

Why The Transfiguration?

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It is absolutely wonderful when God answers one of my questions. Now, I would not want anyone to think that God speaks to me personally, sends me dazzling visions or the like. That sort of thing has yet to happen. Just like everyone else, I usually have to dig out the answers, and very frequently, it is a long time between question and answer. Sometimes I wait days, sometimes weeks, sometimes months. More often than not, God makes me wait years for the answers to some of the most nagging questions.

This particular question goes back to the fifth grade—about 20 years—and God answered it for me just recently. One of our fifth-grade assignments focused on prefixes. The teacher, Mrs. Martin, gave the class a list of about ten prefixes, and our job was to write down the longest words that we could think of that started with those prefixes. The student with the longest word for each prefix received a prize, and the student with the highest total score also received a prize.

Well, I won the prize for the prefix "trans-." Living in the Bible Belt, I thought more kids would have come up with the same word I did, yet no one but I thought of the word "transfiguration." That is fifteen letters. I upgraded to chocolate milk that day at lunch.

Thinking of the word, "transfiguration," made me curious, so I read the account in Matthew 17. I thought it a wonderful story, miraculous and almost incredible. The three disciples received a rare glimpse into the glory of God! What a tremendous thrill that must have been!

But why? Why did God do it? What was its purpose? What exactly was He trying to get across? These are the questions to which I think I finally received the answers. However, before we get to the answers, we must set the scene. In the *background details*, the *religious milieu* of the day and the *disciples' perceptions* of things, we see the reasons for this stunning display of Christ's glory.

Background

Matthew 16 provides the background for the transfiguration. Looking quickly through the chapter, we see several sections, all of which tie into the lessons of the transfiguration.

- » The Pharisees and Sadducees seek a sign, but they cannot discern the signs of the times (verses 1-4). Even with their extensive knowledge of the Old Testament, they did not understand what was happening. They would not accept the myriad signs proving Jesus' Messiahship.
- » Jesus warns His disciples against the leaven—the doctrine—of the Pharisees and Sadducees (verses 5-12). Their teaching did not square with the revelation of God; it was based more on tradition than truth, as Jesus had shown in the previous chapter.
- » Peter proclaims Jesus to be the Messiah, and Jesus speaks of building His church and being crucified and resurrected (verses 13-23). This was a major step forward in the disciples' understanding, and it corrected the erroneous prophetic teaching of the

Pharisees and Sadducees. However, from the incident that occurs in verses 22-23, we can see that Peter—and probably the other disciples also—were not yet fully convinced of it.

» Jesus warns the disciples that they must imitate Him in sacrificing themselves to bring about the Kingdom of God (verses 24-28). Following Christ means imitating Him, to the point that they would have to give their very lives in service to Him. Their reward would be based on how they gave themselves to this cause.

These ideas swirled around in the disciples' minds for six days before the transfiguration took place (Matthew 17:1). Jesus' teaching and warnings served to prepare them for the glorious vision they would witness atop the mountain. As Peter later wrote, it was something they would never forget, an experience that helped forge them into apostles of Christ (II Peter 1:16-18).

Religious Milieu

Because of Daniel's Seventy Weeks prophecy (Daniel 9:24-27), the Jews knew that the coming of Messiah was imminent. It was a constant topic of conversation (John 7:25-31, 40-44). They could easily count the weeks equal to years and come up with at least an approximate year. They expected Him to reveal Himself at any time.

However, they were expecting a conquering King to come and overthrow the Romans—not the Lamb of God led to the slaughter to die for our sins. They looked at the prophecies of the Old Testament, seeing the ones that spoke of Christ coming to fight the enemies of Judah (see Zechariah 12:1-9), and ignoring the ones speaking of His redemptive work (see Isaiah 52:13-15; 53:1-12). In effect, they wanted to skip right to His second coming without any of the "unpleasantness" of the first.

Also, and this is vital to understand, they thought the Messiah to be *just* a prophet, a man, a physical savior. They probably derived this from Moses' prophecy in Deuteronomy 18:15-19 of "a Prophet like me." Since Moses was a mere man, they thought the Messiah to be no better.

Any idea of the Messiah being God or the Son of God they would think to be close to, if not real, blasphemy. Even when Jesus explained the truth of this to them (John 10:31-39), they rejected Him and tried to seize Him and stone Him. Thus, as Paul and Peter later said, He became to them "a stone of stumbling" (Romans 9:33; I Corinthians 1:23; I Peter 2:6-8) because they were stubbornly fixed on their preconceived notions about Christ.

This is what the disciples had learned as they had grown up in Galilee, and it was what they were having to unlearn under their new Master, Jesus. Since their whole world was being turned upside down, God knew that to encourage them as they learned, He had to show them incontrovertible proof that they were on the right track. The transfiguration gave them that boost.

Disciples' Perceptions

Sometimes we give the disciples too much credit. Though they knew enough to follow Jesus, and their understanding was growing, they still did not have the benefit of the Holy Spirit to any great degree. They were still very much in the unlearning process—that is, unlearning the false teachings

they had received all their lives. It would be akin to asking an American to believe that individual rights, capitalism, baseball, hot dogs and apple pie were evil, and that an uneducated man from the backwoods knew a better way.

The disciples' thinking was still based on the typical Jewish understandings promoted by the Pharisees and Sadducees. They had never known any other way of life, and they were proud of their strictness in following it (Acts 10:14; Galatians 1:14; Philippians 3:4-6). Even years after they both had received the Holy Spirit, Paul corrected Peter for the tendency to fall back on his Jewish upbringing (Galatians 2:11-21).

For all that, however, they knew Jesus was special. A short while before, when many of Jesus' disciples deserted Him because of misunderstanding His teaching, He asked the twelve, "Do you also want to go away?" (John 6:67). Peter's answer for himself and the others is insightful:

Then Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (verses 68-69)

This shows that they had this one fact firmly in hand. However, they were still not totally ready to swallow everything Jesus told them right away. Peter went so far as to rebuke Jesus for even mentioning that He would suffer crucifixion and rise from the dead (Matthew 16:21-22). To Peter, the Messiah should not have to endure such a thing! Even the transfiguration, crucifixion and resurrection did not completely persuade them to accept the outworking of God's plan. Before Christ ascended to heaven they asked Him, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6).

In reality, though the disciples had at least recognized Him as Messiah, they were still in their spiritual infancy. They had a long and arduous work before them, and God found it expedient to kindle their faith with a raw dose of His Son's once and future glory.

The Transfiguration

Matthew tells the story of the transfiguration in a very straightforward manner:

Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, brought them up on a high mountain by themselves, and 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. (Matthew 17:1-3)

Jesus clearly calls this mysterious occurrence a "vision" (verse 9). It was not reality but a glimpse of what the future held for Jesus Christ.

The word "transfigured" in verse 2 sounds esoteric, but it is merely the passive form of the Greek word *metamorphoo*, meaning "changed in form" or "transformed." This same word is used in the well-known Romans 12:2, ". . . be *transformed* by the renewing of your mind. . . ." Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke uses the phrase *egeneto heteron*, translated as "was altered" and meaning "became different" (Luke 9:29). In the vision, the three disciples saw Jesus change to the form He will have in God's Kingdom, which He alluded to in Matthew 16:28.

Why did Moses and Elijah appear with Him? This is where the events of Matthew 16 become important. These two servants of God were the most revered among all the Old Testament figures. Moses, the Great Lawgiver personified the Law, and Elijah, the Archetypal Prophet, the Prophets. Evidently, the vision depicted Moses and Elijah speaking to Jesus in a servant-Master relationship, but the disciples failed to see this vital distinction:

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. (Matthew 17:4-6)

Notice how Peter puts it. "Let's make three tabernacles, one for each of you." The other accounts say he did not really know what he was saying, meaning that he had missed something in his fear, that he spoke without thinking it through (Mark 9:6; Luke 9:33).

What happened as a result of his thoughtless comment? Notice that Matthew writes, "While he was still speaking. . . ." This is a big clue. God, immediately seeing that the disciples did not understand, took steps to make it plain. To paraphrase what God says, "Look! Jesus is **MY** beloved Son, and He has **MY** highest approval. Listen to what **HE** says! He is **far** greater than Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets."

This is why the transfiguration occurred. God wanted to make it very clear to the disciples that His way of life is based on the life and death and life again of Jesus Christ, not on the Jews' traditional beliefs. He had to stun the disciples so that they would put Jesus and His teachings on a higher level than Judaism—even higher than the teachings of Moses and Elijah.

Whatever Jesus says is far more important to our salvation than the minutiae of Moses' law or the vagaries of prophecy. In many instances, Jesus makes upgrades to Old Testament law, giving a higher, spiritual meaning (for instance, Matthew 5:21-22). Hear Him!

Confirmation

Hebrews 3:1-6 confirms that this is the true understanding of the transfiguration. In the early AD 60s, Paul was still having to reiterate this point to the Jewish Christians:

Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus, who was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was faithful in all His house. 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. For every house is built by someone, but He who built all things is God. And Moses indeed was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward, but Christ 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.

Jesus, the Son of God, is greater than Moses, a servant, and He is certainly greater than Elijah. We will do well if we first start with the teachings of Christ and use them to "interpret" the rest. He is the Chief Cornerstone (Isaiah 28:16; Ephesians 2:20). Upon Him, everything hangs.

In Hebrews 3, Paul admonishes us to hold fast to what Jesus taught us (see also Revelation 3:11). If we do, he writes, we also will be sons and daughters in His house. We will no longer be servants, but heirs, actual children of the Father (Romans 8:16-17). Is that not good reason to put Him first? Hear Him!