

2 Kings 2:1-18

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[0 : 00] The Bible tells us that there were two people in the Old Testament who did not die. There's first of all Enoch. We read about him at the very beginning of Genesis.

And all we read is that he did not, he walked with God and God took him. That's all we know. The other one, of course, was Elijah.

Elijah did not die a normal death, but rather was taken up straight by God to heaven.

Elijah was a prophet. We mentioned him last week as one of the two great prophets that lived round about the same time. Elijah just preceded Elisha and lived at the time of Ahab and Jezebel and had a peculiar ministry amongst the people of Israel.

But we not only get to find out about his life, we get to find out exactly in detail of how God uniquely removed him from this world.

[1 : 04] He didn't die. There was no body to bury. He took him, God took him in a chariot of fire, in a whirlwind, straight to heaven.

I'm not asking us to understand it. I'm not sure if I understand it myself. But we should note, of course, how unique this was. And none of us should expect the end of our life to be as Elijah's was. Nonetheless, despite the uniqueness of the end of Elijah's life, there is something remarkably similar about it to the death of every Christian.

In fact, the only difference between Elijah's end, if you want to call it an end, and our end is that whereas we will leave a body to be buried, Elijah's, he was taken to heaven, body and soul.

That's the only difference. In every other respect, his passing is exactly the same as the passing of every believer. And we rejoice today that despite the sadness of death, that we can lay hold on the promise that God makes to all of his people, that life does not end at death.

[2 : 31] In fact, Jesus expressly puts it this way. He says, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.

And he who lives and believes in me shall never die. We'll look at that later on, that promise later on. But let's lay hold upon that, because that is a certainty that we can all lay hold of today.

It's a certainty that applies when a loved one is taken from us and goes to be with the Lord. And it is a certainty that we can look forward to, even despite the horror of death.

So I want us to just look at how this chapter provides for us a picture of the death of every Christian. First of all, the first thing that strikes me is that Elijah knew that he was going to die that day. Now, we don't know when exactly we will die, but we know that we are going to die.

[3 : 39] And that's because the Bible tells us that our death is planned by God. God knows the day of our death just the same way as he knew and planned the day of our birth.

God is on the throne. He is sovereign. And none of us will reach the end until the very moment that God determines. Now, that doesn't give us a room for complacency.

He doesn't give us an excuse to be careless. And neither does it mean that we can dismiss medicine or every attempt that we make, rightly, to preserve life.

Of course we do. Nonetheless, we know that God is on the throne. And God has determined the very moment that we will leave this world.

I find that tremendously comforting. During my ministry, I've often come into contact with families who agonize over the what-ifs.

[4 : 42] What if I had done this? What if I had done that? Could I have done something to prevent this? A little bit like Martha. You remember when Jesus arrived after their brother had died.

And she said, Lord, if you had been here, if you had only been here. But it wasn't in the plan of God. And it's the same with families who agonize over the what-ifs.

God has determined the day of our death just the same as he has determined the day of our lives. The day that we were born into this world.

So let's take comfort in that. By all means, let us make every effort to bring healing by the use of medicine and hospitals and all the great facilities that are available to us.

And yet, we know that God is on the throne. Second thing that strikes me about this passage is that Elijah lived in the light of his certain departure.

[5 : 50] He lived that day as if it was his last because he knew that it was his last. Now, none of us know exactly when we are going to leave this world.

You often hear people saying, you should live each day as if it was your last. And that, I can understand why people say that. We ought always to live in the light of the certainty of death. But, to be honest, none of us do live each day as if it was our last. You've got to admit with me, we don't do that. And I don't think it is natural to do that.

I know what they mean when they say that. But, none of us do. Of course, the other extreme is equally unrealistic. And the other extreme, of course, is where people live each day as if they're going to live forever.

And that is a denial of the fact that our lives in this world will come to an end. The Bible, of course, gives the perfect balance.

[7 : 01] We are to enjoy life to the glory of God. Paul says we're to eat and drink and do everything to the glory of God. And I believe that when we do that, we enjoy our lives in this world a whole lot more than those who live for their own pleasures.

But the Bible also reminds us that we are never to lose sight of the certainty of death.

We're to count our days, the psalm says, so that we may apply our hearts to wisdom. And the very best way of doing that is to make sure that we're right with God.

To make sure that we know God. To ask him to be our Lord and our Saviour. To trust in what Jesus has done for us on the cross.

And to come to know him as our Saviour and as our Lord. I can't help noticing also in this little passage.

[8 : 08] How Elisha just wanted to make the most of Elijah. He knew that Elijah was going to be taken away from him. And he wanted to make the most of him. So when Elijah, I guess he wanted to protect Elisha from the sadness that there would be in watching him leaving.

But Elisha was having none of it. He wanted to savour every moment that he had with Elijah.

Because in Elijah, he saw not only a dear friend, but a brother.

Someone who God had given for a particular purpose. And someone through whom God had done great things. So Elisha treasured every moment. We should treasure every moment that we have with each other.

Because we don't know when that change is going to take place. When the unexpected is going to happen.

And when it does happen, we often look back and we think, I wish I'd made more of that occasion. I wish I'd stayed longer. I wish I'd appreciated that person more.

[9 : 15] But now that opportunity has gone. So let's make the most, particularly when it comes to the fellowship of God's people. We only have this opportunity for a short time.

So let's make the most of it. Third thing that strikes me about this lovely passage is that death is a crossing of the Jordan. Did you read with me?

That Elisha and Elijah, they both crossed the river Jordan. That was no coincidence as the last thing that they did before Elijah was taken from this world.

Because the crossing of the Jordan signified that moment in the history of Israel when their journey in the wilderness was over.

And when they now entered into the promise that God had given his people from the time of Abraham, that they would take possession of the land of Canaan.

[10 : 20] And for Christians for centuries, that moment in Israel's history signified the crossing, the leaving behind of all the miseries and the sicknesses and the sadnesses and the disappointments, the tears that this world brings to us.

And the entering in to the promised land. The crossing of the Jordan, it signified the fulfilment of all that God promised to his people.

And it still does to this day. When we read about how Israel crossed the Jordan, we can't help thinking of how we lay hold one day of a promise that God will give his people and that he will most certainly fulfil.

And so for Elijah and for Elisha, it was no coincidence that they crossed the Jordan as the last thing, the last event before Elijah was taken up to heaven.

Fourth thing that strikes me about this is that death is a separation. Verse 11, that when the chariot of fire came, it passed between Elijah who was to be taken away and Elisha who was to remain in the world.

[11 : 50] And I can't help being reminded of the separation that death brings. Of course, that's true for any death in which a person is taken away.

That's true whether you're a believer or not. But it reminds me that for believers, death is real bereavement for those who are left behind.

Even when we know that our loved one is now with the Lord, the fact is that our loved one is no longer with us. And you see that in several places in the Bible.

For example, when Stephen was put to death in Acts chapter 7, there was no question about where he went. In fact, he saw just before he died, he saw heaven opening and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

That was his vision. He knew where he was going and everyone around him. They knew that Stephen would go to be with the Lord.

[13 : 01] And yet we also read that the disciples came and they buried him. And they buried him, we read, with great lamentation, which means with profound sadness because he was no longer with them.

And so while we know that death means eternal life for those who love the Lord, nonetheless, it's still that enemy that separates loved ones.

And there is still that profound grief. And so in the light of that, we have a duty to bring comfort and support to grieving families, to those who are left devastated without their loved ones.

Fifth thing that strikes me about this is that death is simply a transportation to where God is.

Verse 11, Elijah went up to heaven. It's simply a transportation. It's almost as if he gets picked up by the chariot.

[14 : 22] He steps into the chariot and off he goes to heaven. And in a moment in time, he's in a different place altogether. Why do I believe in heaven?

Because the Bible tells me. I believe in heaven for the same reason as I believe in the universe that I see around. The only difference is that while I see the universe around me, I can't see heaven yet. But that shouldn't make any difference to whether I believe in heaven or not. The reason that I believe in this world, in the eyes of the Bible, is because the Bible tells me that it's by faith that we believe that the universe was created by the word of God.

So the visible was created out of what is invisible. Hebrews chapter 11 and verse 3. Why is that so important?

It means that we not only believe in the world that we see around us, we believe why the world exists. Because God created it to exist.

[15 : 38] What's so difficult about believing that in parallel with this universe, that God could create another universe? He'd create another million universes if he wanted to.

So scientifically, I have no problem in believing in the existence and the reality of heaven. Heaven is also where God is.

Now, of course, you could say, well, God is everywhere. He's omnipresent. And yet God has declared himself to dwell in heaven. I don't really know what that means.

I don't know what it means geographically. I don't know what it means scientifically. It's way beyond me, way beyond anyone's understanding. And yet that's what God says.

And when Jesus was ascended to heaven, when he was lifted up, when he left this earth after rising from the dead, he went to a real place. He was still in a real body.

[16 : 40] Elijah was still in his real, albeit glorified and perfected body. He went to a real place. Don't ask me where. I don't believe it's that far away.

I believe it's far nearer than we think. I believe it's almost like going behind a curtain. It's as close as that. But it's a place of unbroken perfection and permanent happiness because it is the place where God is.

And the reason I know that is because what brings us unhappiness in this world is sin. All the misery that sin has created and brought into the human race, all of that will be taken away. And my focus will once again be placed entirely and perfectly in the glory of God. And there will be perfect, unbroken happiness because of that.

That's what we have to look forward to as God's people. The last thing that this great passage reminds me of is that we who remain in this world for a while, it won't be forever, we don't know how long it will be.

[18 : 03] We move on in faith. I am quite sure that Elisha felt completely unhinged when he saw Elijah being taken, knowing that he would never see him again in this world.

Because he had learned to depend upon Elijah. Elijah had been such an institute. He had been a legend. He had so much depended on Elijah. And everything he prophesied came to pass. God used him mightily for his kingdom. Now he was gone. Everything that God did, he did through Elijah.

So it's no wonder that Elisha felt insecure. And there must have been that feeling, is God going to do anything through me?

It's the way we feel about the last generation, isn't it? Because we naturally do look up to the last generation, their wisdom, their experience, their knowledge, their steadfastness, and what God did through them, and the example that they left to us.

[19 : 15] And yet, as Elisha was shortly to find out, the same God, who had done such great things through Elijah, was going to continue to do great things for his people.

There was a future. The great temptation, when we think about the past, and I'm a student of history, so I spend a lot of time reading about what God did in the past.

And the temptation, of course, is to try to kind of take refuge in what God did in the past and think, oh, weren't these great days? As if he wasn't doing anything now.

He is. And he will continue to do things, great things, in the future, because the Bible says that heaven and earth will pass away, but my word will never pass away.

Jesus promises that upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. And so Elisha, when he took up the cloak, and when he struck the water again, what happened?

[20 : 25] The water divided because God, the same God, the God who made the promises, was going to fulfil his promises and continue to do so beyond Elisha's time, beyond Isaiah's time, into the time of Christ, beyond the time of Christ, for the next 2,000 years, into our day, and beyond our day, until every one of his plans comes to pass.

And only then will this world come to an end, and Jesus will return again and take his people with risen, glorified bodies. We must never forget, of course, that when a Christian brother or a Christian sister is taken from us, although we know that that person is with the Lord, we know that there's a not yet, that there's a great day coming.

And it was that day that Paul looked forward to more than anything else, a day when the body that had been buried would rise again. And so, said Paul, we shall forever be with the Lord.

That's the promise that we lay hold on tonight. That's the promise that gives us the comfort in the face of bereavement and sadness. We only have the promise.

We lay hold alone on the word of God and we come to Jesus who is able to bring us to God and who is our only hope this evening.

[22 : 08] Lord our God, we pray that you will bless our thoughts, bless your word to us, bless the rest of this day to us, bring us comfort in time of bereavement, give us that strength to continue in the light of the gospel, to continue to let our light so shine that men and women will see our good works, our lives that are faithful to the Saviour and so that they too may glorify their Father in heaven.

So bless the rest of this evening to us, we pray and draw near to us in our closing singing in Jesus' name. Amen.