“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.” - 2 Kings 2:11

“Chariot of Fire!”
2 Kings 2:1-18

I. Elijah’s ascension to heaven was granted by God:
   1) To validate Elijah’s message and encourage believers (1 Kings 19:18)

   2) To point to the ascension of Jesus (Luke 24:27; Acts 1:9)

   3) To remind us of our own transport to heaven (Luke 16:22)

II. Application: Elijah walked to four towns, each one significant for every true believer. Every believer needs:
   1) Gilgal (1) - a starting place (Joshua 4:19-20)

   2) Bethel (2) - a place of worship and prayer (Genesis 12:8)

   3) Jericho (4) - a place of victory over sin through faith and obedience (Joshua 6)

   4) The Jordan River (7) - the symbolic place of departure from this life to the next (John 5:24; Hebrews 9:27).
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“Chariot of Fire!”
2 Kings 2:1-18
Pastor Ted Gray

Only two people in the history of humanity have passed from this life into the glory of heaven without dying a physical death. The first person was Enoch, and we are told why he had that great privilege. Genesis 5:24 says: “Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.”

How wonderful is that! We would all like to duplicate that walk with God and that ascension into heaven without a physical death. But the only other person in history who was taken to heaven without first dying is Elijah. 2 Kings 2:11: “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.”

Why was Elijah given that great privilege that before only Enoch had experienced? Why was Elijah suddenly brought up into the glory of heaven in this chariot of fire?

**A Vindication and Validation of God’s Word**

One reason: God granted this great blessing to validate Elijah’s message and encourage believers.

A study of Elijah’s life shows that he was straight shooter when it came to the truth about sin, judgment and the need to repent. In 1 Kings 17 we see him stride into the palace of King Ahab and declare that because of Israel’s sin a drought would come on the land for three and a half years. Later we find him on Mount Carmel taunting the priests of Baal and proving to the people of Israel how false and deceptive the priests of Baal were. In 2 Kings 1 we read of how he called down fire from heaven to consume the commanders and their troops who had no respect for God and His Word concerning the imminent death of wicked King Ahaziah.

While we respect and admire his boldness in condemning sin, warning of judgment, and the need to change, others saw him as nothing more than an extremist. Today he would be called a right wing radical fundamentalist - one of those outspoken Christians who is a great danger to society.

Now suppose that at this point Elijah dies. Queen Jezebel, who was still alive, and all of her false prophets, priests of Baal and Asherah, would say, “So much for that right wing radical extremist, Elijah! - He’s dead, gone the way of all the earth!”
But now, with the chariot of fire taking Elijah to glory, God had validated all that Elijah had prophesied. It must have sent shivers down the spine even of someone has hardened and sinful as Jezebel to hear that Elijah had been transported to heaven without a physical death. The company of prophets had searched the hills for his body, - but it was gone; he was gone to glory in a whirlwind, in a chariot of fire. That gave credence, and validated, everything that Elijah had prophesied about sin, judgment and the need to repent.

What an encouragement it was to the believers, - the 7,000 who had never bowed their knees to Baal! Through Elijah’s ascension into heaven they were assured, and we today can be assured, that God’s Word and His people are vindicated, if not in this life, then in the life to come (2 Thessalonians 1:6-7).

A Foreshadow of Jesus’ Ascension

This very unusual chariot ride also points ahead to the ascension of Jesus into heaven. Everything in the Old Testament was written to point us to Christ (Luke 24:27). We see shadows of Him throughout the Old Testament scrolls, - in the bloody sacrifices, in the incense of the temple representing his intercession as the great High Priest, - and even here, in this ascension of Elijah in the whirlwind, we have a shadow pointing to the reality of the ascension of Jesus to His heavenly throne.

Interestingly enough, we find Elijah mentioned along with Moses in Matthew 17. They are both on the Mount of Transfiguration with Christ in all His glory. As Jesus came down from the Mount of Transfiguration He explained to His disciples that He must die. But after His death He would rise from the grave, victorious over sin, Satan and death itself. And He would ascend into heaven in that same way He will return on the last day: Suddenly. Visibly. Physically. This ascension of Jesus, which understandably amazed the disciples so much, is foreshadowed in the remarkable ascension of Elijah into heaven.

A Foreshadow of our Transport to Glory

Elijah’s dramatic exit from this life also reminds us of our own transport to glory. We may find the fiery horses and chariots of fire to be far removed from our every day experiences of both life and death. Yet the imagery of this passage fits in with our transport to heaven, which in the words of Luke 16:22 is accomplished by angels. At the time of physical death, angels transport the soul of the believer to the glory of God.

There are many classes and categories of angels, and some of those categories are described in similar terms as the chariot of fire that took Elijah to glory in the whirlwind. One class of angels, Seraphim, are described as being like fire. Psalm 104:4, “He makes winds His messengers (or angels); flames of fire His servants.”

Cherubim, another category of angels, are often signified by chariots: “He mounted the cherubim, and flew; he soared on the wings of the wind” (Psalm 18:10). “The chariots
of God are tens of thousands; the Lord has come from Sinai into His sanctuary” (Psalm 68:17).

Do you see the correlation? We must die a physical death, unless the Lord returns while we are still living, but when we die physically our soul is taken by angels into glory, and the angels are often described in Scripture in the same way that Elijah’s transport into heaven is described: a whirlwind and a chariot of fire.

**Elijah’s Walk, and Ours**

On his last day of life on this earth, Elijah took quite a walk. Did you notice how he and Elisha walked from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho and to the Jordan River? That’s a distance of about 55 miles. As more than one commentator points out, Elijah was still in good shape; it’s not as though he was taken home in a chariot of fire because he was old and weak and couldn’t get around anymore!

However, not only do we see Elijah’s physical shape to walk to those locations, more importantly, each one of those places had spiritual significance. They had spiritual significance to the people of Israel of that day, to Elijah who had faithfully prophesied to Israel, and those four locations should have spiritual significance to you and to me.

**Gilgal**

The first town we read about is Gilgal, there in verse 1. Gilgal was significant because Gilgal is the place where Israel started their journey into the promised land of Canaan. We read about it in Joshua 4:19-20, “On the tenth day of the first month the people went up from the Jordan and camped at Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho. And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan.”

Gilgal was the place where the Israelites reflected on what the Lord had done for them, and they committed themselves to Him. Every believer needs that Gilgal, that starting point where we reflect on what God has done in our lives and commit our lives to Him.

Some people have a very dramatic “Gilgal” experience, much like Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, they have a dramatic conversion where they can point to an incident and name a date and say: “That’s when I was saved. That’s when I put my faith in Jesus Christ alone.”

Many others, myself included, can’t point to one specific incident or date and say: “That’s my Gilgal, - that’s when, by God’s grace and Spirit’s work, I committed my life to Him.” Most of us grew up in Christian homes, and many of us are like Timothy who is described in 2 Timothy 3:15 as knowing Christ, from the Scriptures, since infancy.
For you young people your Gilgal may be your profession of faith, where you, like Israel of old, reflect back on what God has done and then you make a conscious decision - and a public profession - of faith in Him.

Regardless of when it comes about, each individual needs a starting point. You will never be ushered into heaven on the coattails of your Dad or your Mom or anyone else. You won’t be ushered into heaven because you were baptized or took the Lord’s Supper. You won’t reach the glorious gates of righteousness because you have your church membership certificate.

All those things are important. But what transports us from this life to glory is faith in Jesus Christ alone, and Gilgal represents that starting point, - that place where each one can say, “By God’s grace, I see God’s work in my life and I will follow Him, living by faith in His Son, all the days of my life.”

Bethel

From Gilgal Elijah and Elisha walked on to Bethel (Verse 2). Bethel has a long history in Scripture, in fact Bethel is mentioned more often in the Bible than any other town except Jerusalem. We first read of Bethel in Genesis 12:8 as it describes Abraham leaving the Ur of the Chaldees and making his way to Canaan. He stops for the night and makes an altar to the Lord.

Later Jacob had his vision of the stairway to heaven at Bethel. The name “Bethel” means “house of God.” Throughout Scripture Bethel is associated with God’s house; it is a place of worship and prayer, - even though it was later corrupted by Israel in her apostasy under Jeroboam son of Nebat.

How crucial that we have our Bethel! How crucial that we take seriously and joyfully the need to be a part of the body of Christ, to be in “Bethel,” the true church of Jesus Christ, the holy universal Christian Church. Cyprian put it well when he observed that if God is your Father, then the church will be your Mother. If you and I truly belong to Christ, the Bridegroom, then we will be a willing and active member of His Bride, His body, the true church.

Jericho

In verse 4 we find Elijah and Elisha going on to Jericho. Jericho is significant because it represents a place of victory over sin and growth in grace through faith and obedience in Christ as we fight the world, the flesh and the devil.

Jericho represents the worldliness that can consume us. Jericho was a city of sin, its best known resident a woman of ill-repute, Rahab the prostitute, who, by God’s grace, had her “Gilgal” experience and came to salvation though faith in the Messiah, Jesus Christ. But
although Rahab was saved, the city of Jericho fell in response to Israel’s obedience and faith in the Lord.

Each one of us has our share of “Jerichos.” It may be a certain sin that makes an inroad into our life. Our Jericho can be fueled by lust, or greed, or power. Or our Jericho may be material goods that God has given us and we have become enamored with the gift instead of the Giver.

We overcome our “Jerichos” the same way Israel did: By faith in the Lord and obedience to His commands. All of you children know how the walls of Jericho fell.... Those walls fell, not because Israel was so strong, but because they placed their faith in Almighty God and obeyed His commands to them.

Whatever the “Jericho” might be, part of living the Christian life is having victory over that “Jericho” - over that sinful habit or practice. That victory is fully gained in the life to come. As the Heidelberg Catechism points out, in Lord’s Day 44, “in this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience.” Nevertheless, an important part of our sanctification is seeing that by God’s grace, through faith and in obedience to Him, we conquer more and more of the sinful “Jerichos” in our lives as we walk ever closer to our Lord.

The Jordan River

In verse 7 we read how Elijah and Elisha came to the Jordan River. The Jordan River throughout Scripture represents leaving this life for the heavenly Canaan, crossing over to the other side - to glory for the believer.

Unless Jesus returns in our life time we, too, will come to the River Jordan, “For it is appointed unto man to die once,” Hebrews 9:27 declares, “and then to face the judgment.”

But the same Scripture also assures us (Romans 8:1) that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ.” Jesus Himself says, “I tell you the truth, whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24).

We have only scratched the surface of this chapter. Much more could be said, perhaps about the faithfulness of Elisha who would not leave Elijah’s side. Or the company of prophets, - the whole concept that Elijah had trained others to carry on the Word of God. Or the faithfulness of God in providing a successor to Elijah so that His Word would continue to go forth even after Elijah’s passing.

But by scratching the surface of the deep and wondrous mine of God’s Word may we be greatly encouraged. May we also walk faithfully from Gilgal to Bethel and on to Jericho,
so that we will be confident and unashamed when we come to the River Jordan, and enter into the glory that awaits all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ with a saving faith. Amen.