

Did Elijah Go to Heaven?

A biblical event many cite to support belief that the righteous go to heaven when they die involves the prophet Elijah.

Elijah was a prophet of God in the ninth century B.C. The Bible states that "Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven" (2 Kings 2:11). But does this contradict the testimony of John's Gospel, which stated some 900 years after Elijah's time that "no one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man"? (John 3:13).

How can we explain this seeming biblical discrepancy? A closer look shows that the two passages can be reconciled easily enough.

Careful study shows that *three* "heavens" are actually discussed in the Bible. One is God's dwelling place—the place of His throne—and the heaven where the resurrected Jesus is today. Speaking of Christ, who is our High Priest, the Bible says, "We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens" (Hebrews 8:1). Heaven is specifically called God's dwelling place (Deuteronomy 26:15). The apostle Paul calls this heaven the "*third* heaven" (2 Corinthians 12:2)—showing, as noted, that there are two others. It's described as the "third" because, being in the spirit realm, it is beyond the other two, which are in the physical realm.

Another heaven discussed in the Bible, second in proximity to us, is what we call outer space. It is the domain of the moon, planets, comets, asteroids, sun and stars. David spoke of this when he reflected on the awesomeness of God's creative handiwork, which he described as "Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained" (Psalm 8:3). Many scriptures mention "the stars of heaven" (Genesis 26:4; Deuteronomy 1:10; 28:62; Isaiah:13:10).

Yet another heaven, closest to us in proximity, is the envelope of air that surrounds our planet, consisting of oxygen and other gases. This heaven—earth's atmosphere—is mentioned in such passages as Genesis 7:11-12

, which describes the great flood of Noah's day: "The windows of heaven were opened. And the rain was on the earth forty days and forty nights." The Bible also speaks of "the birds of heaven," those that fly overhead (Job 35:11; Jeremiah 16:4).

To determine which heaven is meant in a Bible passage, we must carefully consider the context. It was into the lower reaches of this first, closest heaven—the earth's atmosphere—that Elijah was taken. Let's notice the proof.

God had earlier told Elijah he was to anoint a man named Elisha as a prophet to succeed him (1 Kings 19:16). Later, as the two men walked together, Elijah said to Elisha, "What may I do for you, before I am taken away from you?" (2 Kings 2:9). This led to a discussion of God's gifts to Elisha that would allow him to fill Elijah's role.

"Then it happened, as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven" (verse 11). Elijah was now gone. The former followers and students of Elijah were now to look to Elisha as their new leader. "Now when the sons of the prophets who were from Jericho saw him, they said, 'The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha'" (2 Kings 2:15).

Many readers assume that Elijah at that point was made immortal and taken to the heaven where God resides. This was not the case. The sons of the prophets knew otherwise. They knew the whirlwind had simply removed Elijah to another location on earth. They exclaimed to Elisha: "Look now, there are fifty strong men with your servants. Please let them go and search for your master, lest perhaps the Spirit of the Lord has taken him up and cast him upon some mountain or into some valley" (2 Kings 2:16).

The disciples were concerned for Elijah's safety, so they sent out a party of 50 men to search for him. The 50 searched for three days but did not find him (2 Kings 2:17).

Another passage proves conclusively that Elijah was not taken up to live in heaven. The Bible records that Elijah wrote a letter to Jehoram, the king of Judah, several years after he was removed in the whirlwind.

Notice the sequence of events recorded for us in the Bible. Elijah's last recorded and dated act occurred during the reign of the Israelite king Ahaziah when Elijah told the king he would die for his sins (2 Kings:1:3, 17). Ahaziah's reign lasted only about a year, ca. 850 B.C.

Elijah's removal and replacement by Elisha is then recorded in the next chapter, 2 Kings 2. The story continues with incidents from Elisha's life, including an encounter with Jehoshaphat, king of Judah (2 Kings:3:11-14). Several years later Jehoram, son of Jehoshaphat, succeeded his father as king of Judah, ca. 845 B.C. (2 Kings 8:16).

Jehoram proved to be a wicked king, leading the nation of Judah in rebellion against God's commandments. A few years into Jehoram's reign, and several years after Elijah's removal, Jehoram received a letter *from Elijah* warning the king of dire consequences because of his sins. This letter is recorded in 2 Chronicles 21:12-15.

This letter proves that the prophet was still alive and on earth some years after he was removed by the whirlwind and replaced by Elisha. God had chosen Elisha to succeed Elijah as His prophet, so He bodily removed Elijah to another place, where he continued to live for at least several more years—as his letter to Jehoram demonstrates.

The Bible tells us nothing more about Elijah's life following his writing of the letter. But he eventually died, just like the other prophets and righteous men of the Old Testament, who all died in faith, not yet receiving the eternal life God had promised (Hebrews 11:39).

Again, a careful reading of the Scriptures shows that Elijah's miraculous removal by a fiery chariot involved transporting him to another location on earth, not to eternal life in heaven.