I am a little sad as we near the end of our series on Elijah. When I started my study, Elijah was a casual acquaintance. After months of getting to know him, I think of him as a friend.

In 2 Kings 2:1-18, one of the most dramatic, if not the most dramatic, conclusions to anyone’s life is given. In the history of the world, only two people have gone directly to heaven without dying: Enoch (Genesis 5) and Elijah (2 Kings 2).

How else would we expect Elijah’s life to end? He was not likely to be killed by his enemies when he had the power to call down fire from heaven. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine him on a deathbed between clean sheets. He lived an extraordinary life, and it is fitting that he have an extraordinary conclusion to that life.

Let us now consider “How To Spend Your Last Day on Earth.” In 2 Kings 2:1-18, we are told how Elijah spent his.

If you knew without a doubt that tomorrow would be your last day on earth, how would you spend that day? This question has always fascinated people. Stories, books, plays, and movies have explored the emotions and actions of people who knew they had only a few hours to live. If we really knew that we had twenty-four hours before Christ returned and this world would exist no more, my guess is that society would divide into two camps: one group spending the time in penitence and prayer, with every church building packed, and the rest spending the time in riotous living, saying, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1 Corinthians 15:32).

We have to guess how we would react to the knowledge that we had only a short time to live, but we do not have to guess in the case of Elijah. Elijah knew he would be taken from the earth shortly. The chapter begins, “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” (v. 1; emphasis mine). Elijah said to Elisha, “If you see me when I am taken from you, it shall be so for you” (v. 10; emphasis mine).

Let us see how Elijah, fully aware that this was his last day on earth, spent that day. Probably, this is how we, too, should spend our last day on earth.

**Spend Your Last Day Doing God’s Will (2:1, 2)**

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. And 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 (vv. 1, 2).

When we first met Elijah (1 Kings 17:1), he characterized himself as one who “stood before the Lord,” ready to do the Master’s bidding. We have seen Elijah as “the word of the Lord” came to him, and again and again he responded. At the beginning of this story, Elijah was at Gilgal, possibly the famous spot occupied by Joshua, and God spoke again. Elijah said, “The Lord has sent me as far as Bethel.”

“So they [Elijah and Elisha] went down to Bethel” (v. 2c). Here is an interesting detail about this chapter: According to verse 1, all of this was

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1 Another possibility is a lesser-known village by that name in the mountain region.
to lead to Elijah’s being taken up into heaven. We know from verses 8 through 11 that Elijah’s “taking up” occurred east of the Jordan River. However, there is no indication that Elijah knew his final destination. He just went where God told him to go, from Gilgal to Bethel, from Bethel to Jericho, from Jericho across the Jordan River. This is roughly equivalent to going from Fort Worth to Austin via Oklahoma City and Kansas City.\(^2\) God told Elijah to go to Bethel, and he did. God told Elijah to go to Jericho, and he did. God told Elijah to go across the Jordan River, and he did. God told Elijah, “It is time to go to heaven,” and he did. That is the way all of us should be—no arguing, no complaining, just “Whatever You want me to do, Lord, I’ll do. Wherever You want me to go, I’ll go.”

Elijah spent the day doing God’s will. A summary of Elijah’s last day could be borrowed from the words about Enoch: “[Elijah] walked with God; and he was not, for God took him” (Genesis 5:24).

**Spend Your Last Day With Godly Friends (2:1, 2)**

On a recent TV program, one of the main characters said, “I never did care much for running with the pack.” Elijah could identify with that. He was God’s one-man army. He stood alone against the forces of Baal on Mount Carmel. I think he believed in the philosophy “You travel faster if you travel alone.”

Nevertheless, God knew that Elijah needed a friend. When Elijah became discouraged, he said, “I alone am left” (1 Kings 18:22; 11:10, 14). “Not true,” said God. He referred to seven thousand who were still faithful, and He assigned to Elijah a helper named Elisha (1 Kings 19:16-21). From that point, Elisha traveled with Elijah as his servant,\(^3\) but as more than a servant—as his friend. Elijah was probably not an easy man to like or to get to know. Elisha, however, saw something in this man that others could not see, and he counted him as a friend. Elijah’s last day was spent with Elisha at his side.

Those who have been following the text may say, “Wait a minute. Elijah tried to get rid of Elisha.” It is true that Elijah said, “Please stay here [at Gilgal] while I go on.” Elisha replied, “As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you” (v. 2). In fact, this happened at each stop Elijah made in the chapter.

Scholars have struggled with this. What exactly was Elijah trying to accomplish? At first glance, it would seem that Elijah did not want Elisha with him. At the end of the story, however, Elijah told Elisha that he would be rewarded for being there when Elijah left, so it hardly seems as if Elijah was merely trying to get rid of Elisha.

Some have suggested that Elijah hated farewells. My wife, Jo, can identify with that. She has asked more than one person not to come to the airport to say “good-by.” Others suggest that Elijah wanted to spare Elisha the long, tedious trip. That does not quite ring true either.

The best answer I have read is that Elijah was testing Elisha. You may remember a similar test when Naomi told Ruth to stay in her home country (Ruth 1:11-13). “I have no more sons for you,” said Naomi, “and you will just be a stranger in a strange land.” Maybe Elijah’s words were a test to see how strong Elisha’s friendship was. If it was a test, Elisha met it beautifully. When Elijah said, “Stay here, please,” Elisha responded, “As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” I think Elisha was saying, “Whether you want me or not, you may need me. As your friend, I will not leave you.”

Friends are marvelous. “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18). We need people close to us to encourage us to do what is right—friends like Jonathan, who strengthened David’s hand in God (1 Samuel 23:16, literal rendering). Many of us find our closest friends in the Lord in our own families: a godly wife or husband, Christian parents, and Christian children. If we knew that this was our last day on earth, we would want nothing more than to be with those friends, in whose presence it is easier to be good.

**Spend Your Last Day In the Service of God (2:2-5)**

Elijah’s trip was like a child’s treasure hunt: “Go to the cupboard.” When he goes to the

\(^2\) I am taking into consideration the fact that we drive while Elijah walked. Personalize this, using cities your listeners are familiar with.

\(^3\) In 2 Kings 3:11, he is called the one who poured water on Elijah’s hands.
cubby, he finds a note that says, “Go to the cupboard.” When he goes to the closet, he finds a note that says, “Look underneath the bed.” Why this erratic journey? Did it have a purpose, and if so, what was that purpose? The answer seems to be in the verses that follow:

So they went down to Bethel. 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.” And 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. And 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” (vv. 2b-5).

One scholar is convinced that this journey was made because the places visited held special histories and memories. It is certainly true that all three were historical spots: Gilgal (if the one connected with Joshua) was the place of beginnings. Bethel, which means “house of God,” was the place of the altar—the special place to which Abraham and others of his family returned again and again. Jericho was the great place of victory for Joshua and the people of God. However, I doubt that God made Elijah walk all day just to stir up memories. I think the answer is more obvious: These cities were the locations of the schools of the prophets. (The Living Bible paraphrase has the “Bethel Seminary” and the “Jericho Seminary.”) We would call them the “Bethel PTS [Preacher Training School]” and the “Jericho PTS.” Elijah was visiting these schools to give them a final charge—as Moses, Joshua, and Jesus charged their helpers before leaving them.

The expression “sons of the prophets” does not mean that all of these men had fathers who were prophets. “Sons of” is a Hebraism that refers to “partaking of the characteristics of.” These were prophet-trainees. Today, we would call them preacher-trainees.

I wish we knew more about those schools and Elijah’s relationship with them. Similar schools had been started in Samuel’s day, but those in Elijah and Elisha’s day seem more extensive and intensive. One tradition says that Elijah started and directed these schools. This may be true, for Elisha took Elijah’s place, and Elisha was closely associated with these schools (2 Kings 6:1; etc.).

I also wish I knew exactly what happened when Elijah made a final trip to these schools. Each time the sons of the prophets came out and asked Elisha, “Do you know that the Lord will take away your master from over you today?” (“After today Elijah will no longer be over you, guiding you.”) Each time Elisha replied, “Yes, I know; be still.” Perhaps Elisha was saying, “Yes, we all know this is Elijah’s last day, but that is not important. What is important is what he is about to tell you, so be quiet and listen.”

What did Elijah say to those prophet-trainees? His address may have been similar to Moses’ or Joshua’s farewell discourse, or Jesus’ farewell address to His disciples in John 14—16. Perhaps Elijah closed with a prayer like this:

“And I am no more in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to Thee. Holy Father, keep them in Thy name, the name which Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, . . .” (John 17:11).

Whatever the exact purpose of Elijah’s visit to the schools of the prophets and whatever he said, one thing is obvious: Elijah spent his last day on the earth busy in the service of God! Years ago, a preacher in England was asked what he would do if he knew the next day was his last day on the earth. He thought about the question, then answered, “I would rise at 6:00, read and pray for an hour, then have breakfast. Then I would study in the morning, have a light lunch, visit in the afternoon, go to the hospitals, eat dinner, go to midweek service, come home, have a cup of tea, and go to bed.” In other words, he would do what he always did. It was his plan to live every day in the service of the Lord.

All of us need to be busy, but not just busy. We need to be busy in the service of God. God has a plan for our lives. He has told us what He wants us to be doing, and we need to be busy at that.

**Spend Your Last Day Securing Your Influence For Good (2:2-10)**

*Other translations have “hold your peace.” This could mean “Don’t be agitated or upset (because Elijah is leaving).”*
Most individuals, knowing it was their last day on earth, would want to spend a portion of that day tying up loose ends. Among other things, they would try to ensure, as best they could, that any good work they had started would be continued. I think that is what Elijah was doing as he (under the guidance of God) visited the schools of the prophets and finally turned his work over to Elisha.

Then Elijah said to him [Elisha], “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.

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 (vv. 6, 7).

There were at least fifty men in the Jericho “preacher training school”—a good number to carry on the work! These fifty men “stood opposite them at a distance,” watching to see what would happen. Several elevated spots are near Jericho. If they were on one of those elevations, they were several miles away from Elijah and Elisha.

As the countdown to the closing minutes of Elijah’s life continued, an interesting thing happened:

And 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 (v. 8).

Elijah took off his mantle, rolled it like a staff, and struck the water—as Moses had struck the Red Sea long ago—and the waters parted. The two men crossed on dry land as Joshua and his troops had crossed the Jordan River long ago (Joshua 3:17).

Now it came about when they had crossed over, that 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” (v. 9).

When Elisha asked for “a double portion” of Elijah’s spirit, it sounds as if he was asking for twice as much power as Elijah had. From the chapters that follow, however, we do not get the impression that Elisha was twice as powerful as Elijah. Elisha was probably asking to be considered Elijah’s spiritual heir; the eldest son’s inheritance was “a double portion” (Deuteronomy 21:17). Elisha considered Elijah his spiritual father (v. 12).

“And he [Elijah] said, ‘You have asked a hard thing’” (v. 10a). It was “hard” because only God could grant the request; Elijah could not do it personally. There was, however, a condition: “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” (v. 10b). (Since Elisha was with Elijah when he was taken up, Elisha did receive the “double portion” as Elijah’s mantle fell on him.)

Did Elijah fail or succeed in his mission in life? He was sent to eradicate Baalism. Did he accomplish this? Even after Ahab died a shameful death, his son Ahaziah still inquired of Baalzebub. Baal worship continued until chapter 10, when Jehu engineered the massacre of all who worshiped the pagan deity. Did Elijah fail?

No, he did not fail! He succeeded in three ways. (1) He did the will of God to the best of his ability. God asks no more of any man. (I like this sign I saw recently: “God demands our best, not our better than.”)

(2) The worship of Baal was greatly restrained as a result of his efforts. Schools of the prophets of Jehovah in northern Israel would not have been possible before Elijah came on the scene. In chapter 3 we read that although the next king over Israel was wicked, “he put away the sacred pillar of Baal which his father had made” (v. 2).

(3) Above all, he left behind those he had helped to prepare, to carry on his work after he had gone. Without an Elijah, there would have been no Elisha—and probably, there would have been no schools of the prophets.

The influence of Elijah will live until time is no more. When Malachi spoke of one who was coming to prepare the way for the Messiah, he called him “Elijah.” Malachi was referring to

5 The mantle was a long cloak, slung loosely around the shoulders. The Septuagint has “his sheepskin.”
6 Except they were going in the opposite direction.

7 Additional illustrations are given on pages 43 and 44 in the next lesson.
8 One way the influence of Elijah lived on in his own day was a written message, perhaps delivered by Elisha after Elijah’s death (2 Chronicles 21:12). We wish we knew more about this message—the only example of Elijah’s writing down the words of his Master.
Elijah did not go to heaven just because of his activities on his last day, but the activities of his last day enhanced the life he had lived and prepared him for the great scene pictured in the next few verses:

"Then it came about as they [Elijah and Elisha] were going along and talking, . . ." (v. 11a). I like that scene: two friends, walking and talking. The spectacular end to Elijah’s life did not come as he was engaged in one of the dramatic moments of his life or as he was kneeling in prayer, but while he was walking and talking with Elisha. We might want our lives to end while we are worshiping or doing some great work for the Lord, but chances are, death will be more prosaic. (This stresses that we always need to be ready.)

"Behold, there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire which separated the two of them" (v. 11b). Some of the ancient manuscripts have “chariot” (singular); others have “chariots” (plural). This is simply a way of depicting the army of God. In 2 Kings 6:17, when Elisha’s servant’s eyes were opened and he saw the army of God, we read, “He saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.” In that story, the “chariots” were the angels of God.11 In Luke 16:22, when Lazarus died, he “was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s bosom.” That is what happened here. God’s man of fire was ready to leave this earth, and angels came to get him!

"And Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven" (v. 11c). This was not necessarily what we call a tornado, but a whirling, gusting wind. The dust was flying, and up Elijah went!

Activities such as this would be among the most important if we knew tomorrow would be our last day on earth.

**Spend Your Last Day Making Sure You Will Go to Heaven (2:11-18)**

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9Because Elijah was translated to heaven without dying, he is viewed by some Jews as living a mysterious life in heaven, ready always to return to the earth, which they believe he will do before the coming of the Messiah. The Messiah has already come, but this shows how respected Elijah still is.

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11See also Psalms 104:4 where angels are compared to “flaming fire.”
my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen! And he saw him no more” (v. 12a). We would assume that Elisha was referring to the scene before his eyes, until we turn to chapter 13 to read of the death of Elisha and find the same words spoken (v. 14) even though there was no fiery chariot in sight. In chapter 13, the words refer not to God’s heavenly army, but to Elisha himself. In 2:12 they may refer to Elijah rather than to his means of transportation. “The chariots and horse (or horsemen) of Israel” referred to God’s army. Perhaps Elisha was saying, “God’s one-man army is leaving. What shall we do?”

“Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces” (v. 12b). This was a sign of great sorrow. Elisha was shaken.

“He also took up the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and returned and stood by the bank of the Jordan” (v. 13). Was all lost? “And he took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and struck the waters and said, ‘Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?’” (v. 14a). He did not ask, “Where is Elijah?” He knew where Elijah was. The question was, “Where is the God of Elijah? Will God continue to be with us even though Elijah is gone?”

The death of a great warrior of God does not mean God is dead, just that the servant is dead. As long as there are men to pick up the mantle and go on, God can continue to work! “And when he also had struck the waters, they were divided here and there; and Elisha crossed over” (v. 14b). Yes, God was still working. Yes, God was still alive, and He was now active in Elisha. Elijah’s work would continue.

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 (v. 15).

The rest of the story concerns the sons of the prophets trying to find the body of Elijah, which of course they could not (vv. 16-18).

What a magnificent close to a magnificent life!

You are probably thinking, “But that was only for Elijah. Since only two people left this earth without dying, obviously the odds are against me. Such a dramatic event could never be for me.” Interestingly enough, such an experience for you and me is within the realm of possibility—if we are alive when Christ returns, and are ready to go:

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17).

If we are alive when Christ returns, we will be changed; then we will be caught up to meet the Lord, without ever dying. Even if we die first, however, it will still be exciting, as we are raised in our new bodies and are caught up as Elijah was caught up (1 Corinthians 15).

The secret to it all is being ready on our last day on the earth.

CONCLUSION

Let us review the five suggestions on “How To Spend Your Last Day on Earth”: Spend it doing God’s will. Spend it with godly friends. Spend it in the service of God. Spend it making sure your influence for good will live on. Spend it making sure that you will go to heaven.

Someone may say, “We do not know when that last day will be.” That is true (unless a judge tells you). This brings us to the bottom line: Spend every day of your life as though it were your last day on earth. Jesus said, “Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming” (Matthew 24:42).

Are you ready for your Lord’s coming?

VISUAL-AID NOTES

Make a large card with the title of the lesson and cards for each of the main points, for example, “SPEND YOUR LAST DAY DOING GOD’S WILL.” These can be used as key-word cards to be displayed on the pulpit (or held in the hand), or they can be used as a flannelboard presentation. (If you have a computer and a banner program, you may want to make banners of the main points.)

12Some think the horses and chariot(s) were invisible. Even if they were, there is a good chance that Elisha could see them (note 2 Kings 6:16, 17).
LESSON OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION
A. One of the most dramatic conclusions to anyone’s life is found in 2 Kings 2. In the history of the world, only two people have gone directly to heaven without dying: Enoch (Genesis 5) and Elijah (2 Kings 2).
B. We will consider “How To Spend Your Last Day on Earth,” because in 2 Kings 2, we are told how Elijah spent his.

I. SPEND YOUR LAST DAY DOING GOD’S WILL (2:1, 2).
A. Apparently, Elijah did not know his final destination for that day. Instead, as always, he went where God told him to go, to do whatever God wanted him to do. He ended his life as he had lived it—in the center of God’s will.
B. What a wonderful example for us!

II. SPEND YOUR LAST DAY WITH GODLY FRIENDS (2:1, 2).
A. Elijah was “a loner,” but God knew he needed a friend, so He gave him Elisha. Elisha was with him all day.
B. Friends are wonderful (Genesis 2:18; 1 Samuel 23:16). If this were our last day on earth, we would want to spend that day in the company of those we love, especially those who help us to be better Christians.

III. SPEND YOUR LAST DAY IN THE SERVICE OF GOD (2:2-5).
A. Was there a purpose in the erratic journey Elijah made? Probably the purpose was to visit the schools of the prophets in Bethel and Jericho. Whatever his relationship with these schools, and whatever the purpose for his visiting them, Elijah spent his last day in the service of God.
B. We all need to be busy in the service of the Lord.

IV. SPEND YOUR LAST DAY SECURING YOUR INFLUENCE FOR GOOD (2:2-10).
A. As Elijah visited the schools of the prophets and finally turned his work over to Elisha, he (under the guidance of the Lord) was making sure his influence would live on.
1. After Elijah visited the schools, he and Elisha crossed the Jordan.
   a. Elijah’s mantle parted the waters, and they crossed on dry land (v. 8).
   b. Elisha asked for “a double portion” of Elijah’s spirit; this was probably a request to be considered Elijah’s spiritual heir (note Deuteronomy 21:17).
2. Did Elijah fail or succeed in his mission?
   a. He did not eradicate Baalism, but he did not fail.
      1) He did the will of God to the best of his ability. God asks no more.
      2) As a result of his efforts, Baal worship was greatly restrained (note 2 Kings 3:2).
      3) He left behind those he helped to prepare, to carry on his work.
   b. The influence of Elijah will live until time is no more.
B. Each of us will leave this earth someday. We need to consider the effect our leaving will have.

V. SPEND YOUR LAST DAY MAKING SURE YOU WILL GO TO HEAVEN (2:11-18).
A. Elijah’s activities on his last day enhanced his life and prepared him for the climax of his life, when he was caught up in a whirlwind!
B. Such a dramatic conclusion can also be ours if Christ returns before we die—and if we are ready (1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17)! Even if we die first, Christ’s return will still be exciting (1 Corinthians 15)!

CONCLUSION
A. Someone may say, “I do not know when my last day will be.” We should spend every day of our lives as though it were our last day on earth (Matthew 24:42).
B. Are you ready for the Lord’s return—or