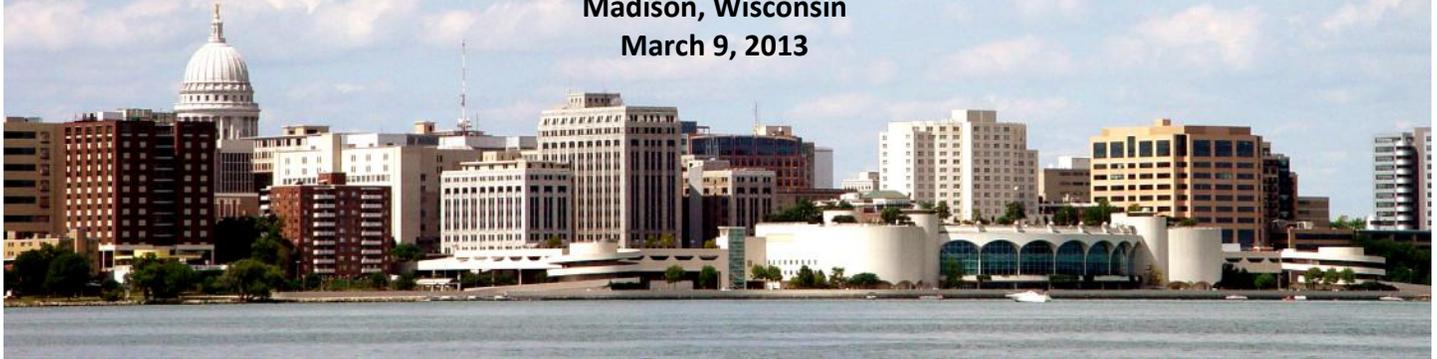


# *“Chariot of Fire”*

**SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF ELIJAH (PART 6): 2 KINGS 2:1-14**

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This morning I would invite you to think with me about the question: What would you do right now if you knew without a doubt that today were to be your last day on earth? If somehow God were to let us know that by this time tomorrow we would be taken up into heaven, how would we spend the next 24 hours? I am sure that all of us would have some very interesting answers. I am also sure that our answers would be very different from our friends and neighbors who are living for this world only. Many around us might decide to fill the next 24 hours with nothing but worldly pleasure. Perhaps many of us would choose to spend time with our families. Some might decide to spend some time in nature. Others might spend the next 24 hours in some level of panic, worried about what will happen next.

This might seem to be a rather negative thought to consider, but sometimes we need to slow down and remember that this life is not all that there is. The end is coming for all of us – later for some, but much sooner for others. We see reminders all around us – we think of the crash over Viet Nam that has been in the news for the past two days, we think of close friends and loved ones who are battling horrible diseases. The reminders are all around us, but rarely do we slow down and really think about what we might do if we were given just a few hours to live. This morning, then, as we conclude our series of lessons based on the life of Elijah, I would like for us to consider Elijah’s answer to that question.

For the prophet Elijah, the answer comes in the first half of 2 Kings 2 (p. 593). In 2 Kings 2, we find that Elijah is given just a short time to live. And I would say that the end of Elijah’s earthly life is probably more spectacular than just about any other Bible character, with perhaps the exception of Jesus (although there are certainly even parallels between the end of Elijah and the end of the Lord’s earthly ministry).

In this series of lessons, we remember that Elijah was a man of tremendous courage. He came on the scene out of nowhere and condemned wicked king Ahab for the sin of idolatry. We then learned that Elijah was sent to a widow’s home where her faith was challenged to care for Elijah. She was miraculously sustained throughout the rest of the drought, but then her life caved in as her only son died. He was then brought back by Elijah. All of this brought us to the passage in 1 Kings 18 where we studied the showdown on Mt. Carmel. There was the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. The prophets of Baal were killed, and we ended that lesson with the first rain in 3-½ years. Last week, we found that Elijah raced back to the palace, where he might have expected the king and queen to turn from their wicked ways, he perhaps expected some

kind of national revival, and yet instead, we find the queen once again calling for Elijah's death. With this overwhelming sense of dread, Elijah then goes into hiding again, where he seems to slip into some kind of depression. He sleeps for days, he isolates himself, he feels completely useless, and he even gets to the point where he begs God to take his life. God, though, very gently helps Elijah work through all of that, and by the end of 1 Kings 19, we find that Elijah is back on some kind of limited duty as a prophet. He is not quite back to where he was, but he is once again useful in God's plan.

All of this brings us to 2 Kings 2. A number of years have passed, Ahab and Jezebel are dead, and Elijah seems to be overseeing several schools that have been set up throughout the land for the purpose of training prophets. The nation is still caught up in the worship of idols; however, God's work continues on behind the scenes. Elisha is still working as Elijah's assistant, and that brings us to 2 Kings 2.

***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. 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."***

***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. 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.***

***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. 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.***

***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." 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." 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. Elisha saw it and cried out, "My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" And he saw Elijah 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. 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.***

Once again, this morning we have read a powerful passage. In fact, there is no way for us to get every lesson out of this paragraph. There is so much we could say about Elisha here. But the focus of this series is Elijah. So,

I would like for us to look at this passage from Elijah's point of view. And as we do that, I want us to notice three very practical lessons based on Elijah in this chapter.

**I. And the first lesson I'd like for us to notice here is that ELIJAH DID NOT FEAR THE END OF HIS EARTHLY LIFE.**

And really, Elijah leaves us quite an example to follow. As he comes near the end, it is obvious to us who are reading this that Elijah knows at least something of what is about to happen. In other words, Elijah knows that the end is near. He might not know all of the details, but he knows that some kind of a separation is about to take place. In fact, as he and Elisha travel around the area, they are reminded over and over again by these young men in the schools for the prophets, "Don't you know that your master is about to be taken away?" [paraphrased]. The prophets, though, are told to be still. But through this entire process, the point here at the beginning is that we don't see any panic on Elijah's part. Instead, Elijah faces the end of his life with dignity and peace. He knows what is about to happen, and he moves forward with confidence.

We certainly think of what Paul wrote to the church in Philippi as he was in prison and at least thinking about the possibility of his own execution. In Philippians 1:21, Paul said, "***For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.***" Paul was affirming there that when a Christian dies, nothing of lasting value is lost, and everything of lasting value is gained [David Owens; The Grand Finale; [www.sermoncentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com)]. As Christians, we look forward to meeting God face to face. We long to go home. We know that death will bring a great reward. As Christians, our understanding is that at the point of death, angels will carry us into the presence of God. That is what happened with Lazarus in Luke 16, and that seems to be what happens here as well. Elijah is taken up to be with God. We think about the old spiritual, "Swing low, sweet chariot, coming forth to carry me home." This was Elijah's view of the end. He knew that there was something beyond this earthly life, and he was looking forward to it. A great example for us to follow! So, first of all, Elijah did not fear the end of his earthly life.

**II. There is something else we can learn from Elijah in this passage, and that is: ELIJAH SERVED GOD TO THE END.**

In other words, as he came near the end of his life, Elijah kept on doing what God wanted him to do. And again, going back to our question of what we might do if we knew this were to be our last day on earth, Elijah knew that this was it, and he spent his time carrying out God's commands. In verse 2, in verse 4, and also in verse 6, Elijah says, "***...the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel,***" "***...the Lord has sent me to Jericho,***" and "***...the Lord has sent me to the Jordan.***" In other words, Elijah spent his last few hours traveling from one town to the next, just as God had directed. Again, what a great example!

All of us here this morning who are more than 40 years old (especially) need to pay very careful attention to what happens here. The way I look at it, I am now in the second half of my life, and Elijah serves as an example. The Lord sent, and Elijah listened. Elijah went where God had directed. For those of us who have been Christians for many years (I am coming up on 30 years myself in about a week), but for those who us who have been Christians for many years, our greatest temptation is probably not the temptation to go get wasted at a bar every Friday night. I'm too old for that – I don't have the energy! The greatest temptation for me is not the temptation to go out and rob a bank. Again, that is too risky. Not that I think about this regularly, but I have neither the time nor the energy to plan that out. I am too old for that! Instead, the greatest temptation for those of us who have been Christians for many years is probably the temptation to simply not do much at all. We have worked hard for decades, so let us just slack our way in toward the finish line. Let us

just enjoy the last half of life. That might have been a temptation for Elijah as well, but notice what he does: He lives for God right up to the point where he is taken to heaven. He travels around to these schools for the prophets, encouraging the young men in those schools, faithfully serving God until the very end.

We think of what Paul wrote in our Scripture reading this morning, from Galatians 6:9, ***“Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary.”*** Elijah did not lose heart, but he kept on doing good right up until the end.

**III. As we look back at 2 Kings 2, I would point out another very practical lesson based on what Elijah did here, and that is: ELIJAH TRAINS HIS OWN REPLACEMENT.**

In other words, Elijah (on his way out) makes sure to pass along God’s work to the next generation. It serves as a valuable reminder that God’s work goes on without us. Ideally, though, those of us who are older should be able to assist in that transition. And in this situation, the focus is on Elisha. The relationship between Elijah and Elisha, of course, goes back many years. It was at the end of 1 Kings 19 where Elijah found Elisha and pulled him into the ministry. On that occasion, you might remember that Elisha was apparently a farmer, and right there on the spot, Elisha killed his entire team of oxen (twelve pairs of oxen), and he offered those animals up as a sacrifice, and he used the wood from his plow and his farm equipment to kindle that fire! So, Elisha was motivated from the start!

And in the years to come, Elijah would continue to train this young man. Elisha was Elijah’s assistant, and over time it seems to have developed into almost a father-son relationship. So we finally get to the end, and in 2 Kings 2, we have Elijah taking Elisha with him on what we might describe as a “whirlwind tour” (I hope you all get the pun there)! But Elijah takes this young prophet-in-training from one city to another. I kept looking online for a map that would show me the route Elijah took here, and I really couldn’t find anything. So, I decided we needed our own! Once again, I went to Google maps and did the best I could to figure out where these three cities were, I determined the distance between each city, and then I tried to make it so that we could actually see it. As we have found several times concerning some of these locations over in that part of the world, Google basically says, “You really do not want to travel between these places!” And that is what happened here. There is some serious conflict going on in that part of the world right now – razor wire, concrete barriers, military checkpoints, and so on. But if we could go back in time, this is where Elijah took Elisha. They started off from where they were in Gilgal, they went down to Bethel, they went over to Jericho, and then they went down to the Jordan River. And in each of these places, Elijah tried to leave Elisha behind. We may never know what Elijah was thinking here, but as I see it, Elijah is putting a challenge out there. Elijah is showing Elisha how tough it is, and as I see it, he keeps on basically asking, “Are you sure you are ready for this?” Of course, they get to stop in and encourage the other prophets-in-training in these schools along the way, but as I see it, the little tour is primarily for Elisha’s benefit. In his own way, Elijah is preparing Elisha for what was about to happen. He is preparing him to take over where he is leaving off.

With this in mind, I want to speak again to those of us here this morning who are over the age of 40: In practical terms, what can we do personally to hand off our faith to the next generation? What can we do personally to encourage the younger members of this congregation? How can we encourage them to stay strong in the faith? What are we teaching those who are coming along behind us? What are we teaching them about the importance of faith and obedience? What are they learning from our example? Did you know that there is something we ***“ought”*** to do in this regard? I know there are some who might consider it to be legalistic to say that we ***“ought”*** to do anything. However, in Hebrews 5:12, the author seems to be almost a little bit irritated that those who are listening aren’t mature enough to understand what he really wants to talk

about, and in that context, the preacher says, ***“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.”*** The Bible says that the spiritually mature among us ***“ought to be teachers.”*** Are we teaching? Like Elijah, are we passing the baton along to the next generation?

And so with all of this as background, these two men get down to the Jordan River, Elijah strikes the Jordan with his outer garment, the river splits, they walk across on dry ground, and when they get to the other side, Elijah asks Elisha, “What do you want from me?” [paraphrased]. And Elisha says that he would like to have a double portion of Elijah’s spirit. That is a rather unusual request. There is some debate over this, but as I see it, Elisha was basically asking to be Elijah’s successor in ministry. In the Old Testament, a ***“double portion”*** was given to the first-born son. And so if a man had two sons, at his death his oldest would get two parts of the inheritance and the youngest would get one part – 2/3 to the oldest and 1/3 to the youngest. Elisha, then, was saying, “Treat me like the oldest son. Give me a double portion of your spirit.”

As I see it, it becomes obvious that Elisha is now ready to take over, and at that point, God intervenes and takes Elijah directly to heaven in a whirlwind. And then, with those fifty prophets watching from a distance, Elisha turns around and does what Elijah had just done with the mantle (the outer garment) and Elisha crosses back over the Jordan River. This, by the way, is the fourth time that anybody in the Bible ever crossed a body of water miraculously on dry ground – the Red Sea with Moses, the crossing of the Jordan with Joshua, and now these two crossings that happened here.

But again, the point is: Elijah did what he needed to do to teach, and train, and challenge the next generation. Just as Moses trained Joshua, and just as Paul trained Timothy, Elijah trained Elisha. Of course, I could point out to those younger than 40: Elisha had to actually pick up the mantle and run with it, but the main point here is that Elijah trained his replacement.

### **Conclusion:**

As we come to the end of this series, I would invite you this morning to turn with me to the blank page in the middle of the Bible, the blank page between the Old Testament and the New Testament. I always loved being able to find that page when I was a kid. I want us to turn together to the blank page, and then I want us to go back a page or two and find the last two verses of the Old Testament – Malachi 4:5-6 (p. 1498). As we think back over the lessons we’ve studied over the past month and a half, I want us to notice the honor given to Elijah in the closing verses of the Old Testament, two verses that were written roughly 500 years after the time of Elijah. Malachi is the last prophet, and in terms of sending inspired messages to the human race, God is about to “go dark” for a period of about 400 years. But before those 400 years begin, please notice the last words as the Old Testament comes to a close, ***“Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.”*** And with that, the Old Testament comes to an end. God does not speak again until John the Immerser comes on the scene announcing the coming of Jesus. In Luke 1:17, John is identified as the one who would come ***“in the spirit and power of Elijah.”*** What an honor that must have been!

Elijah was a man with a nature like ours. He was a man of courage. He was a man of prayer. He was a man of faith. He was a man who struggled with depression. And as we have learned this morning, Elijah was also a man who served God to the very end, making sure that God’s message would continue to be preached even

after he was gone. Overall, we have learned in this series that God can use people like us. What an encouragement!

This morning I would close with the question we considered at the beginning: If we knew that we had only 24 hours to live, how would we spend that time? The truth is, unlike Elijah, we have no idea when the end may come. It may be today, it may not happen for many years. If Elijah were with us this morning, he would want us to believe the prophetic word that has been made known to us through the New Testament of Jesus Christ. The New Testament teaches that we must repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of our sins. At that point, we are added to God's kingdom, we are born into God's family. If you have any questions, let us know. If you have something we need to pray about as a congregation, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, we hope you will let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)