**If the dead don’t immediately go to heaven, how did Moses and Elijah appear at the transfiguration?**

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**Texts in question:** Luke 9:29, 30; Matthew 17:1–3; Mark 9:3, 4

“As He prayed, the appearance of His face was altered, and His robe became white and glistening. And behold, two men talked with Him, who were Moses and Elijah.”

**Proof texts:** 2 Kings 2:11; Jude 1:9

One of the most powerful stories in the Gospels is that of Christ’s transfiguration. In the sight of Peter, James, and John, Jesus temporarily shed His earthly form and allowed them to see His divinity. The Father’s voice then pierced the sky, saying He was well pleased with Jesus, His son. The experience was so powerful to those who saw it that Peter affirms its validity in his epistle, 2 Peter 1:16–18.

The text might be troubling, however, to those who otherwise understand that people go to sleep at death to await a bodily resurrection at Christ’s return. How can Moses and Elijah have been present at the transfiguration if they are waiting for the resurrection?

To make sense of this, we must first understand two important principles. The first is that, while the general resurrection of God’s people will happen at the end of time, there have been individual resurrections recorded in the Bible. Christ’s resurrection, for instance, was not part of the general one. Neither were those of the saints who came forth from the grave after Christ’s resurrection (see Matthew 27:52, 53). The prophets Elijah and Elisha both performed resurrections during their ministries (see 1 Kings 17:17–22 and 2 Kings 4:32–35). Individual resurrections throughout history do not invalidate the general resurrection when Christ returns.

The second principle to understand is that some people have left the earth without dying, and therefore are not in need of a resurrection.

Moses and Elijah each fit one of these two categories.

The story recorded in 2 Kings 2 tells us unmistakably that Elijah was taken to heaven without first dying. Verse 11, specifically, says he was caught in a heavenly whirlwind and taken to heaven in sight of Elisha, his successor. Appearing with Christ at the transfiguration would not have posed a problem for Elijah; he had already spent much time with Jesus in heaven before His human birth in Bethlehem.

Moses, on the other hand, died in the wilderness before the Israelite people entered into the Promised Land. The story of his death, as recorded in Deuteronomy 34:5, 6, reveals something extraordinary. The Bible says that God Himself buried Moses, and that none of the Israelites were ever aware of his gravesite. This is the first biblical hint that something special awaited Moses after death.

The New Testament, however, gives us more information. In Jude 1:9, we’re told that the archangel Michael contended with Satan over the body of Moses. In other words, Satan claimed Moses as his own, worthy of death just like everyone else. Michael, however, thought differently. As the archangel, He has the power to resurrect God’s people. (See 1 Thessalonians 4:16; the voice of the archangel raises the dead in Christ at Christ’s return.) Moses was not meant to stay dead. Indeed, he was resurrected from the dead and has been living in heaven since that time. Truly, he has already experienced life after death.

Therefore, the presence of Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration does not answer the question “What is death?,” because neither one was dead! Elijah never tasted death at all, and Moses was given a new life at his resurrection, just like Christ’s people will receive at His return.

While the transfiguration doesn’t directly give us information on the state of the dead, it retains theological significance nonetheless. When Peter recounted his experience in 2 Peter 1:16–18, he writes that he witnessed Christ’s coming at that time. In other words, he understood the experience to represent the return of Jesus Christ. Moses and Elijah represent the two classes of God’s people who will be present at that miraculous event: Moses represents the “dead in Christ” who rise to new life, and Elijah represents “those who are alive and remain” who will be translated to heaven and eternal life without ever experiencing death in the first place (1 Thessalonians 4:16). Understanding that the transfiguration is a representation of the second coming of Christ also helps us understand Christ’s promise that “some standing here … shall not taste death till they see the kingdom of God,” spoken a few days before the transfiguration (Luke 9:27).

When we understand the profound significance of this event in light of what Moses and Elijah represent, we can gain an understanding of the nature of death as a result. There would be no need of a bodily resurrection if everyone immediately went to heaven to live in Christ’s presence at death; similarly, translation to heaven would have no special significance because everyone would go to heaven immediately upon death. Moses and Elijah act as evidence that death brings a sleep of unconsciousness while the sleeping saints await the return of Jesus Christ.

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