

GOING TO GLORY

2 Kings 2

Most people don't like to think about the fact that one day they will die. Death is the number one unmentionable subject for the majority. But this should not be so for us. For the Christian death is the door to the eternal, visible, glorious presence of Christ Himself.

This morning, as we complete our series in the life of Elijah, we find the prophet (and those around him) fully aware that his life is coming to a close. But he is not sitting sullenly in his armchair. Instead we find him finishing well; running strongly to the end. He is going to Glory!

- Elijah is still journeying by faith, wherever God directs.
- He is still training Elisha, and schools of prophets have sprung up in Bethel and Jericho.
- He is still a man of signs and wonders; dramatic and awe inspiring as ever, as he strikes the river Jordan with his cloak and sees it part.
- And then a chariot of fire and horses of fire plunge to earth, separating him from Elisha, as he is carried up to heaven in a whirlwind.

v12: Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" Elijah's end was truly remarkable; we are not even told that he died!

Not many people go to glory in a whirlwind accompanied by chariots of fire. Yet many of God's people do go to glory in such an impressive way that they inspire those who look on.

I recall visiting a church member called Joe when I was a Baptist pastor in Littlehampton. He had just had cancer diagnosed and so I went to pray with him. We talked and then he gave me a big grin and said. *"Well John, if it's my time, I want to go in Calvary glory!"*

This morning, I propose to give you a brief selection of descriptions of great saints going to glory. None of them involved a whirlwind. Some were unspectacular while others were dramatic. But each died in such a way that God's name was honoured and the gospel baton was passed on.

Aiden, Bishop of Lindisfarne. 651

In Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People, he records how, in 635 AD Aiden had gone from Iona to the Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Northumbria where King Oswald was a believer. The King wanted his people to hear the gospel, so Aiden based himself on Lindisfarne and began to travel throughout the towns & villages, initially with the King himself as his interpreter.

He travelled thousands of miles over 16 years, preaching the gospel and baptising hundreds of people. He was a gentle man, approachable and full of

compassion. He was once given a horse by a relative of the King, but he gave it to the first beggar he met as he rode out. Aiden died on 31st of August in 651 AD somewhere near Bamburgh. A great man of God had gone to glory.

In Bede's 'Life of Cuthbert' he includes this account of God's call of Aiden's successor Cuthbert, who was probably sixteen at the time. Cuthbert "happened to be looking after a flock of sheep committed to his charge, away up in the hills. One night when his companions had gone to sleep and he was keeping watch and praying as usual, he suddenly saw light streaming from the skies, breaking the long night's darkness, and the choirs of the heavenly host coming down to earth. They quickly took into their ranks a human soul, marvelously bright, and returned to their home above.

There and then he set about praising God: *'What wretches we are, given up to sleep and sloth so that we never see the glory of those who watch with Christ unceasingly! After so short a vigil what marvels have I seen! The gate of Heaven opened and a band of angels led in the spirit of some holy man. While we are still in the deepest darkness, he has the happiness of looking forever on the halls of heaven and their King. I think he must have been some holy bishop or layman of great distinction since he was led in with such splendour and light by retinues of angels.'*

In this way Cuthbert fired the hearts of the shepherds with the love and honour of God. Next day he was told that Aiden, Bishop of Lindisfarne, a man of outstanding holiness, had passed into the Kingdom of Heaven at the time of his vision. He delivered the sheep back to their owners and decided to enter a monastery." He travelled to Melrose where he came under the charge of a renowned monk called Boisil.

John Wesley. 1791

Wesley's last years saw an astonishing growth in the Methodist church. Wesley himself, now in his 80's, continued preaching tours around the country, although he travelled by carriage rather than on horseback.

Perhaps special notice is taken of those who have spent their lives sharing the gospel. Will they finish well? For me, Wesley is a great example of a man dying with his boots on. Right up to the end, even as an old man, he was passionate about the gospel and the advance of the Kingdom of God. In 1790, when he was approaching 87 years he wrote: *"I am now an old man, decayed from head to foot ... However, blessed be God, I do not slack my labour. I can preach and write still."*

A week before he died in 1791 he wrote what was believed to be his last letter, to a young politician called William Wilberforce. *"Go on in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery, the vilest that ever saw the sun, shall vanish before it... Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you."*

Six days before he died he preached his last sermon at Leatherhead, at the age of 88. His text was Isaiah 55v6. "Seek the Lord while he may be found." The next day he began to grow weak and it was clear he was dying. But even as he slips away we catch a glimpse of how this man was soaked in the gospel.

Two days before he died he slept most of the day, but then he was heard to say in a low but distinct manner: "*There is no way into the holiest but by the blood of Jesus.*" Can you imagine how those around would have sat up to attention? He then began to talk about a recent text he had preached on: 2 Cor.8v8: "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, for our sake he became poor, that you, by his poverty, might become rich." He then said: "*That is the foundation, the only foundation; there is no other.*"

The day before he died he seemed to rally and began to sing the great hymn by Isaac Watts, based on Psalm 146:

*"I'll praise my Maker, while I've breath,
And when my voice is lost in death,
Praise shall employ my nobler powers;
My days of praise shall ne'er be past,
While life and thought and being last,
Or immortality endures."*

When his voice grew weak, among the last words he could be heard saying was "*I'll praise. I'll praise.*" But one of the last things he said, he uttered in a loud voice "*The best of all is – God is with us!*" He repeated this with great emphasis and it became a rallying cry of Methodism on his death.

Eric Liddell. 1945

I couldn't resist including Eric Liddell because of the "Chariots of Fire" link. His story was made famous by David Puttnam's 1982 film which won an Oscar for best picture. After his triumph in the 400 metres at the Paris Olympics in 1924 Eric Liddell worked as an itinerant evangelist in China. When the Japanese invaded Pearl harbour he was working in a Japanese occupied area of China, and so he was interred in a Japanese camp in 1943. He died of an undiagnosed brain tumour in the Weih sien internment camp. Not exactly going to glory in a whirlwind you might think.

Sally Magnusson wrote a book about Liddell which she called 'The Flying Scotsman'. In it she searched for the man rather than the Olympic hero, especially in his final years in internment. What she discovered was undramatic but remarkable.

Those in the Weih sien camp had the status of internees rather than prisoners of war, consequently they did not suffer the brutality captured soldiers experienced. Nevertheless, conditions were primitive and overcrowded, and the inmates were gradually starving because of their poor diet. There were tensions because very different people were herded together: 21 nationalities

including businessmen, missionaries, many prostitutes, as well as children and old people. Back-biting and prejudice and selfishness abounded. But every letter, journal entry and post war interview singled out one person as the great exception.

Magnusson writes "Eric is portrayed as the Christ-figure at the camp. He befriends the prostitute and the despised business man; he carries coal for the weak and teaches the you; he gets ready to sell his gold watch and tears up his sheets for hockey sticks. And yet he is still the same Eric, marching around in a multi-coloured shirt made out of old curtains and looking extremely ordinary and nothing special at all." Stories abound of Liddell's acts of kindness and mercy during his eighteen months in the camp.

On 21st February 1945 he collapsed into arms of a friends and nurse called Annie Buchan with these words: "*Annie, it's complete surrender*", and he died. Sally Magnusson writes. "*Surrender. A strange word for a hero to utter with his dying breath, especially a man who had never given up, ever, particularly when the challenge was greatest. It is only really meaningful in the context of the faith by which he had lived, and by which he was now completely surrendering himself to his God.*"

After his death the tributes flowed. One wrote: "*Eric Liddell was the most outstanding Weihsien personality, in his early forties, quiet spoken and with a permanent smile. Eric was the finest Christian man I have ever had the privilege of meeting.*" A women in the camp, a Russian prostitute, said that Liddell was the only man who had ever done anything for her and not taken advantage of her. None of the other missionaries would help her; only Eric. Another of the other internees was quoted at Liddell's funeral in the camp. "*Of all the men I have known Eric Liddell was the one in whose character and life the spirit of Jesus Christ was pre-eminently manifested.*"

Jim Elliott, Nate Saint, Ed McCully, Pete Fleming and Roger Youderian. 1956

This is the story of five Americans who gave their lives for the gospel in 1956. Jim Elliott is the best known of the five because of his wife Elizabeth's writings. He had prepared for missionary work at Wheaton College. Fleming, was a close friend of Elliotts, as was McCully. Nate Saint was a pilot, and Youderian had been working with a tribe called the Jivaros know as the "head shrinkers". In the Ecuadorian jungle. He was veteran paratrooper from the Second World War and an expert in jungle survival.

These men prepared themselves to take the gospel to the Auca Indians of Ecuador. They were a violent tribe and their area was considered too dangerous for any western worker. Several oil workers had been killed by them. Elliot wrote to his father that the Aucas: "*they have never had any contact with white men other than killing. They have no word for God in their language, only for devils and spirits.*"

After 3 or 4 months of gift dropping they landed and set up a shelter. They befriended two Indians & their pilot Nate Saint even gave one a ride in his plane, and afterwards they shared their hamburgers & mustard.

On January 8th 1956, encouraged by the friendly contact, they decided to go into the Indians village. However 20 or 30 Aucas arrives at their shelter. Soon all five men were dead, killed by spears & machetes. They had been carrying guns for protection but did not use them.

In 1948 Jim Elliott had written in his journal: *“God, I pray thee, light these idle sticks of my life, and may I burn for Thee. Consume my life, my God, for it is Thine. I seek not a long life, but a full one, like you Lord Jesus.”* More famously on 28th October 1949 he wrote *“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”*

Many said “What a waste of young lives!” and “How could God allow such a tragedy?” Yet as the news spread there was not only grief, but a whole new wave of zeal for missions. Young people especially were inspired by the example of the five young men. Jim’s young wife Elizabeth wrote books which further stirred zeal for missions. “The Shadow of the Almighty” and “Through Gates of Splendour.”

These five men went to glory, not in a whirlwind, but in a shower of spears. They entered heaven wearing martyrs crowns. They left a legacy of heroism and passion for Christ and the gospel that affected a generation of Christian workers.

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What then is the secret of finishing well as we go to glory? It is worth each of us pondering over what Thomas A Kempis wrote in the fifteenth century: *“A man is not only happy but wise also, if he is trying during his lifetime to be the sort of man he wants to be found at his death. Try to live in such a way now that when the hour of death comes you may feel joy, not fear. Learn to die to the world now, so that you may begin to live with Christ then. Learn not to value anything in this life now, so that you can go to Christ without anything to hinder you then.”* (Thomas a’ Kempis: ‘The Imitation of Christ’.)

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