

## **“The Transfiguration”**

### **Luke 9:28-36**

This morning as we continue our study in Luke 9 we are going to look at one of the most significant events in Christ’s earthly ministry: the transfiguration. At the transfiguration three of the disciples were eyewitnesses to the majesty of Jesus Christ. They saw a visible manifestation of the glory of God the Son.

What is the significance of the transfiguration? Why did this happen? Why were only three disciples chosen as witnesses? Why things were said on this occasion? Why were the three disciples instructed not to tell anyone about this vision until after the resurrection?

As we look at this account of the transfiguration this morning, our focus will, of course, be on Jesus Christ. In the transfiguration we see Christ revealed as greater than His persecutors, greater than Moses and the prophets, and greater than us.

#### **I. Jesus Christ Revealed As Greater than His Persecutors**

Verse 28 tells us that the events described in this passage took place about 8 days after what Jesus had taught in verses 18-27. The careful Bible student will notice that the parallel accounts in Matthew and Mark both say that six days passed between these two occasions. There is no contradiction in these accounts. Six full

days had passed in the life of Christ, but if you include the day Jesus had taught the things previous and the day of the transfiguration you get the 8 days found in Luke's account.

This verse also tells us that Jesus specifically took Peter, James, and John with Him on this occasion. This is the second time we have seen these three disciples singled out by Jesus to witness something the other disciples did not get to witness. The first occasion was the healing of Jairus' daughter back in Luke 8:51. As we consider the significance of the transfiguration, keep in mind that Jesus specifically chose just these three disciples as witnesses. In verse 36 of this text we read, "And they (Peter, James, and John) kept it close, and told no man in those days any of those things which they had seen." In the parallel accounts of the transfiguration found in Matthew 17 and Mark 9 Jesus specifically told Peter, James, and John not to tell the other disciples about the transfiguration until after the resurrection.

Why? We will come back to this, but think about it for now. Why did Jesus choose just these three disciples and then instruct them not to tell anyone until after the resurrection?

After verse 28 tells us who all was present, the end of the verse tells us where they were. Jesus took these disciples and "went up into a mountain to pray." Jesus often went up into the mountains for privacy. Sometimes He did this for the

sake of teaching his disciples in private, but often He did this for prayer and that is what we see on this occasion. Jesus went up this mountain to pray.

Verse 29 tells us what happened as Jesus prayed: “The fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistening.” Matthew’s account says, “his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light” (Matthew 17:2). As Christ humbled Himself in prayer on this occasion, He was transfigured in glory. There was a physical change that took place on this occasion that allowed these three disciples to see in part the glory of Christ which could not be fully comprehended in their flesh. They were given just a taste of His boundless glory, a taste they could comprehend in their mortal bodies. John would later write in I John 3:2, “Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.” On that day we will see Him as He is, but until then, we rest in what He has revealed.

Luke does not use the word “transfigured” like Matthew and Mark use in their accounts. Remember, Luke was writing to Theophilus, a Gentile. And this word “transfigured” was often used in Pagan theology to describe the changes experienced by their false gods. To avoid confusion Luke omits the term here.

Peter addresses the same issue when talking about the transfiguration in II Peter 1:16 when he wrote, “For we have not followed cunningly devised fables,

when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty.”

Now look down to verse 32: “But Peter and they that were with him were heavy with sleep: and when they were awake, they saw his glory, and the two men that stood with him.” Peter, James, and John, though present, were struggling with the weakness of their own flesh. They were tired. They were “heavy with sleep.” But at some point they became aware of what was happening. They were awake and they “saw His glory.” Peter described it as “majesty” in II Peter 1:16. They witnessed this incredible display of God’s glory upon, in, and through Jesus Christ.

Now look down to verse 36: “And when the voice was past, Jesus was found alone. And they kept it close, and told no man in those days any of those things which they had seen.” Peter, James, and John didn’t tell anyone about this. They had just witnessed the glory of God revealed in Jesus Christ in a way that they had never seen before during His earthly ministry. Yet they didn’t tell anyone.

Matthew 17:9 says, “Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead.” Jesus gave them specific instructions about what they had seen. What they had witnessed was not to be shared until after the resurrection. This brings us back to our earlier question: Why did Jesus choose just these three disciples and then instruct them not to tell anyone until after the resurrection?

Remember what Jesus had taught His disciples just eight days earlier in Luke 9:22, “The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be slain, and be raised the third day.” Jesus had taught His disciples that He would suffer rejection and be killed. On the surface we might immediately think that the transfiguration was given to encourage the disciples about the impending suffering and death of Jesus. But only three of the disciples were witnesses to the transfiguration and Jesus specifically told them not to share this with the other disciples until after the resurrection. The revelation given to the disciples at the transfiguration was intended to be useful to them, and to us, at a future time. Future from their perspective. Specifically, after the resurrection. How is this revelation of Christ’s glory at the transfiguration beneficial for us in the time in which we live, after Christ’s resurrection? In the transfiguration we see clearly that Jesus was greater than His persecutors.

Everything Jesus predicted about His suffering and death came to pass. As we continue through Luke’s gospel account we will see Jesus suffer. He was rejected by the Jews. The elders, priests, and scribes: those who should have been first in line to welcome the Messiah, were first in line to persecute Him. He was seized by the Jews, handed over to the Romans, and crucified at the demand of the mob. But through the transfiguration, we see that all of this Jesus suffered willingly.

In Christ's suffering and death we do not see weakness, but profound humility. It was not by force that Jesus suffered. It was not by constraint that Jesus suffered. It was not through weakness or inability that Jesus suffered. Jesus could have protected His physical body from death just as easily as He was clothed in heavenly glory on this occasion. Jesus was subject to death because He laid down His life. He was sacrificed because He offered Himself. Nothing was taken from Jesus. All that Jesus suffered while His glory was concealed in His flesh He willingly suffered as he emptied Himself. Philippians 2:7-8, "[He] made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."

In the transfiguration Jesus is revealed as greater than His persecutors. Heavenly glory was manifested by Christ in His earthly body. He did not die out of compulsion. He willingly submitted himself to death. Through the transfiguration we see the death of Christ as it really was: not weakness, but profound humility. He was greater than His persecutors. Next, we see through the transfiguration that Jesus is greater than Moses and the prophets.

## **II. Jesus Christ is Greater than Moses and the Prophets**

Consider the imagery of this passage. Someone goes up a mountain, converses with God, and a visible change takes place such that they shine. This

sounds like Moses in the Old Testament. In Exodus 34 Moses went up Mt. Sinai and was there with the Lord 40 days and 40 nights. When Moses came down from the mountain Exodus 34:29 tells us that “the skin of his face shone” because of his close communion with the Lord. And when Moses came down, he brought with him the two tablets of the law, the ten commandments.

Certainly there are similarities between Moses on Mt. Sinai and Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. But consider the superiority of Christ. Moses reflected the glory of God, like the moon reflects the sun. Jesus actually possessed the glory of God, it was innate to His person. Moses concealed the glory that shined on the skin of his face with a veil until it faded and he was again like any other man. Jesus willingly and purposefully concealed the glory of God in his human flesh until he had accomplished the redemption God the Father sent Him to accomplish. God gave the Law to Moses. The Law is holy, just, and good (Romans 7:12). But there is no grace found in the Law. The Law shows us our sin, it gives us God’s perfect standard of righteousness and shows us where we come short, but it offers no solution. All the Law can do is condemn us.

Grace and peace come through Jesus Christ. He came to fulfill the Law. He did what we could not: He kept the law perfectly. God’s own righteousness satisfied God’s demands. Then Jesus willingly laid down His life as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. In salvation His righteousness is imputed to us. He takes our

sin and we receive His righteousness. We see the superiority of Christ in the broad imagery of this passage.

Now look at verse 30 of our text: “And, behold, there talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias:” Moses and Elijah were present with Jesus at the transfiguration. Why these two men?

They represent the Old Testament, the Law the the Prophets. We have already pointed out Moses’ role as the giver of the Law. Elijah stands next after Moses in the line of distinguished Old Testament prophets. He called Israel to repentance and fidelity to the Word of God when true worship had been all but lost. He courageously stood alone against wicked king Ahab and the apathetic men of Israel. He served as a prototype of the ideal prophet. He was chosen to represent the prophets on this occasion.

The presence of Moses and Elijah remind us that Jesus did not come into the world without a testimony. Moses and the prophets had testified of Him. The Old Testament prophesied, prefigured, and prepared the way for Jesus and His ministry. Jesus is the fulfillment of all these things.

Jesus demonstrated this for the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Luke 24:25-27, “Then he [Jesus] said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.”



Peter testified to the same in I Peter 1:11 when he wrote that the Spirit of Christ in the Old Testament prophets “testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow.”

Verse 31 tells us that Moses and Elijah appeared in glory. They briefly departed from the glory of the Father in heaven to be witnesses to the glory of the Son on earth. The glory in which they appeared was not an intrinsic glory, but glory given to them in Christ. This is the future condition of all Believers.

Colossians 3:4, “When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.” I John 3:2b, “We shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.”

In this display of glory, we again see the superiority of Christ over the law and the prophets. Their glory is not intrinsic, but a reflection of God. Jesus has intrinsic glory.

Verse 31 also tells us what Moses and Elijah discussed with Jesus. They talked of His decease, his death. This word “decease” is the Greek word “exodus.” Again we see the superiority Jesus. His exodus is superior to the exodus of Moses. Moses was used by God to deliver the people of Israel from earthly bondage. Jesus was used by God delivered His people, all His people, from spiritual bondage.

We also learn from this verse that, even at His transfiguration, Jesus discussed His death and suffering. His death was central to His mission as Messiah. His death was both His greatest humility and His greatest glory.

In the transfiguration we have seen Jesus revealed, first, as greater than His persecutors. Jesus willingly submitted Himself to death.

Second, Jesus is revealed in the transfiguration as greater than Moses and the Prophets. Moses and Elijah were present on this occasion, not in their own glory but in the glory given to them in Christ. They were witnesses to the Messiah they had prophesied about. Jesus was the fulfillment and perfection of everything that they had prophesied and prefigured.

Finally, in the transfiguration Jesus is revealed as greater than us.

### **III. Jesus Christ is Greater than Us**

Of course Jesus is greater than us. I can't imagine anyone here would claim otherwise. Yet often we live as if Christ and His glory is subservient to us: to our wishes, our desires, how we think our life should go. We are going to develop this thought as we look at what Peter said on this occasion and what God the Father said. As we look at these last few verses I hope we will see that we must have a God-centered theology. God doesn't exist for us, we exist for God. God doesn't need to do what we think He should do. We must do what He has commanded us to do. God's ways are not only different than our ways, His ways are better. May we be humbled as we consider this text.

Look at verse 33: "And it came to pass, as they departed from him, Peter said unto Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three

tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias: not knowing what he said.” Moses and Elijah were departing from Jesus.

When Peter saw this He began to speak. The first thing Peter said was, “Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here.” Peter had been drowsy, “heavy with sleep,” as verse 32 tells us. But now that this incredible scene which he has been blessed to witness is about to end he made an effort to maintain it. Often we are not sensible of the blessings in our life and the mercies of God shown to us until we lose or are about to lose them. Thank the Lord for the mercies He has shown you and make good use of them now for we do not know when they may be withdrawn.

These words may also indicated that Peter thought this mountain top of glory was a better place for them to be than other possibilities: “Jesus, it is good for us to be here on this mountain where You have revealed Your glory rather than down with the needy, noisy crowds of Galilee where we see misery and distress instead of glory.”

“Jesus, it is good for us to be here on this mountain where You have revealed Your glory rather than in Jerusalem where You have talked about facing suffering and death.”

“This is good, Jesus, we should stay here.”

Consider what Peter proposed in verse 33: “Let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias.” In this moment, Peter didn’t understand what he was witnessing. As we talked about earlier, the true benefit of

this vision was for a later period, after the resurrection, as Jesus says in Matthew. Peter had just heard Moses and Elijah discuss with Jesus His quickly-approaching death. But with his words Peter indicated that he desired this present manifestation of Christ's glory on that mountain top to continue. It was temporary, it was very limited, and its true benefit would not be manifest until after the resurrection. But Peter wanted it to continue.

What of Christ's work of redemption? What of Christ's work of eternal salvation? Peter would have tried to hold these things off by building tabernacles so that the glory he witnessed in that moment could continue.

Let's pause here to make application to ourselves. I don't think Peter was knowingly attempting to delay Christ's work as Messiah. Peter was experiencing a good thing, and he wanted it to continue. But Jesus had already told His disciples that He must suffer and die. Peter didn't grasp that God's plan for the future, though difficult, was even better than what Peter was experiencing in that moment.

We must learn to hold our lives with an open hand. When times are good, and God is at work in a way we like, we want to hunker down there. How can I make this last as long as possible? And praise God when we get to experience good times like that, but God is at work in the good times and the hard times. Not only are God's ways different than our ways, but they are better. May we learn to pray, "Lord, lead where you will, give me the strength to follow, and teach me to be content."

We also see in his proposal that Peter made no difference between Moses and Elijah and Jesus. He wanted to make a tabernacle for each of them: equal, distinct, and separate. Take just a moment to consider this. What need do glorified saints have of tabernacles here on earth? They have a resting place eternal in the heavens, a house made not with hands.

More importantly, Moses and Elijah, as representing the Law and the Prophets, are not to be viewed as equal with Jesus. The Old Testament prophesied, prefigured, and prepared the way for Jesus and His ministry. Jesus was the fulfillment of all these things. They were the shadow, Jesus is the substance.

Nor are Moses and Elijah to be seen as distinct from Christ in their message. The testimony of the Law and the Prophets agrees with Christ. Jesus did not come to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it.

At the end of verse 33 we are told why Peter said these things: he spoke, “not knowing what he said.” Mark’s account says, “For he wist not what to say; for they were sore afraid.” (Mark 9:6). Peter, in his agitated state of mind, in his fear, did not consider what he said: whether or not it was right and proper. It would serve us well if we learned to be silent when we are not sure what to say. Proverbs 10:19 says, “In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips is wise.” Contrast Peter’s confusion with the clear word from God we see in the next two verses in this text.

Look at verses 34 and 35. While Peter was speaking a cloud descended over them. A cloud is often an image of God's peculiar presence. Throughout the Old Testament we see the presence and glory of God manifested in this way. We are told in Exodus 24:15 that when Moses went up mount Sinai to meet with God a cloud covered the mountain. When the children of Israel finished building the tabernacle in Exodus 40:34 we read, "Then a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle." In Leviticus 16:2 God said, "I will appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat." When Solomon's temple was dedicated in I Kings 8:10 we read, "The cloud filled the house of the Lord."

This was a powerful and fearful thing. In Exodus 40:35 we read, "And Moses was not able to enter into the tent of the congregation, because the cloud abode thereon, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle." II Chronicles 5:14 says, "The priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud: for the glory of the Lord had filled the house of God."

Similarly, when this cloud overshadowed the disciples in our text we are told, "they feared." Matthew's account says, "they fell on their face, and were sore afraid." (Matthew 17:6)

Then in verse 35 God the Father spoke out of the cloud, saying, "This is my beloved Son: hear him." Notice that when God spoke the focus was solely upon Jesus. There stood Moses and Elijah, eminent servants of God. But God did not

draw any attention to them. God did not say, “Hear my servants.” Instead, He said, “Hear my Son.” The Son has preeminence.

God the Father said of Jesus, “This is my beloved Son: hear him.” In these words God the Father revealed two great truths about Jesus. First: that He is God’s “beloved Son.” It is implied in “beloved” that God the Father was pleased with God the Son, for He who is loved by God pleases God. Matthew and Peter both include the words: “In whom I am well pleased” in their accounts of the transfiguration. In these words we see Jesus as the only possible mediator between God and man. Only one who pleased God could be our mediator. Jesus pleased the Father. He is God’s beloved Son.

The second truth revealed about Jesus for us in these words is that He is our true master. God said to the disciples: “Hear him.” Jesus Christ is the head of the church. We must all be in subjection to Him. We must all hear Him as our supreme and final authority. Hebrews 1:1-2 says, “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son.”

“This is my beloved Son, hear him.”

After God spoke from the cloud, the transfiguration was over. Verse 36 tells us after the voice was done speaking, the disciples found Jesus alone. The glory that the disciples had seen so clearly revealed just moments ago was now concealed. And, as we have already noted, Peter, James, and John didn’t tell

anyone else about what they had seen. Our text says, “They kept it close, and told no man in those days any of those things which they had seen.” In Matthew’s account Jesus specifically told them, “Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead.”

In just a few moments we are going to partake of the Lord’s supper. What an apparent contrast to our text.

This morning we have seen the superiority of Christ through His transfiguration. In the transfiguration Jesus Christ is revealed as greater than His persecutors, greater than the Law and the Prophets, and greater than us. For a few moments on that mountain Jesus displayed His glory.

The Lord’s supper shows us His death. I Corinthians 11:26, “For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come.”

These two things look very different, but there is no contradiction. Our text reminds us that the Lord of glory emptied Himself for us. He could have stayed on that mountain. He could have remained in his glorified state. But He chose to go to the cross to accomplish the redemption the Father had ordained.

As we come to the Lord’s table remember that He is the Lord of glory, as we see so clearly in our text, but He concealed his glory, he emptied Himself, and died for us. And He told us to remember, to commemorate His death with this supper, until He returns. And when He returns we will see Him in His glory.