

Elijah & Elisha Instruct Us on Memorial Day
Sermon on 2 Kings 2:1-14
Weekend of May 29, 2005
Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI
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Introduction: One Reason We Honor Military People

The Scriptures having Jesus saying: *I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me.* Amen.

Dear fellow Christians—and also fellow Americans:

This weekend, of course, is Memorial Day weekend. Now, what does that mean to you?

There's a good chance that your thoughts usually go something like this, "Ah, good!—a three day weekend, and the beginning of summer.... School is out—or school is out soon. The weather is finally warmer. And summer, and summer vacations, and a little bit of leisure time and all that extra sunlight are on their way."

And maybe, maybe sometimes, we'll then go on to think, "Hmm, what's Memorial Day celebrating anyway?" And then we'll probably remember that Memorial Day is there for us to remember—to remember specifically our military men and women fallen in battle, to remember that our nation's precious freedoms were bought at a price, and then we also go on to remember the loved ones we knew who are now no longer with us.

Theme: Elijah & Elisha Instruct Us on Memorial Day

So, God's specific Word to us today – as we approach Memorial Day – is an ever so fitting one. In it: ELIJAH AND ELISHA INSTRUCT US ON MEMORIAL DAY. In this Word from God, the Lord will acknowledge that (1) WE'RE SAD OVER THE SEPARATION CAUSED BY DEATH—just as Elisha was sad over his separation from Elijah. On the other hand, it's also true that (2) WE'RE GLAD FOR THE ETERNAL LIFE CAUSED BY CHRIST—just as Elijah experienced it. Furthermore and finally, it's also true that (3) WE'RE GLAD FOR THE PRIVILEGE TO CARRY ON CHRIST'S WORK—just as Elisha went on to carry out Elijah's work after him.

Exposition One: Elisha Was Sad over Separation from Elijah

Well, God's Word to us today is Second Kings, chapter two, verses one through fourteen—and it's printed for you in your service folders. As the account opens up, it is about eight and a half centuries before the birth of Christ. It's long after the time of Abraham. It's long after the time of Moses. It's even more than a century after the glory days of David. God's people, at this time, are divided into two kingdoms: the ten tribes of Israel to the north—and the tribe of Judah to the south, still ruled over by a descendent of David. At this point, though, we're in the northern ten tribes of Israel.

Now the northern ten tribes of Israel—these are ruled over by the house of Ahab and Jezebel. They were the wicked king and queen who introduced Israel to the worship of the filthy fertility gods: Baal and Asherah. It was to counter these two that the Lord sent two of his most remarkable prophets—one right after the other. The first was a man named Elijah; the second was his friend and successor, named Elisha.

That's where we pick up the account. And God's holy Word goes as follows: **When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind** – without death,

in a windstorm – *Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal.* *Gilgal* was a town five desert miles up into the foothills to the west of the Jordan River. *Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel."* *Bethel* was further up into the hills, some fifteen miles and about a day's journey into the center of the land. Undoubtedly, Elijah knew he would soon depart from this earth. Probably, he wanted to spare Elisha the sudden sadness of witnessing that. So, he says: *Stay here.* *But Elisha said, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live – it's about the most powerful oath any person could take! – I will not leave you."* Elisha also undoubtedly knew that Elijah would depart. And he wanted to stay loyal to Elijah and to his teachings and to the true Lord until the very end. *So they went down to Bethel.*

Now: *The company of the prophets at Bethel* – followers of Elijah and Elisha, who lived in the very town where one of two idolatrous golden calves stood – these men *came out to Elisha and asked, "Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?"* The Lord had revealed to them what was going to happen. And the Lord had revealed to Elisha what was going to happen. *"Yes, I know," Elisha replied, "but do not speak of it"*—do not speak of it, undoubtedly because Elisha was naturally sad over it.

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here, Elisha; the LORD has sent me to Jericho"—back down toward the Jordan River, fifteen miles, almost exactly where they had just come from. *Jericho* was newly rebuilt on the ruins of the city Joshua had destroyed six hundred years earlier. Well, Elisha replied to Elijah: *"As surely as the LORD lives and as you live – there's that same strong oath again! – I will not leave you."* "I'm loyal to you, and to your teachings, to the Lord, and to his teachings—until the very end. *So they went to Jericho.*

And: *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"*—five desert miles, downhill from Jericho. *And he replied – Elisha replied to Elijah – "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So the two of them walked on.*

Application One: We're Sad over the Separation Caused by Death

Now, that's a good place to stop for a minute.... By now, it might have crossed your mind, "All this is interesting enough, Pastor, but what does it have to do with us on Memorial Day?" That's a good question. And I think there are a couple good answers.

First of all, take a look at Elisha's appreciation for Elijah: and not only for Elijah—but especially for the Lord, who had sent Elijah. Elisha's appreciation for Elijah and for the Lord was so great that – no way, no how – was Elisha going to get separated from him before the appointed time.

On Memorial Day, it's appropriate for us to have the same appreciation for those who have served our country militarily, especially for those who have served to the point of death, and very especially for the Lord who sent them. These are people who understood there was something bigger than them to fight for and to die for. And no few of them knew: not only freedom—but also our Savior, who gives us genuine freedom: freedom from sin, freedom from death, and freedom from Satan.

Secondly, take a look at Elisha's sadness over Elijah's departure. I mean: he knew Elijah was departing for heavenly glory, and for that he was glad, of course—but he was also sad to lose Elijah's company.

It's the same way for us, especially on Memorial Day. In the case of all our loved ones who have died: we know it was inevitable eventually. In the case of our nation's

military people, who died in battle; we know it was for a good cause, ultimately, for the freedoms we hold so dear. And in the case of anyone who died trusting Christ: we know that little flock has gone to a far better place. Still, we're sad. We miss their companionship. And deep down, we know it was never meant to be this way. It is this world's sin that has robbed us of their companionship—sin that infects our souls also, sin that will also rob us of life....

Exposition Two: Elijah Experienced Eternal Life Caused by Christ

Well, picking up the story: we're at the Jordan River—probably about the size of the Rock River here in town, but probably not as deep all the way through, and certainly not so deep at certain times of year. By now it is also, at least, not early in the day. And we read: **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.**

Now: **Elijah took his cloak** – and the original word indicates that it was a special one: a *prophet's robe* – he **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:** an amazing miracle, when you think of it!—and just the way the Israelites had crossed the Jordan under the leadership of Joshua, at nearly the same place, some five and a half centuries earlier—and just the way the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea under the leadership of Moses, forty years before that. It all showed that the powerful, helping God of Elijah, was the same powerful, helping God of Joshua, and Moses, and us.

Then, dramatically, it says: **When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?"** It's an unexpected and gracious offer—not only from Elijah to Elisha, but also from the Lord to Elisha. And we read that he boldly takes God at his Word: **"Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied.** The double portion was that of the firstborn, the rightful successor to the deceased. Elisha wanted to be Elijah's successor and to carry on his work. And as for the double portion—well, Elijah had accomplished five miracles, Elisha would go on to do ten; God had raised one person from the dead through Elijah, Elisha would be responsible for two. But I'm getting ahead of myself....

"You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said to Elisha, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours-- otherwise not." In effect, they were leaving the granting of this request in the hands of the Lord God.

And then – and these, of course, are the feature words of this account: **As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly** – whoosh!!! – **a chariot of holy fire and horses of holy fire** – straight from the leader of the army of heavenly hosts! – **appeared and separated the two of them** – how startling! – **and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind:** literally, a *windstorm*, we'd say “a tornado”.

And: **Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father!"** – because he was his spiritual father – **The chariots and horsemen of Israel!"**—genuine Israel, God's Israel. **And Elisha saw him no more.** And in the customary Hebrew sign of grief: **Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart.**

Application Two: We're Glad for Eternal Life Caused by Christ

Whew! Fascinating, again—but once again, “What does it have to do with our celebration of Memorial Day?” Well, more than anything: after the sadness of separation caused by death, our God grants us the gladness of unity in eternal life—through Jesus Christ the Lord.

And that is, I dare to say, the chief theme of the Bible—and the most important fact of life. We all have the same problems. We're sinners, so our soul faces

punishment, and our body is going to die. Only the Christian God of the Bible offers a solution. Christ – God himself! – suffered death on the cross, which was the penalty for your sins. Christ – God himself! – nullified death when he rose from death, three days later. Christ – God himself! – promises you: *Because I live, you also will live!* That’s how he raised to life the widow of Nain’s son, Jairus’ daughter, and Lazarus. That’s how he enabled Elijah, Elisha, Peter, and Paul to raise people from the dead in his name. And that’s how he’s going to raise you, eternally, on the Final Day.

So, when our military men and women died on the battlefield – as many as trusted Christ – the Lord dispatched to them a fiery chariot, and on the whirlwind he carried them to glory. And the day you die – trusting Christ – the Lord will dispatch to you a fiery chariot, and in the whirlwind he’ll carry you to glory. And there we await a great military reunion: as soldiers of the Lord—not yearly, but daily and eternally....

Exposition Three: Elisha Was Glad to Carry on Elijah’s Work

So, how now shall we live our lives? Well, to conclude the account: Elisha *picked up the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. Then he took the cloak that had fallen from him and struck the water with it. "Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over.*

Do you see what had happened? Yes, the Lord took from this world Elijah, and his work was finished. But the Lord had also prepared Elisha, and he took up Elijah’s mantle – literally! – to carry on his work.

Application Three: We’re Glad for the Privilege to Carry on Christ’s Work

So, “What’s the message for us on Memorial Day?” Well, obviously, we’ll cherish the freedoms that are ours in this nation—freedom to speak our conscience, freedom to worship our God, and freedom to get together and also to publish whatever it is the Lord leads us to do. On Memorial Day, we’ll appreciate the great sacrifice so many made to keep us free. And we’ll consider our responsibility to remain free—maybe even to the point of giving our lives in that endeavor.

More significantly, though, we’re going to cherish the freedoms that are ours as Christians—freedom from sin, freedom from death, and freedom from Satan. We’re going to appreciate the price Christ paid to make us free. And we’re going to consider it our responsibility to share this message – to proclaim it, to pray for its spread, and to pay for its spread – even if it costs us our lives.

Conclusion: Another Reason We Honor Military People

What I’m saying is that every Christian can really appreciate our military people. Our armed forces know there’s something bigger than they are, and they’re willing to die for that. Consequently, they’re also willing to say “no” to themselves and to follow the commands of somebody else. Similarly, Christians know that there’s something bigger than they are, and they’re willing to die for him. Christians are willing to say “no” to themselves and to follow the commands of Somebody Else.

Like good soldiers, you’re willing to follow Christ’s commands to you—as he followed the command of his Father and rescued you. Like good soldiers, you’re willing to die for Christ—as he died for you and rescued you. And why not? You know that eternal glory awaits you—as it did Elijah and Elisha, and Christ your commander! Amen.

The Scriptures having Jesus saying: *I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Amen.*