

It Is Glorious When a Believer Leaves This World!

Isn't this story from 2 Kings amazing? I mean a chariot of fire and a whirlwind whisking someone to heaven. If that happened at every one of our funerals, we would be the most popular church in town, in the state. We would have a waiting list of people wishing to join our congregation. Who wouldn't want to see that? Who wouldn't want to close their eyes in death knowing this will happen to them?

Well, it does happen. The Scriptures are clear. In the story of the rich man and poor Lazarus, we are told that Lazarus died and angels carried his soul into heaven. In 1 Thessalonians, we are told, Christ returns and gives the command and his angels scour the earth for every dead believer like kids on an Easter egg hunt and carry their bodies to heaven. It happens whether we see it or not. Truly it is glorious when a believer leaves this world.

I. We will leave this world.

It was my confirmation party. My Uncle Henry was there. He was a fruit farmer in Michigan. Before the party he had just attended the visitation of a farmer friend who died after months of cancer. I remember distinctly my Uncle Henry saying, "I hope I don't die like that." The very next day he was killed when he was thrown from his tractor into a mower he was pulling behind. It was instantaneous. I suppose you can say he got his wish. The truth is we will leave this world. It could be after many years or a few. It could be expected like after a long illness or suddenly like in an accident.

Elijah knew he was going to leave this world, and I am not talking about the diagnosis from some doctor. Somehow God let it be known to him that this day is the day he will leave. So, he took Elisha on a farewell tour of the three schools of prophets in existence at that time. God had many prophets then, and they studied at these schools like our pastors and teacher study at Martin Luther College or Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

"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."

Elijah knew he was leaving. And so did Elisha. At every school the prophets came up to Elisha and told him that today Elijah was leaving. You can sense that Elisha didn't want to hear it. ***"I know, but do not speak of it."***

Prophets are speaking to you today. They are in the Old and New Testaments. And what is it they tell us? One day you and your loved ones will leave this world. The prophets from this pulpit are also saying the same thing. Even insurance companies are telling you that.

You know that. But do we act like it? We should. Of course, we can't put a hold on our lives. It is not wrong to continue to plan for tomorrow and the future. We can't assume we will never do these things, but we also can't assume that we will. So, it is good we plan today for the day we leave. I know a number of you have already made out your wills and funeral arrangements for that day.

So, you get your papers in order. Is that all? Hardly. Knowing the day will come should also move us work while it is day, to spend more time with God and his Word. You don't have to visit the schools for the prophets, but you can spend time with the prophets. Maybe it is time to start up those devotions with the family so that they are ready, too. And don't forget yourself. Sunday morning comes. Do I go and hear how I am going to heaven because of Jesus, maybe receive Communion as proof that I am forgiven and heaven bound, or do I sit around and search the internet?

Some survey about people who don't like to go to church complain that church talks too much about heaven. Is that possible? No. I mean, isn't that what it is all about? We are not planning for eighty or ninety years of life. We are planning for eternity.

And we need each other until that day. Elijah gave Elisha three chances to stay behind. But Elisha refused to leave Elijah alone. What a beautiful picture. It is good to be with loved ones. What encouragement it is to tell great great-grandma that she will soon be in heaven. She needs to hear that. You know her mind and thoughts will be racing over what she didn't do in her life time or feeling guilty of something she wishes she had done better. What comfort for her to hear that God forgives her. It is all right to leave. It is glorious for the believer to leave this world. Imagine angels carrying you to heaven.

And that is why we teach this to our kids. I tried to teach my kids basics like how to drive, how to do this, how to do that. We tried to prepare them for life on their own. Good. It would be wrong of us, wouldn't it, if we didn't teach them about Christ or heaven, if we left them completely unprepared for that.

II. We will be in heaven.

So, we are leaving this world. But for where? ***“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.”***

Here is a trivia question. Was Elijah carried up to heaven in a fiery chariot? Wrong. He wasn't. The fiery chariot and horses actually got between Elisha and Elijah, and he was carried away in a whirlwind. But where? We have been speaking pretty boldly about being with God forever in heaven. How can we be so sure? Well, go back to gospel reading earlier.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday as we celebrate the moment Jesus let his godly glory shine. We need to see that. Over the next few months we will Jesus lose popularity and face death threats. We will watch him betrayed, beaten cruelly, and crucified. So we don't think that this is just another case of a hate crime, Jesus lets us see him as true God so we understand that no mere man is going to suffer all of this. This is God, the Son of God, who is going to suffer this to save us.

And he was not alone. Both Elijah and Moses appeared with him. Don't you find that interesting? I mean we know Elijah never tasted death. He skipped it. Moses, however, did die. Yet, we find both talking to Jesus. I use to think that Elijah was lucky. He never had to experience death. But seeing those two with Jesus tells us something. It doesn't matter if you taste death or not. What follows is the same joy, the same relief, the same glory.

And we know it is heaven where we are going. The three of them, Moses, Elijah and Jesus were talking about his “departure.” What does that mean? It could be the fact that he will die and leave. Or it could include his resurrection when he will leave the grave. Maybe it includes his Ascension as he leaves this world. I am convinced it is all of it including his return when he comes to take us where? Heaven.

We can be sure of this because of his departure. In the next few months Jesus will die on the cross. He will do that for us. My two boys are still in college. Thankfully they are still covered by my medical insurance. That means if something happens, they are covered. And if something happens to me, I am covered. Jesus covers us. If God should ask why he should let sinners like you and me into heaven, what could we say? We tried isn't good enough. We are better isn't good enough. Because of Jesus? That's why. His innocent death on the cross covers over our guilty lives of sin. Elijah committed sins, many of them, yet he could be with Jesus and talk with him because of Jesus. The same with Moses. The same with every believer. Yet look at them standing and talking with Jesus in his glory.

This is what makes the departure or death of a believer glorious. We don't get what we deserve. Instead we share in the glory of Christ himself because of the cross. It makes is much easier when a loved one dies. But it still hurts, doesn't it. Look at Elisha. He didn't want Elijah to go. He stuck close to him enjoying every second he had with him. When Elijah left, Elisha talked about the chariots and horsemen of Israel. He was not referring to the fiery chariot and horses that came between him and Elijah. That phrase, chariots and horsemen of Israel, was a nickname for Elijah. It showed how strong and important Elijah was. He was like an army of chariots for Israel. If you would read on, you will hear that he tore his robe, a sign of mourning. Even after seeing him carried up to heaven in a whirlwind, he still felt sadness.

That is why we still need Transfiguration. That is why we need to read this text many times. It always hurts when loved ones leave this world. Don't apologize for that. But seeing Elijah whisked up to heaven, seeing Jesus in his glory talking about his mission on earth including the cross, forgiveness, resurrection and so on, seeing how glorious God has made death for the believer, that gives us one more emotion, joy. We still hurt, but we are also happy. The shame of death has been countered by the glory of Christ and the resurrection.

Now, are you ready for Lent? Are you ready to follow Christ on that road to his departure? Your departure? Amen.