

**MARK 9:2–9.** (EHV)

After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him and led them up a high mountain where they were alone by themselves. There he was transfigured in front of them. His clothes became radiant, dazzling white, whiter than anyone on earth could bleach them. And Elijah appeared to them together with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He did not know what to say because they were terrified. A cloud appeared and overshadowed them, and a voice came from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him.” Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

You heard in our First Lesson that Elijah went to heaven. Throughout the Bible Moses is referred to as the servant of the Lord. Deuteronomy says that God himself buried him and knew him face to face. So it’s safe to assume that Moses went to heaven.

Let me ask you: What happens when you go to heaven? Does the possibility exist that you’ll ever leave it again? Is the experience of heaven able to be interrupted?

No, of course not. The joy and bliss of heaven is eternal. Once you’re in heaven, you’re always in heaven.

What does that mean for us as we hear and read about this scene on top of the Mount of Transfiguration? If Elijah and Moses have gone to heaven, that means they are still in heaven, which means that, as we see them on the Mount of Transfiguration, we are getting a glimpse or **foretaste of heaven.**

### **1. The Population of Heaven**

As we experience this foretaste of heaven, let’s first take note of the population of heaven. What kind of people are in heaven?

If you were to ask a random person, “If there is a heaven, what kind of people are going to be let in?” I think the standard answer you would get is, “Good people.”

But we know that a rich young man once went up to Jesus and asked, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus responded, “Why are you calling me good? No one is good but God alone.”

Jesus was pointing out that, if you’re going to make goodness the condition for entrance into heaven, that’s fine, but you had better know what you mean by goodness. It’s true that good people go to heaven if by “good people” you mean perfect people, holy people, spotless, faultless people, people as good as God.

Well, whom do we have here? Moses and Elijah. Were Moses and Elijah good people by God’s standard?

Remember when God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt? Did Moses willingly accept that call? Not at all. Question after question, excuse after excuse, before he finally said what was really on his mind: “Please send someone else to do it.” And the next thing we’re told is pretty scary: “Then the LORD’S anger burned against Moses.”

Or what about after the Israelites had been wandering around in the desert for decades, and a new generation had grown up that hadn't seen all of the miraculous signs God performed through Moses and hadn't really experienced the Lord's great patience with the Israelites? This new generation began to grumble and complain that they didn't have any water. So the Lord told Moses to speak to a rock and it would pour out water. The Lord wanted to show this new generation the same patience he had shown the previous one. No, he didn't want them to grumble and complain, but he didn't want them to refrain from grumbling and complaining simply because they were threatened and scared of God, but because they knew the Lord's love and patience for them.

But Moses didn't represent the Lord's gracious holiness in front of the people. He told them, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" and then he struck the rock twice; one gets the sense he did it in frustration and anger. As a result, Moses didn't get to lead the people into the Promised Land, even though he was still healthy and strong. The Lord quietly led him away from the people, showed him the Promised Land from a distance, then called him from this life and buried him in an unknown grave.

By God's standard, Moses was not a good person in himself. He was a sinner. Yet here he is, in heaven.

And what about Elijah? He was miraculously fed in a couple different ways by God's power. He miraculously raised a widow's son from the dead by God's power. And he had a miraculous showdown with the false prophets of Israel in which he prayed to the Lord, and the Lord sent fire from heaven to consume his water-soaked offering.

But when Queen Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab, responded to the miraculous showdown by threatening his life, Elijah was afraid and ran far away, down into the desert. There he sat down under a tree and asked the Lord to take his life. Later he fled to Horeb, the same place where Moses received the Ten Commandments, and he complained to the Lord there that he was the only true prophet left. After all the reasons God had given Elijah to trust him, Elijah's trust faltered.

By God's standard, Elijah was not a good person in himself. He was a sinner. Yet here he is, in heaven. In fact, we heard he was taken straight up to heaven in whirlwind.

If only good people go to heaven, brothers and sisters, then why are Moses and Elijah there? They are there because they despaired of their own righteousness and clung in faith to God's promise of salvation. They are there because they *were* good; it's just that their goodness didn't come from inside, didn't come from themselves. It came from outside themselves. It came from the One with whom they are talking on the Mount of Transfiguration. Their goodness and righteousness came from the Messiah, Jesus. In themselves, they were sinners and fit for hell. In Jesus, they were perfect and deemed worthy of eternal life.

This is good news for us, because we are not good people in ourselves either, by God's standard. Do we ever hesitate like Moses did when God calls us to be diligent students, obedient children, loving parents, committed spouses, honest workers, faithful leaders and pastors in the church? Do we ever think silently, "I can't do this. God, you picked the wrong person; you should really have someone else do it."

Do we ever misrepresent God like Moses did and make Christianity all about God's law and anger over sin, and not primarily about his gracious forgiveness and patience? God certainly

has serious things to say about human sexuality, killing, stealing, rebellion, and so on. Without knowing and saying those things, the gospel means nothing. But do we actually make Christianity all about one's position on moral issues like homosexuality, transgenderism, marriage, and abortion? Do we ever think, "If we could just get everyone else to think like we do on these issues, we'd have a more Christian nation"—when Christianity is primarily about the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in heaven by grace through faith in Jesus, not about the elimination of sin here on earth?

Do we ever falter in our faith like Elijah and just want to end it all? Do we ever think that with the way Christianity is increasingly dwindling, God can't possibly know what he's doing?

Do we have to confess these sins or others? Then thank God that the likes of Moses and Elijah are in heaven. Thank God that our righteousness and goodness comes not from ourselves, but from Jesus our Savior. Thank God that just as Moses and Elijah entered heaven through faith in the Messiah, so will we—not by our works, so that no one can boast, and so that we all can be certain of it.

## **2. The Essence of Heaven**

As we continue to experience this foretaste of heaven, let's also note the essence of heaven. If Elijah and Moses are still in heaven as they converse with the transfigured Jesus on this mountain, how can they still be in heaven? What about what they're doing on this mountain means that they are still fully experiencing heaven?

Perhaps the Mount of Transfiguration shows us the essence of heaven more simply than anything else does. Moses and Elijah are still in heaven precisely because they are beholding Jesus in his glory face to face. The Christian theologians of old called this the beatific vision, and it is the essence of heaven.

An early Christian missionary in Michigan in the mid-1800s, named August Craemer, encountered an old Native American who was willing to hear the gospel, but he refused to believe it. You know why? Because he didn't want to think of himself as a miserable sinner by nature who was deserving of hell, and because he wanted to go and be with his ancestors when he died, and he knew that his ancestors were not with this God he was hearing about. Back when my grandmother worked at a hospital, one of her coworkers once told her flatly that she would rather to go hell because she knew all of her family was there.

We may not be as crass, but sometimes I get the impression that many Christians have a problem similar to the one that Native American and my grandmother's coworker did. They want to go to heaven, but ask them what they're looking forward to most about heaven, and they'll tell you it's getting to see Dad or Mom again, or perhaps a son or daughter who passed away prematurely, or some other relative. If they could know for certain that their relative they loved so much was *not* in heaven—and I'm not saying I wish that at all—part of me wonders if they would still want to go to heaven, or if, like that old Native American or my grandmother's coworker, they would prefer to go and be with their ancestors and family.

Brothers and sisters, if we struggle with loving father or mother, son or daughter, or anyone else more than Jesus, take a look again at this foretaste of heaven. Elijah and Moses get to behold Jesus in all his glory, dressed in dazzling white clothes. The Sons of Korah tell us in

Psalm 45 that Jesus is the most beautiful of the sons of men. There is in fact nothing more beautiful in all the universe to behold than Jesus in all his glory, face to face.

There is such a thing as subjective beauty, beauty in the eye of the beholder. But there is also a greater and nobler beauty. There is such a thing as objective beauty. Stand at the brink of the Grand Canyon, and don't just look into the canyon; look to your left and right. What will you see? People from virtually every nation under heaven, having the same reaction you're having, even though they come from much different backgrounds and have many different cultural tastes. There is objective beauty there.

Step into one of the magnificent cathedrals of Europe, like the one in Cologne, Germany, and what will you see? First you will see that as soon as you step inside, everyone shuts up and looks up, because of the awe-striking beauty. People from virtually every nation under heaven, Christians, atheists, and people of every other religion, having the same reaction you're having, namely, "Whoa." There is objective beauty there.

In heaven the grandest National Park scene, the most stunningly designed and flawlessly executed construction of man, and anything else beautiful you can possibly dream of will look like an eyesore compared to the beauty of your Savior Jesus, radiating with love for you and everyone else there.

To behold and bask in this sight, to behold and bask in our Savior's glory—that is the essence of heaven. That's why Elijah and Moses were still there, even though it looked at first like they had left and come back to earth.

### **3. The Theme of Heaven**

As we continue to experience this foretaste of heaven, let's finally note the theme of heaven. What do the people talk about and dwell on there? Mark actually doesn't tell us explicitly, but Luke does: "They were talking about his departure, which he was going to bring to fulfillment in Jerusalem" (Luke 9:31).

So too in Revelation, it says that that the inhabitants of heaven say things like, "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation." And: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" "[Our brothers] overcame [the accuser] by the blood of the Lamb..."

I don't often read the so-called Christian bestsellers, because I can only stomach so much of them. But I was asked by someone once to read the 2004 bestseller *90 Minutes in Heaven*, and so I did. After reading that book, I am fairly certain that the author was in fact clinically dead for ninety minutes, and that somehow he was amazingly restored to life. But I also know for sure that he is a false prophet and that people should not be learning about heaven from him. One of the reasons I know that is because he states matter-of-factly that there are no songs about Jesus's death in heaven. Why? Because there is no sadness in heaven, he says.

First, the Bible clearly says the opposite, that one of the chief themes of heaven is Jesus's death. And second, the reason that it's one of the chief themes of heaven is because it's not sad when we have the full picture in view. Jesus's death is our salvation. Jesus's death means our sins are paid for. Jesus's death means that we will not die eternally, but live.

Moses and Elijah spoke about it, and so will we. And there will not be even a hint of sadness.

As we continue to experience this foretaste of heaven, we soon realize it is just that—a foretaste. Peter wanted it to be more than that, but a cloud appeared and enveloped him and James and John, a voice came from the cloud, and suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. And then it was time to go back down the mountain.

Here we only get glimpses, foretastes, brothers and sisters. Heaven is not to be found down here. Down here we must carry the cross, as Jesus went down the mountain to do. But every so often, through a happy experience, a wish fulfilled, a prayer answered, a plan realized, a hymn or sermon or festival like Christmas or Easter hitting you just so and filling you with joy, a completely refreshing vacation, a kind word at just the right time, or something else, Jesus reminds you by experience that he is good, that he is not your enemy, that there is a place where this joy never ends. Where sinners never have to deal with sin anymore. Where Jesus in his absolute glory is beheld face to face. Where the full understanding of Jesus's death and his gracious love for us hits our hearts with its full impact and significance all the time.

But we are not there yet. And how will we make sure we arrive there? “A cloud appeared and overshadowed them, and a voice came from the cloud, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him.’”

Enjoy those mountaintop experiences with Jesus, those small foretastes of heaven. But then follow him back down into the valley, and make sure to stay near him. Listen to him and his Word on a regular basis. Have your faith strengthened by him. Say that beautiful prayer with the hymn writer that we will sing later: “’Tis good, Lord, to be here, yet we may not remain, but since you bid us leave the mount, come with us to the plain.”