

The Transfiguration of Christ

"This is my beloved Son...hear ye him"

Peter Ditzel

And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light. And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him. Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias. While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him. And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid. And Jesus came and touched them, and said, Arise, and be not afraid. And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, save Jesus only.

Matthew 17:1-8

The account quoted above is usually called the transfiguration of Christ. It is also found in Mark 9:2-8 and Luke 9:28-36. Many wonder why it happened and why it is recorded for us. In a quick survey, we see that Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain where they see a vision (Jesus calls it a vision in Matthew 17:9) of a shining Christ. Then they see Moses and Elijah appear and talk with Him. Impetuous Peter then sticks his foot in his mouth and says to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias" (Matthew 17:4). Oops. Not good. Why? That's the point of this article, and, I believe, the point of the transfiguration itself.

Jesus' Metamorphosis

Let's notice some things. In verse 2, the word "transfigured" is translated from the Greek word *metemorphōthē*. As you might guess, this is the word from which we get the word metamorphosis. This English word is often used for the change in form that some insects undergo (for example, caterpillar to butterfly). In this vision, Jesus underwent a dramatic transformation. Matthew says that "his face did

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shine as the sun" (verse 2). The word "shine" is *elampsen*, and it means "radiate." In other words, He was not reflecting light, He was a source of light, "as the sun." His clothes also were "white as the light," "shining, exceeding white as snow" (Mark 9:3), and, "white and glistening" (Luke 9:29).

Matthew next says that Moses and Elijah appeared, "talking with him" (Matthew 17:3). Mark says the same thing, but Luke adds that they "appeared in glory" (Luke 9:31). Although glory indicates a splendor, without the detail used to describe Christ, we are left to conclude that their glory did not equal that of Christ's. Discussing the resurrection body, Paul gives this example: "There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars: for one star differeth from another star in glory" (1 Corinthians 15:41). Although all of these celestial bodies have a glory, not all are equal. In the transfiguration account, only Christ is described as radiating as the sun.

The Conversation About Jesus' Exodus

Neither Matthew nor Mark give any indication of what Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus about, but Luke says they, "spoke of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem" (Luke 9:31). This is a little misleading to a modern English reader. "Decease" to us means "death." But it used to mean "departure." The Greek word translated "decease" here is *exodon*. In other words, as a literal translation would say, they "spoke of his exodus that he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem."

We don't often hear of the fact that Jesus Christ led a second exodus, but He did. In fact, Moses' leading the children of Israel out of Egypt was only a type of the real exodus that Christ led. Another shadow of the real exodus was when the angels led Lot and his wife and daughters out of Sodom. These Old Testament exoduses were merely types of Jesus, by His atoning death on the cross, leading His people out of the bondage of sin and slavery to the law that was typified by Jerusalem (notice Galatians 4:25). In fact, God calls the city "where also our Lord was crucified," obviously meaning Jerusalem, "Sodom and Egypt" (see Revelation 11:8). So, Jesus was discussing with Moses and Elijah the exodus in which He was about to lead His people out of sin and bondage to the law.

I should mention that this conversation was itself a picture. Moses and Elijah were representatives of the Old Testament. Moses was the great

lawgiver, and Elijah was a great prophet. They stood for the "law and the prophets," the Old Testament. When Peter, James, and John saw Jesus conversing with Moses and Elijah about His exodus, they were seeing a picture of Jesus informing the law and the prophets about His work of redemption. The reality of this picture did not happen at the moment of the transfiguration. It happened throughout the period of the Old Testament as God revealed to the Old Testament saints the truth of what the coming Messiah was going to do. This then showed itself in all of the laws, rituals, writings, and prophecies of the Old Testament, all of which were fulfilled in Christ (see, for example, Matthew 5:17).

The Superiority of Jesus and the New Testament

Now that we understand this much, we can see that by radiating as the sun while conversing with Moses and Elijah, Jesus was showing to His disciples, and to us, His superiority to Moses and Elijah. In fact, He was showing that the Old Testament is now to be understood in light of the One who fulfilled it through His exodus by dying on the cross as the testator of the New Testament (read Hebrews 9). Thus, the superior glory of the New Testament to the glory of the Old Testament might be likened to the superior brilliance of the sun over the light of the moon, which is only a dim reflection. Remember, too, that Moses' face shone only because he had come in contact with God on the mount. It was not his own glory, and it was only temporary (Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3).

Peter's Blunder

Luke alone also records the following: "But Peter and those with him were pressed down with sleep. But fully awakening, they saw His glory, and the two men standing with Him" (Luke 9:32). This tells us that, like the virgins in the parable (Matthew 25:5) and as these very same disciples were going to do in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:37; 40; 43), the disciples Jesus brought to the mount slept. It was only when they were fully awakened that they saw Jesus' glory and Moses and Elijah with Him. I believe that this awakening was typical of their later spiritual awakening after Pentecost. Before this, they did not fully comprehend either Jesus or even the Old Testament Scriptures.

Nevertheless, Peter is still going to make a grave error. Luke says this occurred as Moses and Elijah were departing (Luke 9:33). In all three accounts, we read that Peter suggested that they make three

tabernacles, one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus. It was as if Peter became afraid (see Mark 9:6) when he saw Moses and Elijah (representatives of the Old Testament) going and wanted to hang onto them (the Old Testament) and not be alone with Jesus (representative of the New Testament). By suggesting one tabernacle for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus, Peter was putting the three on an equal footing. Luke 9:33 says Peter did not know what he said, but the Greek is better translated as he did not perceive what he said. That is, he did not perceive the implications of his suggestion.

Hear Ye Him

God then gives Peter a direct rebuke and correction: "While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him" (Matthew 17:5). It was wrong for Peter to try to keep Moses and Elijah right along with Jesus as equals.

We are not to make the law and the prophets, the Old Testament, equal with Jesus and His newer revelation, the New Testament. Moses and Elijah were not the Son of God; Jesus is the Son of God. We are to hear Him! If we are going to hear Moses and Elijah (the Old Testament), we must hear Moses and Elijah through Jesus, seeing Jesus in the Old Testament, seeing the Old Testament shadows in the light of the New Testament. That is the purpose of the Old Testament for us today. Remember what Jesus did for the men on the road to Emmaus: "And beginning at Moses and all the prophets [the law and the prophets, the Old Testament], he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).

Yes, the Old Testament is the Word of God. But we must never try to make it tabernacle with us as Jesus tabernacles with us. We can take the light of Jesus and look back there to those types and shadows, but we must leave them in the past where they belong and never bring them to dwell with us now.

Being overshadowed by the cloud (by the way, the Greek says it was a cloudiness composed of light, indicating that it was supernatural and a sign of God's presence) and hearing the voice, the disciples were afraid. Then, "Jesus came and touched them, and said, Arise [the very Greek word often used of resurrection], and be not afraid" (Matthew 17:7).

Now notice Matthew 17:8: "And when they had lifted up their eyes [notice that their eyes were lifted up], they saw no man, save Jesus only." And this, dear reader, is what we should all see: Jesus only. When we read Moses, we should not see Moses, for to us he is dead and gone. What I mean is that we should not be reading the law as if it were alive for us today. We are dead to the law (Romans 7:4). When we read it, we should be looking for how it typified Jesus. When we read the prophets, we should not be looking for prophecies for us today. All of the Old Testament prophecies have been fulfilled in Christ. We should be looking for Him.

Read it again in Mark's account: "And suddenly, when they had looked round about, they saw no man any more, save Jesus only with themselves" (Mark 9:8). No one *any more* save Jesus *only*. We must not make the mistake that Peter made. He was afraid and hesitant to let go of the Old Testament law and prophecies. But we must let them depart. There is only One we are to tabernacle with. There is only One we are to hear. He is God's beloved Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. This is why the transfiguration occurred and why it is recorded for us to read—so we can see Moses and Elijah depart and hear Jesus Christ alone. "Hear ye Him."