

Why The Transfiguration?

Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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You know, it is absolutely wonderful when God answers one of my questions. Now I do not want you to think that God speaks to me personally or anything like that. That is not the case. As a matter of fact, He does not even answer some of my questions with any haste whatsoever. Sometimes it is a day. More often it is weeks; more often than that, it is months, and most of the times it is years that I have to wait for the answers, even to some of the most nagging questions that I may have.

Well, the particular question that I am speaking about today actually goes back to my fifth grade year. Grade school. That is 20 years, give or take a few months, and God answered this question for me just this past week.

I will tell you the story behind it. One of our assignments in the fifth grade had to do with prefixes. You know, that is the time in your schooling that you start learning a little bit of grammar and start applying it. Well, my teacher gave the class an assignment, and this assignment was that she gave us 10 prefixes. And what we had to do (she made a game out of it), we had to come up with the longest word that we could find or that we could think of that started with that certain prefix. And whoever had the longest word for a certain prefix got a prize, and whoever had the highest total score for the 10 prefixes also got a prize. Well, I won the prize for the prefix "trans."

Now we were in Columbia, South Carolina, the heart of the Bible Belt, and I thought everybody in the class, all of them Baptists probably, would come up with this word. The word that I came up with, no one else came up with it. I was the preacher's kid, so I had an excuse. The word was transfiguration. Fifteen letters.

Anyway, thinking of the word transfiguration made me curious, so I decided to read the account in Matthew chapter 17. Now, it is a wonderful story, miraculous and almost incredible. Those three disciples, Peter, James, and

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John, the two sons of Zebedee and Peter, they received a very rare glimpse into the glory of God. And just think about it. What a tremendous thrill that must have been to them. To be given a glimpse into God's glory that only a few others in the whole history of the world had ever received.

Now as far as I can remember (I am just thinking off the top of my head right now), but only Moses, while he was standing there in the cleft of the rock, and Elijah, when he saw the Son of Man in his chariot. Well, Ezekiel, did he not, as well as Elijah. Now that I just thought of it, Ezekiel did too. And maybe, maybe Isaiah did as well. Anyway, it is a small number of people who actually got this thrill.

But the question that I have been mulling over for 20 years is, why? Why did God make the Transfiguration take place at all? What were His reasons? What was the purpose of it? What was He trying to get across to these three disciples, Peter, James, and John?

Now this is what I think I finally got an answer to and what we will look in today, but before we get to the answers, we need to set the scene. Because outside of the scene, outside of the setting of this, the understanding does not come through. So what we are going to look at is that in the background details, the religious milieu of the day, and the disciples' perceptions of Christ and what was happening, it is in these things that we see the reasons for the Transfiguration. We cannot look at this without going back all the way to the beginning of Matthew chapter 16. Because it is Matthew 16 that provides the background for the Transfiguration.

We are just going to look quickly through it. We are not going to read any of this. We are just going to pick up, let us say, the subheads of this chapter and see how that ties in with the Transfiguration.

The first section there, my New King James here has "The Pharisees and Sadducees Seek a Sign," and if you go through the section, what Jesus says is they want all these signs, but they cannot read them. They do not understand what is going on. You know, the sky may be red, but they do not know whether that means storm or pleasant weather. So the Pharisees have something wrong with them. They seek these signs, but they do not get it. Something is not sinking in. So even with all their knowledge of the Old

Testament, they did not understand what was happening, especially in the presence of Jesus Christ.

The second section from verse 5 to verse 12 is Christ warns His disciples that the Pharisees and Sadducees doctrines were all wet. The famous scripture out of that is, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees." Their doctrine, their teaching was wrong and it was spreading. It had spread throughout all Judea. And it did not square with the revelation of God because it was based more on tradition and what they had reasoned out rather than on the truth of God.

The third section, the New King James has over verse 13 through verse 20 and actually I kind of lumped this all in all the way up to verse 23: "Peter Confesses Jesus as the Messiah." And Jesus predicts His death and resurrection. Now He also speaks in this section about building the church. Now this was actually a major correction of the doctrine of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They had gotten all this wrong. They did not understand what was going on, and Jesus said, yes, I am the Son of Man but I have not come as a conquering king. I have come as a Suffering Servant who must live a perfect life and then die the substitutionary death that was predicted in the Old Testament. And then I will be raised from the dead.

And at that point I will begin to build My church, and I am going to do it with you twelve guys that are here before me and I have given you X Y Z authority to do this work. I am not coming to overthrow the Roman government, which is what the Pharisees and the zealots and all these other people wanted out of the Messiah. They wanted a man of action to go out there and do something. To kick the Romans out and start their own kingdom and their own millennium. They thought it would happen through the Messiah's coming. They did not understand that He was coming twice. Once to do all the spiritual work that had to get done. And then He would come later on and establish a both a physical and a spiritual Kingdom. But they were thinking entirely on a physical level.

In the fourth section here, "Take Up the Cross and Follow Him" from verses 24 to 28, Jesus gives them further instruction about how they have to act to make all this come about. If I can paraphrase it, He says, "If you don't do these things like I've done them, it's not going to happen. And you'll get

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rewarded according to how well you sacrifice yourself to this cause and how much building you do. And how much you bear the load of this cause that we have of bringing the Kingdom to this earth."

So if you read the first verse there in chapter 17, these are the thoughts that were swirling around the disciples' heads for about a week. Especially Peter, James, and John. They had six days, it says, to mull these things over.

Now let us think about the religious milieu a little bit. We have touched on this a bit, but we did not go into it really fully. We should just quickly review it.

You are probably aware that just about all the Jews were expecting Messiah to come. See, they had Daniel's prophecy of the 70 weeks, and they knew, counting it just exactly as Daniel said, or as Gabriel said to Daniel, that it was just about time. In fact, it was probably up by this point. Maybe they were waiting for the 70th week to be finally over. I do not know, but it was close. It was very close.

Their idea of Messiah though was wrong. Like I said, they expected Him to come as a king to conquer the world and put them at the top of the nations. It was all political. It was all physical.

Now the more spiritual among them did feel that they would have to return to the Lord for this to happen. So they were expecting a spiritual revival of sorts as well.

But they did not at all expect the Lamb of God. They expected the Lion of Judah but they got the Lamb of God. They did not expect the Messiah to come and be led to the slaughter for the sins of the world.

And another thing—and this is very vital to understand. They thought the Messiah was just a prophet. Another man. They thought He would be a leader. You might say, a physical savior. They did not expect Him to be *God*. They should have known that it would be God Himself, Yahweh, who had to die for their sins, but they missed it. Their focus was purely on getting rid of the Romans and becoming a physical nation. They looked at what had happened in the past and they just carried that forward into what God was

doing, and it was not right. And you know, as it came out in the trial of Jesus, when He said He was the Son of God, they got Him on charges of blasphemy. It was blasphemy to think that the Messiah was the Son of God.

See how out of kilter they were, out of step they were with God's truth!

So this is what the disciples had learned. And they were still coming out of it. And now to the disciples' perceptions of things, you know, sometimes I think we give the disciples too much credit. Who were these guys? They were men like us. They had grown up in the world. They had learned all of this Jewish tradition all their lives. As a matter of fact, most of them were Galileans, and they were considered the more religious among them. They were backwater, but they were very devout.

The Judeans, on the other hand, were a little bit more worldly. But these Galileans they were steeped in the old time religion—Judaism, not the true religion. Sure, they knew enough to follow Jesus and their understanding was growing, but they still did not have the benefit of the Holy Spirit to any appreciable measure. It may have been working with them, but obviously Acts 2 shows that they did not have it in them.

So we kind of give them more credit, I think, than they are due. Sure they had good minds, but they did not understand a lot of things. They were very much in that unlearning process that we all go through. We have to unlearn the past before we can really grasp what God is revealing to us. So they were still thinking in the typical Jewish Pharisaic or Sadducaic manners.

And if you think about it, Paul corrected Peter about this years later and we hear about it in the epistle to the Galatians. Peter was still trying to go back to the way it had been. And Paul said, "Look, buddy, you may be chief apostle, you may be Peter, but you're doing it all wrong. I'm sorry. You're causing distinctions between brethren here, and it shouldn't be. Jews and Gentiles have no wall of separation anymore." See, Peter was still thinking that way, and he had to be jerked back by Paul, who understood a little bit better.

So that is what was going on here as chapter 17 opens up.

Matthew 17:1-9 Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them talking with Him. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. But Jesus came and touched them and said, "Arise, and do not be afraid." And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead."

Now we have to ask a few questions here. First of all, why did Moses and Elijah appear? Why those two? It was very significant that God chose Moses and Elijah.

You see, Moses was the great lawgiver. And Elijah was the archetypal, the archetype prophet.

In one fell swoop what God is telling these people is My Son is more important than the law and the prophets. "This is My Son in whom I am well pleased. hear Him!" Now you know why we had to go through all this background. They were still reaching back to Moses and the prophets and putting him on an equal par with Jesus.

That is what Peter said. "Hey, it's good that we are here. Let's get three tabernacles. We'll have one for You and one for him and one for him, and we will all put them all even like this, so no one has the ascendancy on the other one."

You know what God did? *While he was still speaking, He said, this is My beloved Son.* Hear Him! No one is higher than Jesus Christ. God wanted to

make it very clear, right from the beginning, to these three disciples, the three lead apostles.

The one, James, who would be the first to be martyred. He had a very important role to fill. Peter, who was the lead apostle until his own martyrdom. And the one John, the beloved disciple, who took over from there.

It was very important for these three to know this from the very beginning. *No one is higher than the Son.* Whatever He says, goes. And if He says anything that seems to contradict what Moses says or what the prophets say, *hear Him.*

How many times did Jesus say, you have heard it said this way in time past, You shall not kill, but I say do not even think about it. Do not even hate the person. *Hear Him.*

Get the idea now? If there is ever a question about what to do on a certain issue, it is in the Gospel somewhere. He is the guide. He is truth embodied. He is the way. The way that leads to eternal life.

Now you know how I know that this is the truth? Because 30 years later the apostle Paul, or whoever it was that wrote the book of Hebrews, was still fighting this battle. He was still singing the same song.

Hebrews 3:1-3 Therefore, holy brethren [right away he tells you how important this is, all the holy people], partakers of the heavenly calling [that is us], consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Jesus Christ [Think about Him. Think about who this person was.], who was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was faithful in all His house. [at least he and Moses did their jobs faithfully. But listen to this] For this One has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as He who built the house has more honor than the house.

Who was this man, Jesus Christ? He was the Creator! He built all things. And the Creator is so much more important than anything created.

Hebrews 3:4-5 For every house is built by someone, but He who built all things is God. [Jesus Christ was God. Who is more important than God?] And Moses indeed was faithful in all [God's] house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward.

So, he was kind of a forerunner of things. But he was just a witness of what was going to come afterward in the person of Jesus Christ. See, Moses even said, there is a Prophet like me coming. Wait for Him and do everything He says.

Hebrews 3:6 But Christ [He was faithful] as a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.