

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
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The Ascension of Christ**

2 Kings 2:1-12

How A Child of God Departs this Life

- 1. Service completed**
- 2. Encouragement given**
- 3. Victorious!**

Hymns: 170 – 173 – 169 – 175 - 171

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

2 Kings 2:1-12 –

When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel." But Elisha said, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, "Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?" "Yes, I know," Elisha replied, "but do not speak of it." Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here, Elisha; the LORD has sent me to Jericho." And he replied, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went to Jericho. The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, "Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?" "Yes, I know," he replied, "but do not speak of it."

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." And he replied, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So the two of them walked on. Fifty men of the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan.

Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground. When they had crossed, Elijah said to

Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?" "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied. "You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours--otherwise not."

As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" And Elisha saw him no more.

One of our church members was talking to me this week about their neighbor who had died. They told me that the way they went was "perfect!" It was the way to go! Their friend was 85 years old. He had had a long and full life. He lived at home until the day when he went to the hospital. He had come back home feeling really good, and then he died the next day. Therefore, it could be said about him, "That's the way to go!"

How would you like to "go?" As we gather to commemorate the Ascension of Christ, we're going to focus on the Old Testament reading today, the remarkable account of the prophet Elijah being taken up to heaven. Wouldn't you say that was "the way to go?" Let's meditate on that account as well as the account of Jesus' ascension, and think about our own departure from this life. We will consider "***How A Child of God Departs this Life.***" We will look at the account of Elijah being taken up to heaven from three different angles and learn three lessons about a believer's departure from this life.

1. In regard to timing, service completed!

The prophet Elijah's service to the Lord and to the nation had been long and difficult. He had served as a prophet for almost 30 years. He served around 850 B.C., when the kingdom was divided. He was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel. The Lord chose to place him into the time period when wicked King Ahab reigned. We hear about Ahab in 1 Kings 16:

“Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him.”

Ahab chose to marry a Phoenician princess named Jezebel. Queen Jezebel brought her false gods along with her to Israel: Baal, the male god of fertility and his female partner Asherah. I'll let you imagine for yourselves how male and female worshipers of the male god Baal and the female goddess Asherah were to go about their “worship” in the gardens and groves on the hilltops.

Because of the idolatry, immorality, and unbelief that was happening in the country, God's judgment during the time of Elijah was severe. God withheld rain for 3½ years. The climate in the Holy Land is arid to begin with. The famine made conditions miserable for the nation. God had to miraculously provide for Elijah at a brook by having ravens bring him food twice a day. Later, he provided for him by having a widow woman's jar of flour and jug of oil miraculously keep producing. It was a desperate time.

To retaliate for God's judgment, Queen Jezebel ordered all the prophets of the Lord to be murdered. Many hid in caves. Elijah was also the prophet in last week's Old Testament reading who had to face the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel, and called down fire from heaven to consume the offering to the true God. Elijah also had to confront King Ahab when he murdered a vineyard owner named Naboth, so he could possess his vineyard as his vegetable garden. Such were the life and times of the prophet Elijah.

During his difficult ministry, Elijah suffered through a bout of depression and lay under a tree asking the Lord to take his life. But his time of service was not over, so the Lord renewed and re-commissioned him, and gave him Elisha as his assistant for support. They had been together for perhaps ten years. At the time of our reading, Elijah knows that now is time for his departure.

What is our first lesson that we learn about how a child of God departs this life? In regard to timing it happens when service is completed. Elijah may have thought that his usefulness and

effectiveness as God's prophet was over years before, but he was wrong. When was he going to leave this world? When the service that God had ordained for him to complete was over. Now that Elijah knew that the time had truly come for him to depart this life, thoughts similar to the Apostle Paul's were going through his mind: *“The time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day”* (2 Timothy 4).

We see a similarity here to the ascension of Christ. When did Christ ascend back to heaven? He certainly may have wanted to when he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. He prayed to his Father in heaven that would prefer to pass on drinking the cup that had been placed in front of him, that cup of suffering and dying for the sins of the world. He wanted to be free of that service! But the Father's will was that his Son – the perfect Son who had lived perfectly under all the laws of God – would be arrested, beaten, scourged, mocked, and crucified for the sin of the world. He had to complete that service, which his Father had ordained for him. And only after that had been completed and he had risen victoriously from the dead would he ascend to his rightful place of honor and glory at the right hand of God the Father to receive all praise as the Savior of the world! **Service completed!**

We learn the same for our lives today. It is true that we do not know the length of service that any child of God will have in this life. For some, it is 70 years, or 80, if we have the strength. For others it may be 40 or 50. For others, it may be 18 or 20. And for little ones, the plan of God might be that they only have a few years or less to serve him with their Christian life. Yet what is the lesson that all children of God learn from Elijah? **We depart this life when our service is complete. And until that day, keep serving.**

What acts of service has God put in front of you?

- Acts of service to your family – As a father? A mother? A child? A

grandparent? A relative? If you are still here, you have acts of service to do.

- Acts of service in your profession – As a student? A builder? An executive? A designer? A clerk? A cook? You still have acts of service to do.
- Acts of service in your church – A musician? A fixer? A lay leader? A teacher? An overseer and officer? A giver? A witnesser? A food and fellowship person? You still have acts of service to do, prompted by the love of your Savior who served you!

As Elijah did long ago, many people today ask the question, “Why am I still here?” The answer is that there are still acts of service that the Lord has for you to do in his world. **A child of God will depart this life when their service is completed.**

2. In regard to our influence, encouragement given!

For our second lesson, it would be good to re-read some of our text: *“When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, ‘Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel.’ But Elisha said, ‘As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.’ So they went down to Bethel. The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, ‘Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?’ ‘Yes, I know,’ Elisha replied, ‘but do not speak of it.’ Then Elijah said to him, ‘Stay here, Elisha; the LORD has sent me to Jericho.’ And he replied, ‘As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.’ So they went to Jericho.”*

What was Elijah doing as he and Elisha went from place to place in this account? What did Gilgal, Bethel, and Jericho have in common? Perhaps some of you know from your Old Testament reading that the prophet Samuel had started what we might call “schools of the prophets” during his time. These places served to educate men to publicly serve the Lord by

teaching them about music and the Scriptures. The schools of the prophets were located at Gilgal, Bethel, and Jericho. As Elijah – the preeminent prophet of his day – was aware of his imminent departure, **he undoubtedly was going from school to school to encourage these young prophets before he would be gone.** He was undoubtedly concerned with the need for the message of the Lord to continue to be proclaimed after him.

Another detail we see is in the interaction of Elijah and his assistant Elisha, who would soon be the successor. Elijah allowed him to accompany him closely as he made his farewell swing through the land. Don’t you think it might have been a desire of his to be alone at this time? Yet he let Elisha come. And we read about their final conversation, *“When they had crossed (the Jordan River), Elijah said to Elisha, ‘Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?’ ‘Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,’ Elisha replied. ‘You have asked a difficult thing,’ Elijah said, ‘yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours-- otherwise not.’”*

Do you see the concern and love that Elijah had for his younger partner? Elisha requested that he receive a double portion of Elijah’s spirit. The son in a father’s family who was the oldest would receive double what the other sons received. Elisha was asking that he become the heir to Elijah’s ministry as a powerful prophet of the Lord. Elijah left this request in the hands of God, dependent on whether Elisha would see him taken from the world.

Why would Elijah feel the need for such encouragement to be given? It was not because of his own importance or his legacy. It was because of the eternal message of the promised Messiah. The One who was to come into the world would be the Savior promised after the first sin was committed. That message needed to be proclaimed to the next generation and the one after that!

We see much the same in the ministry of Christ before he ascended. Remember his encouragement to his disciples in the Upper Room before he was arrested? Remember the

heartfelt high priestly prayer that he prayed for them and for all believers to come? And after he rose from the dead, we hear that Christ didn't visibly show himself to his enemies or all the people anymore. He only came to his own to instruct them and encourage them, as we learned in Bible class during the past weeks with "The Road to Emmaus."

This is the second lesson we learn today. There are people around us that we need to encourage before we leave this world. Whom are you in a position to encourage? A spouse? A relative who is weak? Your children? Your longtime friend? Beloved friends at work? Of course, the answer is all of the above, and especially, we would add, those in your church who will be continuing the work and mission of God's people. Use your words and your acts of faith to encourage others. **As a believer in Jesus realizes their time on earth may be coming to an end, how important it is to give such encouragement to those who will be left behind!**

3. In regard to manner, victorious!

For our last lesson in Elijah's departure, we read, *"As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, 'My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!' And Elisha saw him no more."*

That's the way to go! What a remarkable exit this was that God granted to Elijah. Elijah left this world without experiencing death. Only one other individual was allowed that privilege, the believer Enoch in Genesis 6. In this account, we hear that a chariot and horses of fire appeared. It's interesting that a few chapters later Elisha saw flaming horses and chariots again. In 2 Kings 6 when Israel was surrounded by the enemy, Elisha asked God to show his servant a supernatural view of the angels who were present to protect them. It says they *"saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around."* God sent heavenly angels to usher Elijah to his heavenly home,

brought there by a whirlwind sent to do God's bidding. **We see the victorious end of the life of a believer who is being escorted to heavenly glory!**

We see similar things in the ascension of Christ today. His end would not be his body lying lifeless and speared. He would not remain in the tomb. He rose victoriously to return victoriously to heaven. **We heard in the Gospel today how he victoriously rose from the earth, holding up his outstretched hands in blessing over his disciples. What a way to go!**

Our third lesson today is that this is how a child of God departs this life also. Victoriously! With angels as escorts, souls ascend to the Lord who made them and saved them. They go to heaven! To eternal glory!

Yet it may not always seem that way, right? After all, we have these "jars of clay" that break. We finish our years *"with a moan."* Many of you have been in a bleak, white hospital room when death is imminent. Or you have been in the home of a sick loved one who will not be getting better in this life. You may have been at the bedside of a loved one who has suffered a long time, and weakness and fear try to fill the room. The departure does not seem to be too victorious. It is due to the presence of sin and death in our world that has ruined our once-blessed paradise.

At a time like that, remember how God opened Elisha's eyes to see the departure of Elijah. As a child of God departs now, what would you see? Suddenly you would see chariots and horses of fire coming into that room. You would see heavenly splendor and the angels of God triumphantly escorting your loved one to the mansions of heaven. This would be a sight to thrill us and fill our hearts with awe and wonder. It would leave us saying with the Apostle Paul, *"Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"* **A child of God departs this life victoriously!**

Finally, we could close by asking the question, "What would Elijah's epitaph have been, if he had suffered physical death and had required a grave?" The meaning of his name

would have been a good one. "Elijah" means "My God is the Lord." That would have been a good epitaph for him, and would be a good epitaph for every child of God!

May God teach us lasting lessons in this account! **A child of God departs this life:**

- 1. With service completed**
- 2. With encouragement given**
- 3. Victoriously!**

May God help us to be prepared and serving until the time comes for us to pass from this life. And one day may he bring us victoriously to the heavenly home he has prepared for us! Amen.