

It's good to be there

2 Kings 2:1-12

"I just want to go to heaven. I want to be done here, and I want to go there. Let me die in peace, Lord, or come back now, Lord Jesus, and take me to heaven." I think every Christian gets to that point at one time or another in life. Most likely it happens when the present is especially painful or the near horizon looks horrible. All options look bad, and so we tell ourselves, "I just want to go to heaven," and we even ask our Lord, "Please take me to heaven." Is that a good thing to tell ourselves? Is that a good thing to ask of our Lord?

Elijah the prophet reached that point at least once in his life. As far as Elijah could see, the present seemed horrible and the future seemed worse. The man ruling in Israel was King Ahab, certainly a top contender for the title of Israel's most wicked king ever. Probably the only person worse in Israel was Ahab's wife, Jezebel, a thoroughly heathen woman who took special delight in murdering the Lord's prophets. Both Ahab and Jezebel wanted Elijah dead. Elijah ran for his life. Told his Lord, "I've had enough, Take my life." Ran further and further away from Israel for 40 days and 40 nights and ended up 250 miles south of where he started. Popped himself into a cave, and that was that. As far as Elijah was concerned, Elijah was done. When the Lord found him and asked him what he was doing there, Elijah said, "I have been zealous for the Lord. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." That's when the Lord showed Elijah a rock-shattering wind, a shaking earthquake, a blazing fire, and a gentle whisper. The Lord was not in the first three, but he was in the gentle whisper. The Lord repeated his question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah repeated his answer: "I have been zealous for the Lord. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." Without saying anything else, the Lord gave Elijah work to do. "Anoint a new king over Israel...Anoint Elisha to be the next prophet after you." You see, the Lord didn't want Elijah dead. The Lord wanted Elijah alive, to continue serving as prophet 250 miles north back in Israel and to train a new man who would continue as prophet after it was Elijah's time to go. So that's what Elijah did.

We have a much different scene before us in today's Old Testament lection. In 2 Kings chapter 2, now it is Elijah's time to go. Elijah knows it. Elisha knows it. The young seminarians being trained in Elijah's prophetic schools know it. We don't know exactly how they came to know this, but they do. It's time for Elijah to go from here to there. The Bible's account of it is so very human. Elijah needs to visit the prophetic schools at Bethel and Jericho one last time. Before traveling to each place, Elijah tells Elisha to stay behind. But a deep bond of love and respect has developed between them, and there's no way Elisha is going to let Elijah out of his sight. Not today. Elisha affirms it to his mentor and his master with an oath: *"As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you."* In both places, at Bethel and Jericho, the young sons of the prophets ask Elisha a painful question: *"Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?"* Elisha gives the same short answer in both places: "Yes, I know. Now be quiet." As if to say, "I know my master's leaving, but I don't want to talk about it." The sun keeps streaking toward the west, and Elijah's departure is at hand. The two men get to the Jordan, and Elijah, who did many miracles, including raising the dead, does his last one. He rolls up his cloak, slaps the river, and it divides, leaving a dry path for them to walk on, right through the middle of the riverbed. In his final conversation with Elisha, Elijah asks, *"What can I do for you before I am taken from you?"* *"Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,"* Elisha replies. A double portion in Israel was the rightful inheritance of the oldest son. So essentially Elisha asks that he be Elijah's successor and that he be equipped with everything necessary to be the Lord's prophet. It's a hard thing to ask for, because a role as prophet is not Elijah's to give, nor is Elijah able to give the gifts necessary for the task. Those things must come from God. Yet Elijah assures Elisha, *"If you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise not."*

I don't know that either man had any idea how Elijah was going to be taken. I mean, if I had been there, I would have assumed that Elijah was going to die there by the Jordan River, just like Moses had once climbed the mountain just to the east of the Jordan to die and to be buried nearby in a place known only to God. But God had other plans. There are only two men in the Bible, and only two men in the history of the world, who never died, and Jesus was not one of them. One was Enoch, whom God just took away in Genesis chapter five. The second was Elijah. Wow! Chariots of fire! Horses of fire! They come out of nowhere and create space between the two, putting Elijah over there and leaving Elisha over here. A whirlwind, a powerful storm wind, suddenly brews up and carries Elijah up into the sky and out of sight. Elisha's reaction to all of this? *"My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!"* He seems to be referring to Elijah, a great prophet, who was such a dynamic strength and force in the kingdom of Israel. *And Elisha saw him no more.* Suddenly Elijah was not here anymore. He was there in heaven.

Why such a dramatic departure without even dying? Why the chariots of fire and the horses and the whirlwind for Elijah? Well, Elisha needed to learn something by sight, and we need to learn something by faith. There is a there. As

surely as there is a here, that you can see and touch, there is a there, that you can also see and touch, just not yet. There really is a heaven, a definite place where believers in the Savior go after this life. We believe from the Bible that our souls go there when our body dies. To confirm our faith in that fact, God took Elijah there both body and soul. And heaven isn't so far away. It's not necessarily millions and billions of miles away beyond the farthest stars that God made. Heaven is just a moment away, a brief whirlwind ride to there from what we now know and experience here. And it's good to be there. It really is good to be there.

Elisha was left here. The chariots and horses of fire were gone. The whirlwind was gone. Elijah was gone. But as Elisha left the scene by himself, sad as he was from having to part with his dear predecessor, he found that his final request of Elijah was granted. He had seen Elijah go. And now he saw Elijah's cloak fallen on the ground. The prophet's large, wide outer garment didn't make the trip there. It stayed here for Elisha. Elisha picked it up, went to the edge of the Jordan River, and slapped the water with it like Elijah had done only minutes before. The waters divided again, and Elisha went over on dry land, the same way he came. Elisha had work to do for the Lord. And to do his work properly here, he needed to ever keep in mind how good it is to be there.

The Son of God was from there, but he came here and so also became the Son of Man. For the disciples who gathered around Jesus Christ to hear him preach and teach, there was no question that Jesus is a man. They could see that. They needed to learn that Jesus is God. They saw that too. They got glimpses of his being God especially through the many miracles that Jesus did—healing sickness and disease, calming the storm, driving out demons, even raising the dead. People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said of Jesus. But of all the people and all the disciples in their day, only three, Peter, James, and John, got a chance to see what Jesus really looks like over there. His bright, blazing glory as God.

The Transfiguration is such a fascinating event. Just think what happened there. You have the intersection of the Bible's whole Old Testament with the Bible's whole New Testament. You have Israel's great prophets of the past, Moses and Elijah, meeting in the same place with the future apostles. Moses, who walked the earth 1400 years before Jesus, and Elijah, who walked the earth 700 years before Jesus, both of them now bright and alert in heavenly glory. Peter, James, and John, on the other hand, sleepy and confused in their mortal flesh. Here and there meet on the mountain, with Jesus in dazzling white standing in between. And think about this. You've got Elijah, a mortal man who never died, talking with the immortal God, who is about to die on a cross. I think that's worth repeating. You've got Elijah, a mortal man who never died, talking with the immortal God, who is about to die on a cross. Mortal means people die. Immortal means God never dies. But Elijah, a mortal man who should have died but never did, stands there next to Jesus, the immortal God-Man who is about to die knowingly and willingly on a cross. The only reason Elijah can be up there is because Jesus suffers and dies down here. The only reason Moses can be up there is because Jesus suffers and dies down here. The only way Peter, James, and John are going to get there is because Jesus suffers and dies down here. God, God also become man is the only one who can take away all human sin and suffer what it rightly deserves. God had to come here to get us there.

"I just want to go to heaven. I want to be done here, and I want to go there." Is that a good thing to tell ourselves? Is that a good thing to ask of our Lord? You know, when Peter was suddenly connected to there, when he got a glimpse of heavenly glory, without really thinking he blurted out on behalf of the three apostles, "Rabbi, it's good for us to be here. Let's put up three tents—one for you, Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." And it was good for Peter, James, and John to be on the mountain. God wanted them to see Jesus' glory as God. God wanted to give them a taste of what it's like over there. But their stay there was temporary. Though Jesus was soon departing for there, God wanted Peter, James, and John here. So they could preach the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of people's sins. So they could bear fruit for God as long as he gave them life and breath down here. To do that work properly, they needed to ever keep in mind how good it is to be there.

If your present is especially painful, or the near horizon looks horrible and all options look bad to you, then today is just for you. You've been given two tastes of there: Elijah going there in a whirlwind, and Elijah appearing with Moses in the glorious presence of Jesus. It's good to want to be there. It is, because it is truly good to be there in heaven with Jesus. But for the time being, will you quibble with your Lord Jesus or complain if he wants you to be here? He will get you there. Right now he has good works planned for us to do here. We don't always know what those good works are going to be. Those good works may be the simplest of daily tasks carried out in love for him who died for us and was raised again. Jesus came here to get us there, and we are going there by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Until we get there, God has things for us to do here. But it's an interesting thing: To properly serve him here, we must always remember it's good to be there. Amen.