

LIFE OF ELIJAH Pt.8 7-18-10

"Gone With the Wind"

(II Kings 1) This is our eighth and final message on the life of the prophet Elijah. We will be looking today at the final two Elijah stories. You will remember that in our last look at Elijah we read of God's curse placed upon wicked king Ahab and his family. That curse began to be fulfilled with the death of Ahab in the previous chapter and continues as we read in II Kings 1 about the son of Ahab whose name was Ahaziah, ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel. **1-2** *Now Moab rebelled against Israel after the death of Ahab. 2 And Ahaziah fell through the lattice in his upper chamber which was in Samaria, and became ill. So he sent messengers and said to them, "Go, inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, whether I will recover from this sickness."* Now whenever you read the word or prefix *Baal*, understand that it means lord or master. The name Baalzebub actually means Lord of the flies and is the name of the idol worshipped in the Philistine city of Ekron. **3-17a**

But the angel of the LORD said to Elijah the Tishbite, "Arise, go up to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria and say to them, 'Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron?'" 4 "Now therefore thus says the LORD, 'You shall not come down from the bed where you have gone up, but you shall surely die.'" Then Elijah departed. 5 When the messengers returned to him he said to them, "Why have you returned?" 6 They said to him, "A man came up to meet us and said to us, 'Go, return to the king who sent you and say to him, "Thus says the LORD, 'Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are sending to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron? Therefore you shall not come down from the bed where you have gone up, but shall surely die.'"" 7 He said to them, "What kind of man was he who came up to meet you and spoke these words to you?" 8 They answered him, "He was a hairy man with a leather girdle bound about his loins." And he said, "It is Elijah the Tishbite." 9 Then the king sent to him a captain of fifty with his fifty. And he went up to him, and behold, he was sitting on the top of the hill. And he said to him, "O man of God, the king says, 'Come down.'" 10 Elijah replied to the captain of fifty, "If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty." Then fire came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty. 11 So he again sent to him another captain of fifty with his fifty. And he said to him, "O man of God, thus says the king, 'Come down quickly.'" 12 Elijah replied to them, "If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty." Then the fire of God came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty. 13 So he again sent the captain of a third fifty with his fifty. When the third captain of fifty went up, he came and bowed down on his knees before Elijah, and begged him and said to him, "O man of God, please let my life and the lives of these fifty servants of yours be precious in your sight. 14 "Behold fire came down from heaven and consumed the first two captains of fifty with their fifties; but now let my life be precious in your sight." 15 The angel of the LORD said to Elijah, "Go down with him; do not be afraid of him." So he arose and went down with him to the king. 16 Then he said to him, "Thus says the LORD, 'Because you have sent messengers to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron--is it because there is no God in Israel to inquire of His word?--therefore you shall not come down from the bed where you have gone up, but shall surely die.'" 17 So Ahaziah died according to the word of the LORD which Elijah had spoken.

Let's begin by looking at the sickness of Ahaziah. And his sickness was two-fold. There was the obvious physical malady which came upon him thru this fall described in verse 2. This sickness was no doubt related to the curse placed upon him by God for the idolatry and greed of his father. But the more important sickness of Ahaziah was the sickness of soul that moved him to seek help from a pagan god named Baalzebub. In the time of his need, when his nation was in turmoil and his health in jeopardy this young king turns not to the Holy One of Israel but to a pagan city and a pagan god for help. You can see from verse 3 how the Lord felt about this. When men, created by God and in his image, turn for aid to anything which opposes Him it is an insult of cosmic proportions. God was so angered by what Ahaziah had done that He assured him of his death.

Now, how might that relate to you and me? In just this way - we must consistently seek counsel and aid from God and stay away from those things which are detestable to our Lord. Now you aren't likely to inquire of Baalzebub but there are numerous modern equivalents. What are some of those modern equivalents? There are ouija boards, and palm readers and psychics or spiritists and then too there are horoscopes. All of these things are demonic in origin and forbidden to the children of light. In Leviticus 20:6 *As for the person who turns to mediums and to spiritists, to play the harlot after them, I will also set My face against that person and will cut him off from among his people.* Deuteronomy 18:9-12 *When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations. 10 "There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, 11 or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. 12 "For whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD; and because of these detestable things the LORD your God will drive them out before you.* God says thru Moses that these practices of pagan nations are detestable to him. Cursed are those who participate in them; so, Christian, you had better stay away. These types of fortune tellers are all over the place in our society. There is Madam this and Madam that who is willing to read your palm or your head or your handwriting for a fee. There are all these psychics who claim to be able to tell us the future - again for a fee. Doesn't that strike you as odd? I mean, if someone could accurately predict the future they certainly wouldn't need my business, not when there is a horse track nearby and a state lottery and a stock market. But some people must be going to these frauds. They do make some kind of living off their evil trade. And then there are horoscopes. Astrology is big business. Newspapers give you your horoscope for the day. It doesn't

mean anything to me, we Gemini are not taken in by this sort of thing, but somebody must be following these things and I'm certain in a group this size that some of you are. Do you see how you are like Ahaziah? This week I visited a website I occasionally check out for laughs and they had a link entitled *horoscope*. So, I went to it and here is what I got. (show slide) I failed their test, but I did repent whereas some of you might have gone on to the full horoscope page. But truly this is a serious problem. Horoscopes are not innocent things. Scripture says they are demonic. You are looking to the demonic for counsel and advice and it is detestable to God. God says to stay away from all such practices. And you don't want to anger the God of heaven. Which brings us to our next point.

Look again at what happened when Ahaziah sent for Elijah. This captain comes to Elijah with his 50 men. 50 men sent after one prophet. The king was clearly afraid of Elijah, but not afraid enough, so Elijah called on God to zap these 50 and God did it. Now that is pretty rough of God isn't it? I mean, how do we justify this? (pause) I don't know. But I don't feel the need to. God had his reasons for what he did and they are sufficient. Probably this was judgment for the mockery of the king and his leaders. They called Elijah *the man of God* in what I expect was a derogatory way. The first captain came and commanded Elijah to come down. He forgot to say the magic word didn't he kids? Hey, boys and girls what should the captain have said? He should have said, "Please, come down." The second captain doesn't learn from this. He is even more demanding. He says, "Come down quickly." He too is taken out. The third captain does it right doesn't he? He comes to Elijah humbly. He says, "please" and begs for mercy. He comes humbly and the Lord is always receptive to humility. God gives grace to the humble and resists the proud. So, after 100 have died Elijah goes to the king as requested. Interesting story - but I find it hard to preach. Is Elijah's example here something you ought to follow? I can't recommend that. The example of the third captain is good. But if there is a lesson to this story it is that you don't tug on Superman's cape, you don't spit into the wind, you don't pull the mask off the ole Lone Ranger and you don't mess around with a prophet of God, with the anointed of the Lord. You treat God's servants with respect.

Alright, are you ready to move on to chapter 2? ("yes please") The chapter that could be entitled, "Gone With the Wind." **1** *And it came about when the LORD was about to take up Elijah by a whirlwind to heaven, that Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal.* This man, Elisha, had become, about 10 years earlier, Elijah's servant and apprentice with a view towards becoming his successor.

2-15

Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here please, for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. 3 Then the sons of the prophets who were at Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, "Do you know that the LORD will take away your master from over you today?" And he said, "Yes, I know; be still." 4 Elijah said to him, "Elisha, please stay here, for the LORD has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. 5 The sons of the prophets who were at Jericho approached Elisha and said to him, "Do you know that the LORD will take away your master from over you today?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be still." 6 Then Elijah said to him, "Please stay here, for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." And he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. 7 Now fifty men of the sons of the prophets went and stood opposite them at a distance, while the two of them stood by the Jordan. 8 Elijah took his mantle and folded it together and struck the waters, and they were divided here and there, so that the two of them crossed over on dry ground. 9 When they had crossed over, Elijah said to Elisha, "Ask what I shall do for you before I am taken from you." And Elisha said, "Please, let a double portion of your spirit be upon me." 10 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." 11 As they were going along and talking, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire which separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven. 12 Elisha saw it and cried out, "My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" And he saw Elijah no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. 13 He also took up the mantle of Elijah that fell from him and returned and stood by the bank of the Jordan. 14 He took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him and struck the waters and said, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" And when he also had struck the waters, they were divided here and there; and Elisha crossed over. 15 Now when the sons of the prophets who were at Jericho opposite him saw him, they said, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha." And they came to meet him and bowed themselves to the ground before him.

What a wonderful story! I recently read a book by the Late Malcolm Forbes entitled, "They Went That a Way!" which is a collection of stories about the death of famous persons. Well, nothing in there compares to this. For our meditations on this account I offer six observations. Observation #1 is that Elijah knew his departure was at hand. That is clear from his behavior and also from his words in verse 9 where he says to Elisha, "Ask what I shall do for you before I am taken from you." Everyone in this story, Elisha, the sons of the prophets, and Elijah himself knew Elijah was about to make his exit. There is no indication that he was ill. He was obviously able to make a long journey. He knew his earthly life was soon to end because God had revealed it. Most of us will never have such a warning. Few there are who can name their final day. I remember the movie *Little Big Man*. Dustin Hoffman was the star and I remember enjoying the film. One part I can recall involved an old Indian chief, played by Chief Dan George, who went to the mountain to die. He took Dustin Hoffman with him for the grand event. When he made it to the spot he had picked out for his final resting place he did some Indian rituals and then laid down expecting to die. But after a few

minutes it started to rain. The old chief got up and said, "Rats, I thought for sure this was my day." And he went back home. That struck me as funny, to think about having your death rained out. Most people don't know when they are going to die. I do because I have an expiration date on my birth certificate, but most people don't know. But let's suppose you did know. Let's suppose, you, like Elijah, were informed by God that tomorrow would be your final day - what would you do? How would you spend your last day or days? If you are a parent, odds are good that you would want to spend time with your children right? That is certainly what I would do. I would cherish those last moments with my children and my wife and I would offer them some important parting words. And that is exactly what we read about Elijah doing. He goes from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho because those are the places where it is believed that Elijah established schools to develop future prophets. These ancient seminarians are called the sons of the prophets. And Elijah took time to visit them before he left. This is a common pattern in the Scripture. Before he dies Jacob took his children aside and spoke personal blessing upon them. David met with Solomon. Jesus who, like Elijah, had no biological children spent his last moments with the disciples. These exhibited a final concern about those left behind to continue their ministry or their family. That is far more important than getting yourself a fantastic last meal.

Observation #2 is that Elisha's insistence on remaining with Elijah was essential for his blessing. Three times in the story Elijah asks Elisha to stay behind; and all three times Elisha says, "I will not leave you." Various reasons have been suggested as to why Elijah asked his friend and servant to stay behind but I believe the primary reason was to test his loyalty. He was not commanding Elisha to stay behind so much as giving him permission - but we see here the commitment of Elisha to his master. Here are two men who exhibit a special and beautiful relationship. Elisha was three things to Elijah. He was first of all his servant. He had humbly embraced a role which many despise - the role of servant to another. But Elisha was more than that wasn't he? He was also Elijah's disciple. He was with him to learn from him with an eye toward continuing his ministry. And I tell you there is no better way to learn a skill or profession than just to be with the expert as he does his thing. All the book learning in the world cannot replace observing and sharing in the work. So, Elisha was an apprentice prophet for these many years. But his relationship with Elijah went yet deeper than that. It is obvious from what we read that these men were friends. They were companions who shared their lives together as they went from place to place. When Elijah was gone the response of Elisha gives this away. He grieved over him not as

a student would his teacher but as a friend and a son. These men of God had tender hearts toward one another.

Our third observation from this story concerns the request of Elisha. In verse 8 the senior prophet looks at his son in the ministry and says a peculiar thing. "*Ask what I shall do for you before I am taken from you.*" It is as though Elijah took from his wallet a blank check and handed it to Elisha. Ask what you will. The only story similar to it in God's word is the offer the Lord made to Solomon when the king requested the gift of wisdom. Remember that? When you get an offer like this, whether it comes from a prophet or a genie or from God himself - your answer reveals a great deal about your character. It tells us what is most important to you, what you value above all else. You honestly put yourself where Elisha was and you might learn something about your own heart. Solomon asked unselfishly for wisdom. Elisha requested a double-portion of Elijah's spirit. I think you have a general idea of what that meant but let me see if I can help define it for you. First of all, what does he mean by a double portion? At first we are prone to think he is asking for double of what Elijah had - with the assumed result that he would be twice the prophet Elijah was. That may be what he meant, but I doubt it. More likely this was Elisha's way of asking for the blessing of the first born. Under Old Testament law the first-born son in a family received from the father a double-portion of the inheritance due to each child. Understood in this light, the request of Elisha is that he would be blessed with double the prophetic gifts and powers of the other sons of Elisha who were the prophets in Israel. That is what double-portion likely means. What does the *spirit of Elijah* mean? When Elisha asks for a double portion of Elijah's spirit he is requesting that he might be granted similar gifts and spiritual powers as those possessed by his spiritual father. He is asking for the special anointing of God to be a superprophet. And so he did obtain. There was one other biblical prophet who also possessed extraordinary gifts like unto Elijah. Can you think of who that was? It was John the Baptist who fulfilled in his person the promise of Elijah's return because he ministered, says Luke, in the spirit and power of Elijah.

So that is what Elisha requested. Think about it. What was the purpose behind such a request? It was thoroughly unselfish wasn't it? Elisha was not asking great things for himself so much as he was asking for that which would be a blessing to others. If we describe his request in New Testament terms we would say that Elisha requested great spiritual gifts. And what are spiritual gifts for? They are to bless others. I Corinthians 14 says that we should earnestly desire spiritual gifts because they serve the whole body of Christ. Spiritual gifts don't make us godly but they do

make us mighty. They make us a blessing to others people. Those who are possessed by the Spirit of Christ Jesus are folks who will share that concern. Their interest will not be self-centered but others-centered. They will concern themselves not with life enrichment but with life impact. I look at Elisha and I'm encouraged to seek after spiritual gifts, to seek after greater abilities as a pastor and teacher and church leader, not for my sake, but in order that I might be a greater blessing to others, in order that I might make a difference. Elisha wanted to be an impact player. So, he didn't ask for money or health or fame but for spiritual power that he could minister effectively in the name of the Lord.

My fourth observation from our story is the unusual departure of Elijah from this life. 11 *As they were going along and talking, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire which separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven.* Now it may be that Elijah died a natural death when he was taken by this fiery chariot or it may be that Elijah became only the second man we know of to be taken to glory without experiencing a natural death. You may recall that in Genesis 5 it speaks of Enoch, the man who walked with God and never died but was simply taken up to be with the Lord. So, it was with Elijah. Verse 11 tells us he was taken by a chariot of fire. It was this story that inspired the famous spiritual *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*. "I looked over Jordan and what did I see? Comin for to carry me home. A band of angels coming after me. Coming for to carry me home. Swing low sweet chariot." The song speaks of our being ushered into glory. But few there are who get this kind of trip. Elijah is taken up into the sky in a whirlwind - an appropriate way for him to go since he lived like a whirlwind. Why did God do this? The text doesn't say but I think he did it to encourage the faithful of Israel and to remind them of the reward that awaits every servant of God. There is a life beyond and, when we remember that, it will transform our lives below.

Observation number five is Elisha's response to Elijah's homegoing. 12 *Elisha saw it and cried out, "My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" And he saw Elijah no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.* This is an expression of grief. The rending of the garment testifies of a tearing of the heart. Elisha is broken-hearted to lose his dearest friend and his teacher. You can see in his language the affection with which he regarded his master. He calls him *My father, my father*. Losing a father figure is a painful thing, but should be a reminder too of how blessed you have been to have such a one in your life. Elijah then utters this strange expression about the chariots of Israel and its horsemen which was a Hebrew idiom

meaning that Elijah was the truest and greatest defense of the nation. He was their protector and without him the nation was much poorer. See here the appropriateness of grief. Believing people do grieve at the loss of a loved one. We don't grieve for those who die in the Lord. There was certainly here nothing to make one feel badly for Elijah. He receives a heavenly escort to an eternity of bliss, but Elisha does grieve for himself and his nation. But his grief is combined with hope isn't it? His grief does not paralyze him. The new chief prophet picks up the mantle, the prophetic cloak and let's read what he does. 13,14 *He also took up the mantle of Elijah that fell from him and returned and stood by the bank of the Jordan. 14 He took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him and struck the waters and said, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" And when he also had struck the waters, they were divided here and there; and Elisha crossed over.* After his expression of grief Elisha picks up right where Elijah left off. Elijah's last miracle became Elisha's first as he parts the Jordan river to rejoin the sons of the prophets. Now this is how I want my children, both physical and spiritual, to react when I die. I hope somebody will cry when I go; I hope there will be some grief, but I hope too that my children will grieve and then get going, more committed than ever to those things I was committed to, more committed than ever to the work of God. The lesson here is that when a loved one passes we grieve and then we get busy honoring them with our activity.

Our sixth and final observation from this story is the inheritance left by Elijah. I remember when my mother turned 70. It was a birthday that sort of shook her up. I gave her a little gift but she sent me, around her birthday, a certificate for some stock which she had owned for 50 years. My mom's instructions were that when she died I was to go into mourning for a week or two but then I was to sell the stock, worth about \$500, and take my family on a vacation. My mother was concerned that if she lived much longer that she wouldn't have anything left to leave me when she passed on and she wanted me at least to have something. I guess when you turn 70 you start thinking about the inheritance you will leave your kids. You need to think of it now. What did Elijah leave? There were no stocks. There was no life insurance. You wonder if it would have paid anything anyway under the circumstances. All we know of is that he left his mantle - just an old tattered cloak - but an old tattered cloak that represented the power of the Creator God. When Elisha picked it up he became a man mighty in spirit. He became the most powerful human being on the face of the earth. And you couldn't buy that mantle for all the yen in China. How about you Mom and Dad? Are you leaving a mantle for your children to pick up? (pause) Or just some unpaid debts? Are you leaving an inheritance of spiritual power for your kids or just a house and some life

insurance? What will you leave behind? I'm told that when John Wesley died he left very little - only his books and an old preacher's robe and a few silver spoons and one other thing what was it? Oh yes, the Methodist church. I tell you what, I'd love to die like Elijah. Skip the hospital and the sickness and the medical bills - just a swift chariot and away you go. That would be nice - but far more important to me is not how I die but what I leave to my children, hopefully a spiritual heritage that will make them rich for time and eternity. And in that way I ask God to give me a mantle of righteousness to pass on to my kids and to my church. Don't wait till you're 70 to think about it. If you would leave a rich inheritance, you plan on it now and you work on it now so that when you go up to glory you will leave behind spiritual treasure. (pause)

Father, as we respond to your word we think first of those caught up in seeking other gods and we understand that may include ourselves. Deliver us Father, however painful it may be, deliver us from the vanity of idolatry, from pouring our lives into what is not real. And give us the spirit of Elijah which is also the Spirit of our Jesus, that we might passionately seek to bless others and have an impact for your name and your fame. Send Mighty Father fresh winds of your Spirit, to blow on us and equip us with every spiritual gift for the building up of your church, and the rescue of many souls. We ask with earnest hope for great power in the Spirit, and great intimacy with you. Teach and convict the moms and dads here esp. to invest in the souls of their children, the souls of our children, that we might become spiritually rich and be able to leave behind a foundation for many godly generations.