

The Transfiguration

Looking into the Face of Jesus
The Life of Christ, 1: Pages 533-545
Manuscript: Lesson Plan 54

Introduction

The passages for this lesson are Matthew 17:1–13; Mark 9:2–13; Luke 9:28–36. Each passage tells of the Transfiguration. We will be reading Matthew 17:1–13 in a moment.

We are going to talk about a pivotal moment in Jesus' ministry and a couple of firsts. In our last lesson, we talked about how Jesus clearly told of His death and resurrection. In this lesson we read about the Transfiguration.

Let's take a moment and consider 1 John 3:2, "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is." The question is, "How will we see Jesus?" As you contemplate that question, we will begin our study.

Let us start by reading Matthew 17:1–3 (read). We cannot really comprehend what the apostles saw and what it meant to them and for them. In this lesson, we will study the story and try to understand why these events happened. Let us explore . . .

The Transfiguration

Matthew writes "Six days" in 17:1, which is different from Luke's account, which says, says "some eight days" (Luke 9:28). William Hendriksen has these thoughts: "The expression 'six days later' is not in conflict with Luke 9:28, 'about eight days after these sayings.' Luke may have included both the day of Peter's confession and that of Christ's transfiguration when he wrote as he did; besides, he does not intend to be precise, for he says 'about eight days.' Matthew and Mark may have used the exclusive method of time computation, referring only to the six intervening days. Matthew 17:1."¹

Think about what the apostles had just heard six days earlier; remember, they were probably struggling to understand all that Jesus told them. Some may have even started questioning Jesus and His authority. There is a possibility that this was a long six days for the disciples.

The people here that Jesus calls are "Peter and James and John his brother" (Matthew 17:1). Most events in Jesus' life could be seen by all apostles, but we know there are some that He chose only a few to see. This was one of those moments. There were a couple of other events only these three had seen. Do you remember them? One was the resurrection of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5; Luke 8), and the other was Jesus' praying in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26; Mark 14).

Why do you suppose these disciples were chosen? Was it because they were some of the first disciples? Was it because they were the only ones capable of understanding? Peter was the "rock" (Matthew 16); John was "the disciple whom

¹William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1973), 663, 664.

Jesus loved" (John 13:23, etc.); James was the first apostle martyr (Acts 12:2). The main point is that we do not know why, so we cannot say with any certainty.

There is a lot of speculation of what mountain is being referenced. Three popular views of speculation: (1) Mount Tabor: The difficulty with this location is that there is a city on this mountain, and it seems this moment was private. (2) Mount Hermon: the difficulty with this location was that Jesus was met by a crowd when He descended and that the crowd was made up of scribes. Mount Hermon was probably too far north for there to be scribes there (Gentile area). Mount Hermon was located in Caesarea Philippi. (3) Jebel Jermak: located in upper Galilee, this was the highest point in that region (4,000 ft. above the Mediterranean Sea). Jebel Jermak was located about 10 miles northwest of the Sea of Galilee. We do not know where this mountain was located; the most popular belief is Mount Hermon.

"Transfigured" is from the Greek word we get "metamorphosis" (this word indicates "radical change"). What do we know here on earth today that goes through metamorphosis? Think of a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly or a tadpole into a frog. We do not know that the changes in Matthew 17:2 were as radical as some might say, but we also do not want to go to the other extreme.

How did Matthew describe the change? "His face shone like the sun." "His garments became as white as light." This must have been an amazing moment.

Then, "Moses and Elijah appeared to them" (Matthew 17:3). How did the apostles know who these men were? Did they introduce themselves? Could they hear the conversation and, therefore, know by their words? Was Moses carrying a staff, or did Elijah descend from heaven in his fiery chariot?

How did the men look? Remember, Moses had died and was buried. Elijah did not die, but his body had to be translated to heaven (2 Kings 2:11). Why these two men—Moses and Elijah? Again, we simply do not know, but maybe what they were discussing could give us a hint.

Luke 9:31 says they were speaking with Jesus about His "departure." Just think about their conversation. Most people believe they were the ones chosen because Moses represented the "Law" and Elijah represented the "prophets." They existed to point the world to Jesus and the departure to come.

Then, Peter spoke up (Matthew 17:4). Luke tells us that they were asleep, but when they awoke, they were "fully awake" as to what they were seeing. Peter offers to make three tents (ESV). Some translate this as "tabernacles"; while others say "shelters." We do not really understand what Peter was trying to do. Was he really trying to make shelters for the three? Maybe he thought they were spending the night. Jesus did not even have to reply to Peter's suggestion.

Next, a voice said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him!" This terrified the apostles. When else did God make a similar proclamation? (Christ's baptism; Matthew 3:17).

Then, the experience was over. Jesus comforted the apostles. They descended the mountain. Jesus told them to tell no one until He had risen from the dead. Why did He not want this told? Mark says they started discussing with one another what rising from the dead meant. The apostles discussed Elijah (Matthew 17:10).

They asked Jesus concerning the prophesy of "Elijah coming first." Jesus had already discussed with them the fact that the "coming of Elijah" had been

fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist (Matthew 11:14). The coming of Elijah must have confused them. Jesus explained again so they could understand.

Let us now see if we can determine the . . .

Purpose of the Transfiguration

Now that we have studied the story in detail, why did God see it important to have this event take place? Consider what Peter wrote in 2 Peter 1:16–21 (read). William Hendriksen comments:

When we put together into a composite picture all that has been definitely revealed—such as, Christ's radiant countenance, his white garments, the resplendent visitors, the bright cloud, and the love-revealing voice—the total impression is exactly that which Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, subsequently summarized in these words, 'We were eye-witnesses of his majesty. . . He received honor and glory from God the Father' (2 Peter 1:16, 17). All in all, therefore, the transfiguration of Jesus was both for himself and for the disciples who witnessed it a definitely positive, encouraging, glorious experience. Matthew 17:5.²

He received "honor and glory from God the Father;" this was for Jesus. In 2 Peter 1:18, we read that they ". . . heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain." This voice was also for the apostles. God put His stamp on Christ's thirty-year preparation for His ministry (words at His baptism), and now, God put His stamp on Christ's personal ministry (words at the transfiguration). Heaven had now prepared Jesus for His coming ordeal: His "departure."

Now we need to see . . .

What can We Learn from the Transfiguration?

We learn from this story of the power of God and glory of Christ. Sometimes we need encouragement from others, like Jesus needed from Elijah and Moses. We also learn of the authority of Jesus.

Conclusion

It would have been awesome to be there that day to see that amazing moment. But we will see another amazing moment one day; let us go back to what we started with—1 John 3:2.

What a glorious day it will be to "see Him as He is." It is going to be an amazing day for those who are prepared to see Him. Are you ready? Because it is going to happen. Will you be like the apostles, frightened by the voice from heaven, or will you be excited because you understand your eternal destiny?

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²Ibid, 668.