

THE UPWARD CALL

*Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet;
but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,
I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God
IN CHRIST JESUS.*

(Philippians 3:13-14 NASB)

#05-1107

Where Was Elijah Taken?

January 7, 2011

As they were going along and talking, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire which separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven. (2 Kings 2:11 NASB)

It is often taught that when Elijah was taken up in a chariot of fire, he was taken to heaven, the place of God's throne, or, as some call it, the third heaven. Since he was alive when this occurred, it is also taught that he did not see death, that is, he became immortal. In other words, according to this view, Elijah has been alive and well since the 9th century BC, living in heaven with God. With this view, some claim that this proves that when believers die, they too go to heaven to be with the Lord.

One other view that may or not be connected to the above view is that Elijah is a type of the saints who will be raptured to heaven, as presented by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; that is, they are taken to the throne of God at the end of the age. This will be taken up in the next issue dealing with Enoch.

But are these proper biblical views? Are they supported by scripture, or do they conflict with scripture?

About 900 years after Elijah was taken up in a chariot, Jesus made a statement of fact that obviously disputes the view that Elijah ascended into heaven, the place from which the Son of Man descended to earth.

"No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man." (John 3:13 NASB)

Obviously, Elijah had not descended from heaven. Scripture is silent on the origin of Elijah other than he was a Tishbite. However, James (5:17) tells us that he had a nature like ours, which means he possessed the same weaknesses and frailties of the flesh as we all do, and this comes from occupying mortal bodies of flesh and blood as we all do. If he had not descended from heaven, then according to the One who should know, it follows that he had not ascended to heaven either.

Only Jesus, the Son of Man, descended from the Father's throne, and only He was raised from among the dead, according to the spirit of holiness (Romans 1:4), and deemed worthy to ascend back to heaven to be with His Father. Christ entered into heaven itself to appear in the presence of God for us (Hebrews 9:24), that is, all mankind, as the High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

As further proof, Paul stressed the immortality of Jesus as the King of kings.

Now to the King eternal, immortal [incorruptible], invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Timothy 1:17 NASB)

(15) He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords (16) who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. (1 Timothy 6:15-16 NASB)

No mere mortal can stand in the presence of God; only one who is immortal, that is, beyond death, can do so. Keep in mind that Paul wrote to Timothy years after Jesus had ascended back to the throne. Many had died before and after Jesus' resurrection, and, according to Paul, no one possesses immortality, including Elijah and, I might add, Enoch. Only Jesus the King of kings is presently immortal. Further, as the Son of Man, Jesus is the first man born of a woman to possess immortality.

If we accept these two premises as fact, then the question remains as to where Elijah was taken. What does it mean that he went up by a whirlwind to heaven? To answer this, it is important to note that scripture speaks of more than one heaven.

The first is the atmosphere around the earth in which the birds fly and our weather and climate are formed. For example: **Let the birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens** (Genesis 1:20 NASB; also Genesis 7:11-12; Job 35:11; Jeremiah 16:4).

The second heaven is outer space, the place of other planets, the moon, sun, and stars. Scripture speaks of **the stars of heaven** (Genesis 26:4; Deuteronomy 1:10; 28:62; Isaiah 13:10). David wrote: **When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon, and the stars, which thou hast ordained** (Psalm 8:3 KJV).

The third heaven is generally thought to be where Jesus ascended to sit at the right hand of the throne in the heavens (Hebrews 8:1). The designation of the third heaven is attributed to Paul who testified that he was **snatched away to the third heaven** (2 Corinthians 12:2 CV). I should add that there is an alternative explanation to the meaning of the third heaven. Paul could have been referring to the third chronological heaven, specifically the one referred to in 2 Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21:1. According to Peter, there was a heaven long ago [the first chronological heaven (2 Peter 3:5)]; there is a present heaven that is reserved for fire [the second chronological heaven (2 Peter 3:7)]; and there will be a future heaven in which righteousness dwells [the third chronological heaven (2 Peter 3:13)]. By the way, the same applies to the earth. I would be remiss if I did not add that I see heaven as the place of God's abode as more of a dimension or realm, as in spirit dimension, than a physical place trillions of light years from earth in the far reaches of the universe. Earth is enveloped by God's realm.

So, into which heaven was Elijah taken? I believe the correct answer is the first heaven, the atmosphere around the earth that gives us life. Most likely, Elijah was taken up in a whirlwind, which is more of a weather phenomenon, like a violent storm, even a tornado, and transported to another region in the Middle East, much like when the Spirit of God snatched away Philip to Azotus after he shared with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:39). Having completed his public ministry and passing the mantle to Elisha, Elijah lived out his days and died.

There is one other proof that Elijah remained on earth after his chariot ride in the air. Second Chronicles refers to a writing attributed to Elijah that was sent to Jehoram, king of Israel, perhaps 10 years after Elijah had gone up in the whirlwind, indicating that Elijah was still alive on earth.

And there came a writing to him from Elijah the prophet, saying, Thus saith the LORD God of David thy father, Because thou hast not walked in the ways of Jehoshaphat thy father, nor in the ways of Asa king of Judah... (2 Chronicles 21:12 KJV)

As to be expected, there are some who challenge this conclusion, for it does not fit their template that when we die we go to heaven. In a side note, in *The Companion Bible*, E.W. Bullinger challenges this conclusion: *"Why assume that Elijah then sent it? It might have "come" as Holy Scripture comes to us today, though written in the past. It does not say a "letter," [based on the Hebrew] but any writing written at any time; probably a prophetic writing to be delivered at this particular time."*

I believe this is a bit of a stretch. Scripture does not indicate this, so why assume it? Besides, Bullinger's conclusion leads to a direct contradiction of scripture regarding Christ being the only one who is immortal and who has ascended to heaven.

Finally, some might challenge the idea that Elijah remained alive on earth because he appeared with Jesus and Moses on the mount as Jesus was transfigured (Matthew 17:1-8). It could have been a vision. But most likely, what the disciples witnessed simply transcended time. The Father opened the portal of time and allowed the disciples to see outside of time. I know that this may be difficult to comprehend, for we are so locked into our mindsets of a physical world, but we need to realize that God is spirit, and His realm is not bound by time. After all, there are other examples of transcending time, most notably, Paul who was snatched away to the third heaven and Paradise, and John who, *in* spirit, was given vision of what would transpire for the next 2,000 years from his day. Again, this is the only way to reconcile scripture and avoid obvious contradictions regarding immortality and ascendancy.