

The Transfiguration of Jesus

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And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead." (Matt. 17:1-9).

Matthew documents one of the most curious events in human history. We strangely referred to this event as the "Transfiguration of Jesus." The word "transfiguration" means "metamorphosis." The term hardly conveys the enormity of what took place.

As best we can understand, the appearance of Jesus was changed for a moment in time and witnessed by Peter, James, and John. This change was the result of divine intervention. How can we begin to articulate such a moment in time? What happened on this mountain is beyond the scope of total human comprehension.

Biblical scholar Kenneth Weust described Jesus' transfiguration as being an "*outward expression of the glory of the essence of His deity, that glory shining right through His human body and nature, that expression proceeding from and being truly representative of His intrinsic deity which He possessed*" (Word Studies in the Greek New Testament). For the rest of our lives, we will be left to wonder about the appearance of Jesus in this moment. However, as interesting and compelling as the appearance of Jesus may be to us, we must find the purpose for its recording in the New Testament. To do this, consider the context of the Transfiguration of Jesus.

In Matthew chapter sixteen, a major transition in the ministry of Jesus is documented. While traveling in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked the apostles what people thought about Him. To this point, Jesus had been teaching, performing miracles, and claiming to be the Messiah. Sufficient time had passed for people to form opinions about Jesus.

When asked about the public's views of Jesus, the disciples responded, "*Some say John the Baptist; some, Elijah; and others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets*" (Matt. 16:14). Jesus was commonly believed to be John the baptizer reanimated from the dead. This was the view held by Herod the tetrarch (Matt. 14:1-2). People thinking Jesus was Elijah or Jeremiah was not surprising either. Elijah did not die. God took him to Heaven in a fiery chariot. For this reason,

the Jews thought Elijah would or could return. To this day, a seat at the table is left empty for Elijah when Jews observe the Sabbath.

Jeremiah lived through the Babylonian captivity and exile. However, his whereabouts remain a mystery. He was believed to have escaped to Egypt; however, after the exile he was never heard from again. As we might expect, legends emerged about Jeremiah. This would explain why some thought Jesus was Jeremiah. Also, the people thought Jesus was one of the prophets from antiquity. This view of the Messiah stems from a prophecy given by Moses (Deut. 18:15). Moses said the Lord would raise up a prophet like him from among the people. Perhaps Jesus was that prophet?

After listening to the response of the apostles, Jesus then got personal. Jesus asked the apostles what they thought: *“But who say ye that I am?”* (Matt. 16:15). Peter answered by boldly declaring, *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (Matt. 16:16). Jesus commended the answer of Peter. Jesus told Peter and the other apostles of their role in the kingdom (Matt. 16:17-20).

The apostles must have been encouraged to hear the Messiahship and coming kingdom reaffirmed by Jesus. No doubt, they were happy to know they would have an important function in the kingdom. However, following this hopeful exchange, the conversation took a dark turn. Matthew notes an important transition in his account of Jesus and in the relationship of Jesus and the apostles: *“From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day”* (Matt. 16:21).

For the first time, Jesus told the apostles of His future death and resurrection. However, they did not understand how the death of Jesus or any self-proclaimed Messiah could establish a kingdom. The apostles descended into a state of confusion and anger.

Imagine hearing this news from their perspective. They had committed themselves to Jesus for nearly three years. They had made great personal sacrifices in the process. They had taken financial losses to follow Jesus. They had staked their reputations to follow Him. Now, all of the sudden, Jesus tells them that He would soon go to Jerusalem to die at the hands of the Jewish leaders? Had their personal sacrifices been for nothing? Or, could there be another way for Jesus to establish the kingdom? Peter declared that he would not allow Jesus to die (Matt. 16:22). For six days, the disciples were left to make sense of this distressing news (Matt. 17:1).

Then, Jesus took Peter, James, and John for a hike up a mountain. While on either Mt. Tabor or Mt. Hermon, Jesus was changed before them (Mt. Tabor is in Galilee and Mt. Hermon is in Caesarea Philippi). His face brilliantly beamed and His clothes became as illuminating as light. As amazing as this must have been for the disciples to see, Moses and Elijah appeared. Awe-struck, Peter began to speak out of turn. He wanted to build tabernacles for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. However, as Peter spoke, a bright cloud appeared overhead and a voice echoed from

the cloud. The voice was the voice of God. He identified Himself as being Jesus' Father and demanded the disciples "*Hear Him.*"

What's the point?

The apostles not understanding why Jesus had to go to Jerusalem to die was irrelevant. However, their lack of understanding did not justify their rejection of what Jesus had told them. Instead of rejecting Jesus and His words, they needed to support and obey Jesus.

The same remains true of us today. We may not completely understand the reasoning behind particular teachings of Jesus. For example, we will never know why baptism was the method Jesus chose for us to receive salvation (Mark 16:16). However, our lack of understanding is not reason enough to challenge, change, or reject baptism. Who are we to reject what Jesus has said regarding salvation, marriage, godly living, or anything else Jesus commanded? Instead of arguing and debating Jesus, we need to hear Him.

Also, the Transfiguration demonstrates the uniqueness of Jesus. There are not varying degrees of uniqueness. Something either is or is not unique. In our pluralistic society, people tend to view Jesus as an important historic and religious figure on equal footing with other important historic and religious figures. For many, Jesus is no different than Mohammed or Gandhi.

Peter wanted to make tabernacles for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. In spite of his confession six days earlier, Peter thought like everyone else. He thought Jesus was like one of the prophets. He did not see Jesus as uniquely the Messiah. To correct this misperception, God demanded the disciples obey Jesus, not Moses and Elijah. By the Transfiguration, God demands we elevate the status of Jesus above everyone else.

In summary, the Transfiguration of Jesus is an amazing account to read. When isolated, it can be a bit puzzling. Placing this event in context to the conversations Jesus and the apostles had at Caesarea Philippi helps to better explain its purpose. There may be attributes and teachings of Jesus that challenge our thinking. However, with humble hearts and willing minds, we can hear Him.