

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

PREPARING TO DEPART.

A Sermon

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DELIVERED BY

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“And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.”—2 Kings ii. 11.

It seems to me that the departure of Elijah from the world, though of course he did not “die” at all, may furnish us with a very good type of the decease of those saints who, although taken away on a sudden, are not without some previous intimation that in such a manner they will be removed. There may be some such here. They may know that they have about them a disease which, in all probability, will terminate fatally and suddenly. Others of us may have no idea at present that there is prepared for us a sudden death and sudden glory. We would not shrink from such a death if it were the Lord's will that it should be ours. Nay, some of us would gladly reach out our hands, and grasp so happy a mode of departure. It has always seemed to us to be the preferable way of leaving this world, not to lie long sick and disabled, a weariness to those who nurse us, and a torment to ourselves, but on a sudden to shut our eyes on earth, and open them on the splendours of heaven. So to die would be, we think, a blessed mode of resting from our labours and entering into the presence of our Lord.

I. Taking Elijah's case as a guide, we propose to-night to say a few words—and may God make them to edification!—about PREPARING FOR OUR DEPARTURE, which really is so near that it is time we began to talk about it.

It is much nearer to us than we think. To those of you who

have passed fifty, sixty, or seventy years of age, it must, of necessity, be very near. To others of us who are in the prime of life, it is not far off, for I suppose we are all conscious that time flies more swiftly with us now than ever it did. The years of our youth seem to have been twice as long as the years are now that we are men. It was but yesterday that the buds began to swell and burst, and now the leaves are beginning to fall, and soon we shall be expecting to see old winter taking up his accustomed place. The years whirl along so fast that we cannot see the months which, as it were, make the spokes of the wheel. The whole thing travels so swiftly that the axle thereof grows hot with speed. We are flying, as on some mighty eagle's wing, swiftly on towards eternity. Let us, then, talk about preparing to die. It is the greatest thing we have to do, and we have soon to do it, so let us talk and think something about it.

And what should we do when we are preparing to die? Well, *we may spend some little time in leave-taking.* We have some friends who have been very dear to us, and we may almost begin to bid them "good-bye." When we feel that death is really coming, we may spare a little season to say to a friend, "I beseech thee now to leave me." There will be some who, like Elisha with Elijah, have been with us during life, and who will not leave us till the very last moment of death. Yet, in the prospect of our departure, we must learn to hold all things with a loose hand. Why should I grip so fast that which death must and will tear from me? Why should I set my affections so ardently upon a dying thing that will melt before my eyes? I cannot carry it with me when I am called to go. There are, it is true, dear ones who will not leave us, but who will live in our hearts and permit us to live in their hearts till the last hour shall come, and longer still. But we must begin even now to prepare for our departure by reminding them, and reminding ourselves likewise, that these friendships must be broken, that these unions must be snapped, at least for a season, hopeful though we may be that we shall enjoy them again on the other side the Jordan.

The next thing we ought to do, and as it seems to me even more important, is *to go and see about our work.* If we have a feeling at all that we are going home, let us set our house in order. What did Elijah do? He went to the two colleges he had founded at Bethel and at Jericho, and of which he was the principal instructor, and he addressed the young men once more before he was taken from them. I should like to have been a student there to have listened to the Professor's last lecture. I warrant you that it was not an ordinary one. There was nothing in it dry, dusty, dead, and dreary. O friends, I think I hear the prophet charging them as before God, and before his holy angels, to rebuke the sin of the age in which they lived. "I went to the top of Carmel," said he, "and the priests of Baal were gathered about me, and I laughed them to scorn; I poured sarcasms upon their heads; I said to them concerning Baal, 'Cry aloud, for he is a God; and while they cut themselves with knives and with lancets

I mockingly said to them, 'Peradventure he hunteth, or he sleepeth, and needeth to be awaked by louder cries;' I laughed to scorn their leapings upon the altar; and then, when I bowed my knees, and cried for fire to come from heaven, those same skies, which my faith had shut up so that no rain fell upon the sinful Israelites' land, now cast forth fire at my word; and then I took the prophets of Baal, I let not one of them escape; I slew them by the brook Kishon, and made the brook run blood-red with their gore, because they had led astray the people of God, and had defied the name of the Most High. Now, young men," said he, "be ye faithful even unto death; go ye and teach the people, whether they will hear or whether they will forbear; pull down their idols, and exalt Jehovah, and speak ye as men who are sent by him."

You, dear friends, are not called to teach students as I am, so I speak with earnest sympathy when I say that, next to dying in the pulpit, the thing I would choose would be to die amongst those brethren whom I often seek to stir up to fidelity in the Master's cause. But you may well desire that, before you depart, all your various works should come under review. Sunday-school teachers, call your children together; let your addresses to them be those of dying men and women. You who can and do conduct our Bible-classes, dear and honoured brothers and sisters, there are many souls committed constantly to your care; clear yourselves of their blood so that you may go to your beds to-night, and every night, as though you were going to your tomb, and feel that you fell asleep on that bed as you would wish to fall asleep when your last sleeping hour must come. Let us each see to the various works we have in hand, so that we leave nothing out of place. Is there one soul we ought to have spoken to that we have not yet pleaded with for the Master? Let us do it now. Is there any field of usefulness which we ought to have ploughed, and does the plough-share still lie rusting in the furrow? Let us go and begin to plough this very night, or, at least, when to-morrow's sun has risen. We have so little time to live, let us live like dying men. A certain lady, staying in the parish of that devoted minister, Mr. Cecil, was asked by him to undertake some particular work. She answered him, "My dear sir, I should be very glad to do it, but I am not certain of being in the parish more than three months." "Ah!" said he, "I am not certain of being in the parish three hours, and yet I go on with my duty, and I pray you, madam, to go on with yours." Let us look at our time, not as having a great deal of it, but as having so little. Beza said to his scribe, as he was translating the Gospel of John, "Write fast; write fast, for I am dying." Then when he had got to the last verse, he said, "Now shut up the book, and leave me alone a minute," and he fell back, and entered into glory. Work hard; the candle is nearly burned out, and you have not finished that garment yet! Work hard, for you have not another candle to light when that one is gone!

When Elijah had taken leave of Elisha, and had addressed the

students, *the next thing was to cross the Jordan*. With his mantle he smote the waters, and passed through them, and then, as it were, they shut him out from all the world except Elisha. I think I would like, if I might have notice of the day of my dying, to get away from the world alone. What does a dying man want with business? A man who has to die had need shut up the ledger, and keep open that blessed Book which shall be as God's rod and staff to comfort him in the valley of the shadow of death. It is a happy circumstance for some of my friends, whom I look upon almost with envy, that they have ended the activities of life before death, and have now a little season in which, as it were, they have got on the verge of Jordan, and are resting, except that they are doing the Lord's work diligently,—resting from the world, and preparing to enter into glory. John Bunyan very graphically describes this state, when he tells us of what he calls "the country of Beulah, whose air was very sweet and pleasant, and the way lying directly through it, the pilgrims solaced themselves there for a season. Yea, here they heard continually the singing of birds, and saw every day the flowers appear in the earth, and heard the voice of the turtle in the land. In this country the sun shineth night and day; wherefore this was beyond the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and also out of the reach of Giant Despair, neither could they from this place so much as see Doubting Castle. Here they were within sight of the city they were going to, also here met them some of the inhabitants thereof; for in this land the Shining Ones commonly walked, because it was upon the borders of heaven." They heard the melody of the upper spheres while they were still here below. This is a blessed terminus of our earthly life. Did not the prophet indicate it when he said, "At evening time it shall be light"? When you have got home from business lately, how you have enjoyed those splendid evenings that we have been having, so fair, so calm, so bright! You know that the day must die, and that the dew would weep its fall; but, oh! its dying hours were so pleasant! There was no sun-heat to broil you, no dust nor whirl of care to vex you, but the evening seemed a beautiful preparation for your going to your beds. Well, if one might choose, one would like to have just such a season as that; and though there are but few grey hairs on the heads of some of us, I am not quite sure that we might not begin this happy time sooner than most people do. I do not mean by laying aside work, but by laying aside unbelief; not by giving up toil, but by giving up carking care. Why should I fret and worry myself when I am young any more than when I am old? My father's God is my God, and he who will make the land as Beulah to me when I come to die, can make it so even now if I have but that childlike confidence which can sing,—

"All my times are in thy hand,
All events at thy command."

Imitate Luther's little bird, that used to sit on the tree, and

sing to him. Nobody else could interpret its notes, or tell what it said, but to Luther it sang,—

“Mortal, cease from care and sorrow,
God provideth for the morrow.”

Elijah teaches us another thing by which we may prepare for our departure. He said to his friend Elisha, “*Ask what I shall do for thee.*” Quick, then, brother, quick; if you have anything you can do for your friends, do it *now*. “*Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.*” If you do not ask your friends what you *shall* do, think what you *can* do for them. Mother, you would like to pray with that dear child of yours; then do it soon, for the hour of your departure is at hand. Friend, you would like to do a kind action to that struggling brother, then do it soon, for you may be gone to-morrow. You have thought of something that you would like to do for Christ’s cause. Perhaps there is a destitute village where you would like to have the gospel preached, and you want to make some provision for it; then do it soon, do it soon, or the resolve may never be able to ripen into action. How many infants, that might have grown up to be spiritual giants, have been strangled by our procrastination! You nurse the little child of resolve, but seldom does it grow into the man of practical action. Get about it, get about it *now!* You cannot help your friend when you have once gone up in your chariot of fire, so help him now, and let him tell you what you shall do for him.

Then notice that Elijah and Elisha were *talking as they went on, and holding communion with each other*. Old Bishop Hall says they must have been talking of some very solemn and heavenly subjects, or else one would have thought that they would have been on their knees praying instead of talking; but he very properly adds, that “sometimes meditation is best, and sometimes conversation.” So was it in their case. Elijah had a great deal to say to Elisha; he was about to leave the State and the Church in very perilous times, so he talked fast to the man who was to bear the burden and heat of the day, and poured the whole case into his ear; and no doubt Elisha asked him many questions, and was informed by him upon many knotty points, and so “they still went on, and talked.” Let our talk always be like their talk, and then it will be well to die talking. “They that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard.” Brethren, I say, and I am afraid I may well say it with tears, that much of our conversation would not do for God to hear; and though he does hear it, yet it would not do for him to write a book of remembrance concerning it, for it would be better far that it should be blotted out. Oh! when the last solemn hour shall come, may we be found—

“Wrapt in meditation high,
Hymning our great Creator’s praise;”—

or else conversing with our brethren here below, so that we may go from the communion of the Church militant to that of the Church triumphant, and take away our lip from the human ear to begin to speak to ears immortal before the starry throne.

These are the different methods by which we may prepare to die. Some people, when they fancy they are going to die, think the only thing they can do to prepare for death is to send for the parson, "take the sacrament," as they call it, get upstairs, not see anybody, and draw the curtain. The best way for a Christian to die is in harness. If I were a soldier, methinks I would sooner die in battle in the hour of victory than I would die in the trenches doing nothing, rotting in idleness for want of work to do. Let us just push on, and may it be said of us when we are gone, he did—

"His body with his charge lay down,
And ceased at once to work and live."

So was it with Elijah; so may it be with us!

II. THIS DEPARTURE OF ELIJAH appears to me in some measure SYMBOLIC OF THE DEATHS OF BELIEVERS.

It was sudden, though expected. They were talking, and just in the middle of a sentence, perhaps, they were parted. There was no noise, for the wheels of that chariot moved not on earth, but its brightness shone around them. They looked back, and they saw strange steeds, whose eye-balls flashed with flame, and whose necks were clothed with thunder; and behind them was a chariot, brighter than the golden car in which the Cæsars rode, for it was a car of fire, and Elijah knew it was one of the chariots of God, which are twenty thousand, that he had sent to take his favoured servant up to the ivory palaces, where the King himself dwells. It was sudden, the parting came in a moment; and I suppose that death is usually sudden. Even though persons may be, as we say, long dying, yet the actual moment of departure comes suddenly. The bowl is broken with a crash, and the silver cord is loosed; the chain is snapped, and the eagle mounts to dwell in the sun.

How terrible!—a chariot of fire, and horses of fire. Even to a Christian, death is not a soft, dainty thing. To die is no child's-play. We speak of it as a sleep; but it is no such sleep as yon youngster's, when he lies down upon the sunny bank to wake again. There are solemnities about it. There are horses and there are chariots, and so far there is comfort; but they are all of fire, and he that sees them need have Elijah's eyes, or perhaps his own will blink. Elijah had seen fire before; he had called it from heaven upon his enemies; he had brought it down from heaven upon his sacrifice; he had seen fire flashing on him at Horeb, till the whole sky was bright with sheets of forked flame, but the Lord was not in that fire as he was in this. He who had looked at that former fire, and feared not, could bear to look upon the horses and chariots of fire which God had sent.

Though terrible, *how triumphant!* Oh, what splendour, to ride to heaven in a chariot! No foot-passenger wading through

Jordan's stream, and going up dripping on the other bank to be met by the shining ones. *That* is bright and glorious. The good dreamer of Bedford Gaol dreamed well when he dreamed that; but this is more triumphant still,—to mount the car, and stand erect, and ride up to the throne of God, drawn thither by horses of fire! It is given to but few to have this experience; and yet, what am I saying? Have we not all the like experience? Shall we not all have it when, in the image of Christ Jesus, we shall mount with him to our eternal rest? Yes, he will come again, and all his people with him; and if Jesus shall ride on the white horse of victory, his saints shall ride on white horses too, and shall enter through the gates into the city amidst resounding acclamations. Yes, to die is triumph to the Christian. It seems to me that it was an act of faith, on the part of Elijah, to mount that fiery chariot; and we may say of him as it was said of Enoch, "By faith he was translated that he should not see death; and he was not, for God took him."

Yes, horses of fire and chariots of fire are no bad image of the departure of the blessed when they are called to enter into the joy of their Lord. As for us, we have not got to heaven yet; our turn has not come, though we are ready to say,—

"Oh that we now might grasp our Guide!"
 Oh that the word were given!
 Come, Lord of hosts, the waves divide,
 And land us all in heaven!"

III. But while we remain behind, let us ask, WHAT OUGHT WE TO DO WHO HAVE SEEN ANY DIE LIKE THIS?

If we have lost wife, or husband, or child, or friend, in this sudden way, what ought we to do? You see what Elisha did. First of all, *he rent his clothes, which was the Eastern mode of showing his grief*. Well, you may weep, for "Jesus wept." Do not think there is any sin in sorrowing over departed friends, for the Lord never denies to us those human feelings which are rather kindly than vicious. Had there been death before the Fall, I could imagine even perfect Adam weeping at the loss of Eve; nay, he would have been no perfect man if he could have lost his spouse, and not have wept. "Jesus wept;" we regard him all the more as Jesus because he wept; and you would not be like Jesus unless you wept too. The gospel does not make us Stoics; it makes us Christians. Still, you must remember that there is a moderation in grief. The Quaker was right who, when he saw a lady fretting on the sofa some year or so after her husband was dead, still harbouring grief without a token of resignation, said to her, "Madam, I see you have not forgiven God yet." Sometimes grief is not a sacred feeling, but only a murmur of rebellion against the Most High.

Yes, you may rend your garments; and if you like, you may do a little more. Elisha not only rent his garments, but he cried, "My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen

thereof," and in doing this *he eulogized his departed friend*. He seemed to say, "He has been a father to me; I have lost one who was very tender to me, one who trained me, and watched over me, and fostered me as a father." Oh, speak well of the departed! You need not 'bate your kind words about your dead friends. We speak little enough that is good of one another while we are living; I wish we sometimes said a little more, not by way of flattery, but by way of commendation, which might cheer depressed and burdened spirits; but you need not be afraid of speaking flatteringly, so as to hurt the dead who have gone to glory, for they will not be injured by what you say. If those who have departed were of value to the Church of God, you may say of them, "The chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof!" You may wonder who will lead the Church now; you may question how things will go on; who will be the horses to drag the car, or where will now be the chariot in which weary spirits may be made to ride.

Yes, you may both grieve and eulogize. Weep well and speak well, but then, what next? Do not stand there, and waste your time; do not stop there, and let your eyes see nothing. See, there is something falling. What is it that is dropping from the sky. It is no meteor. Elisha's eyes are fixed on it; he finds that it is the old mantle that the prophet used to throw about his shoulders, and he picks it up joyfully; and *our friends, who have gone from us, have left their mantles too*. What are these mantles? Sometimes good men leave their books and sermons* behind them, but all Christian people leave their good examples. Now, do not stand and weep till you forget the goodness of the departed, but go and take their mantles up. Were they earnest? Be you earnest. Were they humble? Be you humble. Were they prayerful? Be you prayerful; and so, in each case, shall you wear their mantle. They have left their example for you to follow; they are not gone that you may superstitiously reverence them, but they have departed that you may earnestly imitate them. As far as they followed Christ, do you follow them, and so wear their mantle.

And when you have got their mantle, do not waste precious time in lamentations about them any more; *get to your business*. There is a river in your way; what then? Well, go to the Jordan as the prophet Elisha did, and try to pass it. Say not, "Where is Elijah?" but "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?" Elijah is gone, but his God is not; Elijah has gone away, but Jehovah is present still. Now then, Christians, you have to take up the work of the departed; take it up in the strength of the same God who made them mighty, and strive to do the same works that they did. If they divided Jordan, do you divide Jordan. You have

* When this discourse was delivered, in October, 1865, the preacher could scarcely have imagined that *he* would leave behind him so many books and sermons as he did leave when he was "called home" in January, 1892; and it would never have seemed possible to him that, nearly seventeen years after his own translation to heaven, the weekly issues of the *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* would still be continued, with the prospect of a further continuance for many years more.

their example to show you how to do it, and their God is "the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever."

Ask ye now, "Where did Elisha go after he had divided Jordan?" Did he go to seek out Elijah—

"In some vast wilderness,
Some boundless contiguity of shade;
Where rumour of—"

bereavements and of death might never reach him more? Not he! He went straight away to the place where Elijah used to be the head of the college, and there took up Elijah's work. Were I a soldier, with courage for the armour of my mind, and valour for the enterprise of my life, a soldier of that class which Baxter describes as carrying their lives in their hands, and the grace of God in their hearts, then surely, when I saw a man just in front of me fall, I should step forward, and take his place. That is what you should do. If there is a good man dead, fill up the gap. If there is a saint departed, be you, as it were, "baptized for the dead." Seek to have the blessing of God upon you, so that you may have a double portion of his spirit, and may be able to take the place in the ranks, or the council, which he who is gone has vacated. Your business is not in the closet of mourning, but in the field of service. There is work to be done yet; there is work to be done yet; up, and do it! That was a brave thing in Richard Cobden's life, at the time when his whole soul was taken up with the subject of free trade, and the breaking of the chains of commerce, the young wife of his friend, John Bright, died, and Cobden went to him, and said, "Now, Bright, you have lost your wife, and we will heal your sorrow by fighting the nation's battle;" and the thing was indeed well and bravely done. So, if you have lost a dear friend, heal your sorrow by giving yourself more earnestly than ever to God's cause, and to the propagation of "the truth as it is in Jesus." There is nothing like activity, nothing like having the hands full, to keep the heart bright, and to keep the soul happy. You are dullards, you who have nought to do; you fret, and fume, and rebel, instead of fighting for your Lord; but if you would only go up "to the help of the Lord against the mighty," and would bear his burdens, he would help you to bear yours, and the sorrow that now seems as a knife in your bones would be as a spur to your activity. "I vowed," said one, "that I would be avenged on death for all the damage that he had done to me, and so I smote him right and left with the fiery sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God; I preached the immortality that there is in Christ Jesus, and so I was avenged on death, and felt that I had conquered him." So do you; go and serve your Master still, and though Elijah may depart, yet you shall fill up his place, and God's horsemen and chariots shall not be wanting.

And now, dear friends, in parting for the night, it is meet for us, to say, "Farewell for this night, till we meet again in the morning." But, sometimes, this parting may be very significant,

and therefore let us say, "Farewell," with the thought that some of us may never look each other in the face again. I hope we can truly say, "Farewell!" and then we shall meet in the morning, when the night is over, and the death-dews drop no more, when the chill frost of midnight shall all have been melted away by the rising sun of immortality. Yes, we will meet; we shall meet to part no more. We will make an appointment *now*, to meet each other *then*, where our hearts, in faith, have often met before, at the throne of him who has washed us in his blood, and made us white, and so,—FAREWELL TILL THE MORNING!

But what of some of you? You can make no such appointment to meet us *there*, for your way is not thitherward,—not with horses of fire to heaven, but with chariots of flame down to hell,—down, down, down for ever into the depths of grief! We dare not say that we will meet you *there*. If you will go there, you must go alone; if you will perish, you must perish by yourself. If you will live and die without a Saviour, you cannot expect your friends to accompany you to that dreary world of woe. But why goest thou, why goest thou, O solitary traveller, where thou wouldst not have thy fellow go? Thou wouldst not see thy child damned,—let me say the word with solemn awe,—thou wouldst not see thy child damned, wouldst thou? Then why shouldst thou be damned thyself? "But must I be?" say you. No, sinner, there is no "must" for that. There hangs my Master, the crucified Redeemer, and if thou lookest to him, there will be another "must" for thee, namely, that thou must be saved. The road to heaven is by the cross of Calvary. Christ Jesus marks the way to glory by the crimson blood-drops which flowed from his pierced hands and feet. Trust Jesus; trust him wholly; trust him now; trust him for ever; and then we will meet, we will meet again in the morning, and so,—GOOD NIGHT!

Exposition by C. H. Spurgeon.

PSALM LXII.

In this Psalm the royal singer casts himself entirely on God. Here we see the foundation of his expectation laid bare. He has no confidence anywhere but in God. The Psalm begins in the original with the word "Only." I always call it "The 'only' Psalm" because it harps upon that word. David had no mixed reliance; he had not built upon a foundation partly of iron and partly of clay; it was all in harmony throughout; his trust was in the Lord alone.

Verse 1. *Truly*—

Or, as it is in the margin, "Only"—

1. *My soul waiteth upon God: from him cometh my salvation.*

It is a blessed thing to wait truly and only upon God. You have proved everything else to be a failure, and now you hang upon the bare arm of God alone. There is certainly enough for you to depend upon there. Most people want something to see, something tangible to the senses, to be the object of their confidence; but David says, "Only my soul waiteth upon God: from him cometh my salvation." It is already on the road; it is coming now; it is a salvation from present trouble and from present