

SERMON THOUGHTS ABRIDGED

SERMON: II KINGS 2:9-14
ASCENSION CONFIDENCE -- FOR EARTHLY DESPONDENCE

And so it was, when they had crossed over, that Elijah said to Elisha, "Ask. What may I do for you, before I am taken away from you?" Elisha said, "Please let a double portion of your spirit be upon me." So 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."

Then it happened, as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it, and he cried out, "My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen!" So he saw him no more.

And he took hold of his own clothes and tore them into two pieces. He also took up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood by the bank of the Jordan. Then he took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, and said, "Where is the LORD God of Elijah?" And when he also had struck the water, it was divided this way and that; and Elisha crossed over.

To be left behind is a strange feeling—whether it's accidental, or your own fault, or someone else's. Have you missed your bus, train, or plane? Missed your ride with your friend? Been unable to make a special trip or attend an event with your family? What thoughts fill your heart? --- "Now what??" "Pshaw!" "Bad break." "Did this really happen?" "I hope this turns out ok." "I think I'm going to cry." Hesitancy and despondency.

Picture the disciples on the Mt. of Olives. They saw Jesus, who had been crucified and risen again, definitely taken up into the clouds—gone. He had won the greatest fight ever. He owned the greatest victory ever. He was their Savior from sin and death, He was the Lord of Life. Through Him they had the Father's tenderhearted forgiveness. Now He left them behind! I wonder what sort of thoughts filled their hearts. Fear, doubt, reluctance, disbelief, hesitancy, despondency? Maybe some, maybe all, and likely even more. But words of comfort had been spoken to them. Jesus promised them that the Holy Spirit would come upon them "not many days hence." Plus two angels, dressed in white, assured them that the-same-Jesus would come back. Without all questions answered, with faith in their hearts, the disciples proceeded back to Jerusalem, awaiting the Holy Spirit.

In our text for today, we see an incident somewhat similar. The prophet Elijah was leaving, ascending into heaven—bodily, without death!—and the prophet Elisha was left behind. Let's look at both of them. Elijah had served as prophet during the reign of wicked King Ahab and wicked Queen Jezebel. This queen was not even an Israelite, but a Canaanite, the daughter of a Canaanite king. She worshiped the idol Baal. Ahab dived in head over heels with her. The prophets of the Lord were put to death. However, the Lord kept Elijah safe, even during the three years of drought, which the Lord announced through Elijah, to bring Israel to its knees. As conditions became severe, Ahab agreed to a test with this Elijah whom he despised. All the prophets of Baal would gather together and pray for Baal to light their sacrifice afire. Elijah alone would pray to the Lord to light his sacrifice on fire. Baal did nothing, but the Lord sent fire! Elijah put the prophets of Baal to death. Victory! Jezebel, however, did not take kindly to this extermination of her prophets. She informed Elijah she would kill him. Elijah ran in fear and in despondency--all his work wasted, there was no effect on Jezebel. He gave up; he wanted to die. He was hesitant and despondent. But the Lord had words of encouragement for him. The Lord showed Him that God's Kingdom does not advance with trumpets, and force, and mob popularity. It works in the heart with the quiet voice of the Law and the Gospel. The Law--the unsettling message of death for sin. The Gospel--the comforting message of forgiveness and life through the Promised Jesus. Elijah went back to work.

The prophet Elijah, who had wanted so badly to die, in these words is leaving earth without dying at all! Elijah was talking with Elisha. Elijah was suddenly separated from Elisha by a chariot and horses of fire—symbolic of the Lord who leads and protects His people with forces beyond our control. Then a mighty whirlwind drew Elijah up to the heavens. He who had been so despondent left in victory! Have you ever felt so defeated that you wanted to die? Have you been suicidal? Or have you just wanted to get out of here. "Lord, please take me any way possible—right now would be good!" Defeated. But death for the Christian does not come as defeat! Even if thrown to the lions and devoured by them, death for the Christian is not a defeat, but a victory. Death is not just the last-ditch-defeat-and-departure, a hopeless escape from this world—"You lose." Indeed, with sin held against us, that's what it would be. But with Christ, our death is a day of victory! You may not ascend in victory directly into

heaven like Elijah did, but at death, your soul ascends to the Lord's side in paradise. Victory! Your body sleeps in the grave, to be restored and awakened on the Last Day, re-united with the soul, and then soul and body taken into heaven—ascending in Victory! Jesus' ascension to God's side—mission accomplished!--assures you of it. Jesus said, *"I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto Myself, that where I am, there you may be also"* (John 14:2-3). Thus the hymnwriter wrote, "On Christ's ascension I now build the hope of my ascension" (TLH #216 v.1). Do you feel lost, alone, left behind, or as if left behind—and we all feel that way at times? The Lord is there to comfort you. Think of Jesus' ascension into heaven, and His sitting at God's right hand in victory. The right hand of God is not a location, but a position of honor and power. Jesus at the right hand of God is, ruling the world and watching over the Holy Christian Church, the "Invisible Church" of all believers of all time. He is shepherding you with love, to the end of your life. He will take you from this world when the time is just right—not in defeat, but in victory! He has ascended, and will come back, so that you ascend into heaven as well. Those Christians who are still alive when Christ returns, like Elijah will ascend directly into heaven—no death! Those raised from the dead will ascend, body and soul, with the same victory! In Christ we will leave this world in victory. Jesus has ascended. You will too.

Let's look at the other prophet, Elisha--left behind. He cried out as Elijah was taken up, "My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen!" Seeing Elijah, his master, his teacher, his "father," suddenly taken from him was an emotional moment for him. He calls to Elijah, "My father!" much like the Apostle Paul addressed his student and helper Timothy as "son," his son in the faith. Elisha was left behind. He must have felt lost. How would he function without Elijah? He tore His clothes in grief. How would he carry on? It's true, without the Lord he wouldn't have carried on, but with the Lord's help he would carry on in the work of the kingdom, and mightily so. He had asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit. He saw Elijah depart, which Elijah had said would be the evidence of a Yes answer. Elisha was granted his request. He picked up Elijah's mantle, struck the Jordan with it, just as Elijah himself had done, and the waters parted. The Lord was with Him. By the Spirit of the Lord, Elisha would work mighty miracles, make bitter water sweet, poison stew nutritious, raise a mother's young son back to life, cure Naaman of his leprosy without so much as doing anything. Later when Elisha was dead and decayed, a dead man was hurriedly placed into the same tomb, and contacting the bones of Elisha, came back to life! By the Spirit of God, Elisha had no reason for despondency and hesitancy. God would use him to advance His Kingdom.

The same was true of the disciples on Ascension Day. Mark writes that Jesus instructed the disciples saying, *Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved, but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover. So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen* (Mark 16: 15-20). The Spirit of God came upon the disciples and moved them forward in mighty fashion.

Like Elisha, like the disciples, the same is true for you. No matter how lost and alone you feel, no matter how badly the world is crashing down around you, no matter how cold the icy waters of death feel, the Spirit of the ascended Jesus assures you that you are heavenward bound. Your sins, unintentional and intentional, committed in foolishness or weakness, born in rebellion and stubbornness, have been atoned in the blood of Jesus. Through Christ, you are God's adopted child, His precious lamb. You will ascend into heaven when the time is right. And while you are here, the Kingdom of God keeps advancing even through you. You are specifically a part of its advance. Live your days with confidence. If our nation comes to a dismal end, if dearest earthly possessions suddenly become worthless or are suddenly taken by force, there is no reason to be despondent or hesitant. You are Christ's. You serve in God's special own way as Christ's witness as the Lord enables you. He will give you that which you need to carry on, even in the direst of circumstances. The Kingdom of the Ascended Christ will never stop advancing until He returns and this world comes to its End. He is your confidence and comfort right now. When He returns, He will be your even greater confidence and comfort. You will ascend with Him to the bliss of paradise—a bliss that now you cannot rightly comprehend. In Jesus the ascension is yours, and it is coming! In Him you are not the victim, but the victor!

So be it! Amen!

Pastor Kanzenbach--