now, this mantle or cloak was probably made of animal skin covered with hair, probably goat's skin with the hair turned outward. A description of Elijah's mantle is given in 2 Kings 1:8, and what he wore seems to have been the traditional outfit for a prophet of God. For example, John the Baptist wore camel's hair and looped a leather belt around his waist (Matthew 3:4). The prophet's "uniform" is mentioned by Zechariah, speaking of a time when there would be false prophets who would wish to disguise themselves, when he says: "On that day every prophet will be ashamed of the prophetic vision. He will not put on the prophet's garment of hair in order to deceive" (Zechariah 13:4).

Once the mantle had been passed, Elisha gladly followed Elijah. He kissed his father and mother goodbye, butchered the two oxen, tore apart his plow for firewood, and gave the farm workers a farewell meal. Then he became Elijah's attendant (1 Kings 19:19–21).

After pastors in the Lutheran Church are ordained into the ministry, they place around their neck and shoulder a clerical "stole" which indicates their authority to exercise the Office of the Keys and Confession. These stoles will often reflect the different colors of the liturgical church year. The idea of the stole finds its roots in the story of Elijah conferring his prophetic office onto his successor Elisha. The stole reminds us that the individual pastor has not only been trained and certified by theologians who have passed on to him the doctrines of the Christian faith, but he has also been uniquely called by God to act as spiritual shepherd for a specific congregation which has delegated him their authority to preach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments.

Inevitably, the time came when the Lord was to remove Elijah from his difficult earthly tasks and lead him to eternal rest. Elisha was aware that his tutor's departure was near and he became determined to follow Elijah to the end. In his determination, Elisha demonstrated an admirable commitment to Elijah and his ministry. The dedication Elisha shows Elijah is only one example of the many devoted friendships we find in the Old Testament. We are reminded of the close brotherhood Jonathan and David experienced, or the loving bond that existed between Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi. We can never forget that this kind of devotion is natural to human beings, and can transcend all boundaries of race or religion.

One of the reasons so many people feel isolated and alone in our modern world is because our natural inclinations to bond with friends are inhibited by suspicions of self-interest and greed. People become fearful of growing closer to others because of painful experiences with those who have taken advantage of their friendship in the past. It becomes difficult in our

day and age to trust anyone and we often live rather isolated lives as a consequence of sin.

Elijah tells Elisha that the Lord has called him to Bethel, and that Elisha must stay where he is and not follow. Elisha will hear none of that, however, and continues to accompany Elijah to Bethel. At Bethel, there lived a number of prophets to whom Elijah's impending exit has been revealed. They remind Elisha that the Lord will soon remove Elijah, but Elisha doesn't want to hear it. The Lord calls Elijah to Jericho, and once again Elijah tells Elisha not to follow, and once again, Elisha disobeys. Another group of prophets in Jericho confirm the Lord's wish to take Elijah from this world, but Elisha again does not want to listen. Finally, the Lord calls Elijah to the Jordan River. Once again, Elijah commands Elisha not to follow, but Elisha continues to tag along.

When Elijah and Elisha arrive at the Jordan, Elijah performs a remarkable miracle. In the presence of Elisha, and fifty prophets from Jericho who stand at a distance, Elijah takes his mantle, rolls it up, and strikes the water. In a miracle reminiscent of Moses at the Red Sea and Joshua at the Jordan, the waters part, allowing both Elijah and Elisha dry land on which to cross. Consider how many times we have watched the Lord provide His people with miraculous ways to overcome the obstacles before them. How easy it is to march straight through the most difficult circumstances if one is walking on the path of God's will! He always provides a way to the other side, the Promised Land, the place where He wishes us to be. Many of the frustrations we face on life's journey are a result of our stubborn wish to travel another way.

When they reached the other side of the Jordan, Elijah, sensing the deep loyalty Elisha had for him, asked Elisha if there was any last request he could fulfill for his successor. Elisha didn't ask for wisdom or fame or money. He asked that a double portion of the Spirit which had dwelled in Elijah would now reside in him. Now, Elisha wasn't asking that his ministry be twice as potent or important as Elijah's. He was simply using the language of the inheritance laws of his time to ensure he could carry on Elijah's ministry. Of course, this request was really outside of Elijah's prerogative to give. The spiritual office, which Elisha would possess was a matter of God's good giving. Elijah let the answer lie in the Lord's hands, but the sign of whether or not the Lord would grant Elisha's request would be found in whether Elisha could see Elijah being taken from the earth.

And because Elisha's request would be granted, he encounters one of the Bible's greatest miracles. We read that as they were talking and walking together, a chariot of fire led by horses of fire swept down from the sky, separating the two of them, and a whirlwind lifted Elijah from the earth and carried the prophet into heaven. Elisha had followed his mentor this far, and no doubt would have followed Elijah into the very throne room of heaven had he been able. But Elisha was not given that power, and could only call out in frustration, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" Watching Elijah ascend in fire to his heavenly home inspired Elisha to equate the prophet with the true Israel, the embodiment of God's chosen people. Elisha, as a sign of grief, tore his own clothes apart.

Interestingly, the prophets from Jericho couldn't believe their eyes. They postulated that Elijah

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had merely been transported by the Spirit of God to another location. Elisha was not swayed by their opinion, but because they continued to wheedle him about the possibility, he allowed them to search for Elijah. Fifty of them searched for three days, and when they came to report their failure to Elisha, his only response was, "I told you so!" Elisha was well aware of the nature of the miracle, and through his experience he was strengthened to walk in the way of his mentor and friend.

The "translation" of Elijah into heaven has given rise to a whole world of legends. In the Islamic world, Elijah is the Jewish ancestor of El-Hudr, an eternal wanderer who drank from the water of life and now never grows old. In Jewish tradition, Elijah is expected to return before the arrival of the Messiah in order to right all the wrongs of the world. The prophet Malachi predicts in the last verse of the Old Testament: "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse." Of course, Jesus makes clear this prophecy was fulfilled in John the Baptist. As our Lord's forerunner, he was the camel-haired, leather-belted prophet whom Malachi had predicted. Jesus says in Matthew 11:13-14: "For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come." But to this day, when orthodox Jews celebrate the Passover, they leave the door ajar for the arrival of Elijah. In fact, the barking of neighborhood dogs is said to be the joyful sign of his presence.

Perhaps there was no better ending for the prophet Elijah. Elijah's entire ministry was experienced in a whirlwind, and his spirit was truly on fire. In our world today, many people perform wonderful acts of service. They help the poor and give solace to the grieving. There are those who will bend over backwards to aid a friend who may need assistance. But what we often lack is the passion to share the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. We are eager to help alleviate the temporal problems facing our friends and neighbors, but when it comes to the gift of eternal life we grow shy and backwards, as if eternity is somehow irrelevant to contemporary concerns.

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Elijah's ministry was almost entirely concerned with demonstrating the need to worship the one true God, and to reject the many pagan false gods of the day. Christians today need to stand up for the doctrines we know are true and eternal: the understanding there is salvation in no one but Jesus Christ, not in Buddha or Mohammed or any other figure who lives or lived. We need to remind the world, there is no "second chance" of salvation mentioned in Scripture, nor is the promise of reincarnation valid. We've only been given a limited amount of time to receive the Lord and work in His vineyard, and when our lives have come to an end, we will either gain salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, or we will know an eternal separation from the God of all goodness. Followers of Christ are called on to draw a moral line in the sand and declare that which is right to be right and that which is wrong to be wrong.

If nothing else, Elijah's life is a tribute to the conviction God requires of all of us. Clearly, Elijah often grew tired and discouraged. He became so depressed at one time that he wanted to die. But, through it all, the Lord gave him strength and courage, and rewarded Elijah's faithfulness in the most dramatic exit from this world ever known.

He was given the nearly unique gift of being translated from this world to the next without enduring the sting of death. It is worth noting that even though Elisha followed in the footsteps of Elijah, Elisha died like every man and woman who has lived in this sinful world.

And one other footnote, if you will. When Jesus reveals His power and glory as the Son of God before Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration, the two figures who stand with Him conversing about the fate of the Savior in Jerusalem are Moses and Elijah, both of whom miraculously parted impassable waters. Together they discuss the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who would part the waters of sin and death in order to lead His followers into an eternal Promised Land. And by their presence they demonstrate that God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.

Whether we are brought to our heavenly home by a whirlwind and a chariot of fire, or through the normal process of dying, we can be assured that the life we now know will not be extinguished in some sort of cosmic nothingness, but be renewed in a glorified and eternal existence with the Lord.

PERSONAL APPLICATION*NAAMAN'S NEED – 2 KINGS 5*

O Lord, our Great Physician, thank You for healing our souls through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When we are tempted to doubt the effectiveness of Your grace, and find ourselves fearing for our salvation unless we accomplish extra deeds, keep us mindful that grace is a free gift and that our salvation is complete in Jesus. Then inspire us to perform great works for You, not out of fear for our eternal destiny, but in gratitude for Your many blessings. In Jesus' name. Amen.

1. Whom did the Lord use to bring military victory to Aram? (2 Kings 5:1)

2. In what other ways did the Lord use people from foreign nations to achieve His purposes?

Ezra 1:1–4

Genesis 41:1–40

Luke 2:1–7; Micah 5:2

3. How did a captured Hebrew witness her faith in 2 Kings 5:2–3?

Share an experience when you were able to witness your faith to an unbeliever and what was the response?

4. Why did Naaman bring so much money and so many goods to the land of Israel? (2 Kings 5:5, 15)

How did Elisha respond to Naaman's intentions? (2 Kings 5:16)

Explain how the following tried to "buy" the grace of God.

Acts 8:9–23

Daniel 5:13–17

In each case, what was the response of those to whom the offers of money was given?

What lesson may they have been trying to teach by refusing such precious rewards? (Ephesians 2:8–9; Romans 3:23–24; Matthew 10:8)

Suggest some ways contemporary people attempt to “buy” God’s grace and favor.

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5. In what ways did Elisha’s method of healing not meet Naaman’s expectations? (2 Kings 5:11–12)

What was Naaman’s initial reaction to that disappointment?

Why do you think Naaman felt this way? (1 Corinthians 1:18, 22–23)

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6. Why was it equally difficult for people in Jesus’ day to accept the healing message of the Gospel? (Galatians 1:6–9, 3:1–5)

Of what modern day cult are you reminded when Paul writes about some of the temptations to turn away from the true Gospel? (Galatians 1:8; 1 Timothy 1:3–4)

What becomes the temptation in every church? (Colossians 2:20–23)

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7. For what dangerous compromise was Naaman asking Elisha’s permission when he was about to return to his homeland? (2 Kings 5:18)

In stark contrast to Naaman, explain how three men did not compromise their faith and what happened to them as a result in Daniel 3:4–30.

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8. What did the scoundrel Gehazi do behind Elisha’s back and what was the consequence of his sin? (2 Kings 5:20–27)

Describe what happened to other biblical characters who tried to steal from the Lord.
Acts 5:1–11

Joshua 7:1–2, 19–26

In what ways are we tempted to steal from the Lord?

9. How might the miracle of Naaman's healing be comforting to you in your present situation?
