

The Message of the Transfiguration

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Before us this evening is the event in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ known commonly as the transfiguration. By the very title itself, one is given the impression that this was the only occurrence in the life of Christ where his countenance and his clothing were transfigured. Indeed, we read of no other incident in the gospel that parallels this transfiguration. But we do read of the Lord departing into a mountain to pray alone numerous times. Although the Bible does not tell us one way or the other what actually transpired during those secret and sacred seasons of prayer in the mountains, there is one thing that we can state tonight with certainty. There was one night when the Lord Jesus left the door to his prayer closet open and it was open only for three men: Peter, James and his brother John.

These three men had come to be somewhat preeminent among the other nine disciples. They had a closer fellowship with Christ and certainly they enjoyed higher privileges than the others. And for reasons known only to God, the Lord showed himself to these three men more than he did to the rest.

It had been only recently that they alone were admitted into the house of Jairus to watch the Christ bring his dead daughter back to life. And now they are brought and they alone, the other nine disciples are left behind. These three men alone are brought to a mountain for an all night prayer meeting. It does indicate, does it not, that Jesus Christ has that sovereign right to take who he wants to take, to choose who he wants to choose and to bring into deeper blessing whom he wants to bring into deeper blessing. He is the King and he does what he wills. It is not ours to question. It was not the right of the disciples to question why they were left behind and Peter, James and John got to enjoy those wonderful blessings and they didn't. It is just because it pleased the master and that was the end of the story.

Now although these men in many ways were special men, because they were the cream of the crop, you might say, they were still men after all. For while the Lord is praying we discover that these disciples who had been so greatly privileged by Christ in taking him up to his prayer closet, that they fell asleep. Another occasion not far distant from this they had fallen asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane and the Lord Jesus Christ told them there:

“The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”¹

It does remind us that man at his best is at best a man.

But something awakens these three disciples and what they see taking place before their very eyes brings them quickly out of their slumber. There they see their master like they had never seen him before. His garments were glistening. The idea behind that word is shining as flashes of lightning. What would that have looked like? His garments shining as flashes of lightening. The appearance of his face was altered. Rather the text reads it was other. They had never seen the Lord as he looked now before them.

They had a sight of Christ that they had never had before. Not only does the sight of Christ startle them, but they see two other men talking with him. They knew it was only themselves that traveled up that mountainside and now as they come out of their sleep two other men have joined the crowd.

We gather from Peter’s remark that he perceives them to be Elijah and Moses, men who had lived hundreds and hundreds of years earlier. So Moses did finally get to step into the land of Canaan.

And while they were so mesmerized by all that they are seeing and filled with fear, a great cloud settles upon the mountain and enshrouds them and from the cloud there comes the voice of God the Father saying:

“This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.”²

When they hear this voice Peter, James and John are so filled with fear that they fall to the ground trembling. It is then that the cloud passes, the Christ comes over to them, touches them and says, as he had done so often before:

“Arise, and be not afraid.”³

What an experience. It was an event that they had never ever forgotten and one that Peter can’t help but mention when he writes his second epistle that they were, I quote now:

“...eyewitnesses of his majesty.”⁴

Well, the question that I ask tonight to you all is: What was it all for? We have read about the transfiguration. What was the purpose of it? Why did the Lord bring these men into the experience of beholding his majesty?

¹ Mathew 26:41.

² Matthew 17:5.

³ Mathew 17:7.

⁴ 2 Peter 1:16.

I want to remember again that God performed the miraculous in order to teach divine truth. His miracles were never simply sheer displays of omnipotence. There was always a purpose in Christ's performing any miracle. There is a message in every incident in Christ's life no matter how remarkable the event or no matter how seemingly insignificant. There is truth to be gleaned from it. Thus, there is a message for us this evening from this episode in Christ's ministry and I want to speak this evening on the message of the transfiguration. This message has three points.

The first point in this message, in this sermon from the Mount of Transfiguration is a message of comfort. To understand the message of comfort that Christ was giving to his disciples, we have got to remember the event that immediately precedes this transfiguration. Peter himself had just made a very great confession of his faith in Jesus Christ, verse 20, was the Christ of God. It was then that Christ, after that confession, began to speak of his death at the hands of the scribes and the chief priests and the elders and of his resurrection on the third day. He goes on to speak of the need of all of his disciples, therefore, to deny themselves, the need to take up their crosses daily and to be willing to lose their life for him if they want to be saved. That is our context to this transfiguration.

Now let's try and put ourselves in their shoes just for a moment. They hear the Lord telling them about his approaching death. Their master, their king, their only hope. This is the Messiah.

Then they hear about their need of taking up a cross, a cross... When they heard the word "cross" you have to understand what immediately came into their mind. It was the Roman cross, the instrument of death. There is no doubt that their hearts and minds would have been now filled with care and trouble and fear. Peter has made a great confession.

"We believe you are the Messiah, the Christ of God."

"Great, Peter. Now let me tell you what is going to happen to the Messiah."

If you had been standing in their proverbial shoes, you would have been perplexed and you would have been worried and you would have been full of fear as well.

But eight days later—eight, interesting number—eight days later Christ takes these three disciples up to a mountain one night to bring a message of comfort to their troubled hearts. He doesn't take the other nine. He takes Peter, James and John. All of them were troubled. All of them were perplexed by these words they didn't understand. But he takes Peter, James and John up to mount. You see, they would soon be seeing Christ just as he has told them here in his moment of weakness. But now for a few moments they see him in his majesty. Soon they will understand that picking up their cross didn't necessarily mean dying at the hands of Roman soldiers, but submitting one's self to a life of suffering and self denial. They would soon begin to understand that. But here in the sight of Christ transfigured, there would always be for these three men comfort. Let it not be

denied that the Christian life is a life of self denial. Can this self serving society and country in which we live...? I want to come back and hammer that home. The Christian life is a life of self denial. It is a life of sacrifice. And the more we are going to follow on the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ, the more we are going to enjoy him and all the comfort that he does give, it is going to require of us to enter into his sufferings.

I think that the average Christian—and I consider myself the average Christian—wants to come to Philippians chapter three as Paul writes:

“I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things.”⁵

Paul says, “My desire is...”

“...that I may win Christ, And be found in him...”⁶

Yes, wonderful, Paul. How I want that for my life to know the Lord Jesus Christ, to be found in him and stop short of the next verse that talks about Paul desiring to enter into:

“...the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death.”⁷

That is where we stop. If we are going to be followers of Christ that is an odd concept in our day. Really, it is. If we are going to be followers of Christ and I will tell you more about that at the end of the message by what I mean when it is an odd concept in our day. If we are going to be followers of Christ we must deny ourselves. The Lord states it in plain words. We must follow Christ through the valley of sorrow and suffering. We are going to have to endure the fiery trials of our faith.

But there is coming a day of glory for God’s people. There is coming a day when we shall see Christ as he really is.

For most of his earthly ministry they saw the glory veiled in human flesh. But that night the Lord Jesus Christ gave them a peak and he opened... You might say for a moment he lifted the veil and they saw a glimpse of his glory. I say they didn’t see all of his glory, because no man could see all of his glory and live. He dwells in light unapproachable.

But that night their eyes beheld the Lord in his glory. And there is coming a day when we shall behold the Lamb of God in all of his glory. There is coming a day when we will be not just transfigured, but we will be transformed into the very image of Christ.

Months later in the midst of deep persecution and suffering, James in prison about to be beheaded, Peter beaten by the Pharisees, John all alone on the Isle of Patmos, they would all remember that night and they saw the Lord in his majesty.

⁵ Philippians 3:8.

⁶ Philippians 3:8-9.

⁷ Philippians 3:10.

Yes, it is all right, because there is coming a day when we will see him in all of his glory and all will be well.

Isn't that what Christ himself says in Matthew 24 that he will return in all of his glory? And that day Christ the crown and the kingdom will be ours forever. In that day Christ will put everyone of our enemies under his feet and he... and we will with him reign forever and ever.

Now that is the message, I say, that fact that this glorified Christ is the one that keeps everything in balance here on earth. It is when we forget that fact right there that we become overwhelmed with our trials and with the suffering we have to go through with the disadvantages we might call them. We forget heaven. We forget this old flesh is going to pass away one day and then aches and the pains are going to end and the heartaches are going to stop. And the sin is going to depart, never to trouble us again. We will see Christ in his glory. And we will be made like him.

We just don't think of this enough. We live like we are... our homes are in this world and forget that we are pilgrims, that we are tent dwellers, that we are not supposed to be living of this world and getting all we can temporally for this life. It is a message of comfort.

The second point of the message from the transfiguration is the message of the cross. When Peter, James and John awakened they hear a conversation taking place between Christ and Moses and Elijah. And, wonder of wonders, what in the world do you think that he conversation is circling around?

“...his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem.”⁸

At the end of verse 31.

They:

“...spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem.”⁹

Now that is a remarkable phrase. The word “decease” means literally departure or exodus, his departure or exodus which he should accomplish at Jerusalem. Peter uses this word in the 2 epistle of his to speak of his own death where he says:

“I will endeavour that ye may be able after my decease to have these things always in remembrance.”¹⁰

⁸ Luke 9:31.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ 2 Peter 1:15.

You know, we often think of decease as being dead, but that is not the idea in Scripture. The decease is an exodus. It is a departure.

They speak of his death as that which he should accomplish. Literally it means fulfill.

So these three are discussing, talking about the upcoming death of the Lord Jesus Christ, his exodus and the fulfillment of that exodus, what it was designed to accomplish, not far off in Jerusalem. And, thus, we learn as you just think about Moses and Elijah talking with Christ they come from heaven. It is an interesting topic. I am almost tempted to take a little side trail here. Moses... Elijah is one of two men who never died. Enoch was not. He was translated. Elijah translated. Yet every man must taste death because of sin.

It leads me to believe that the two witnesses of Revelation are Enoch and Elijah.

The important thing here is what they are talking about. What is the centerpiece of the conversation? The cross.

Imagine. Of all the things they could have been talking. Here is Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration and what they are taken up with in their conversation is the cross. That tells me that the talk of heaven is the crucified Christ. The glory of Emmanuel's land is Christ the Lamb of God dying for sinners and atoning for the sins of his people. That is the talk of heaven.

I spoke a few moments ago of the glory that awaits those who take up the cross of Christ. For the crown is only going to be won through the cross. I spoke of the joy that awaits us at kingdom and seeing the king. But do we not see from this conversation between Christ, Moses and Elijah that the glory of heaven, indeed, the talk of heaven will not be the streets of gold. It will not be the many mansions. It will not be all our friends and family that we will see. The talk of heaven will not be the multitude of the heavenly host. The talk of heaven will be Christ the Lamb of God. He is all the glory of Emmanuel's land.

When John saw the Lion of the tribe of Judah in heaven and he saw the root of David who prevailed to open the book with the seven seals, John writes:

“And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain.”¹¹

Right smack in the middle of it all, in the center of it all was the Lamb of God. And when his ears heard the words of the new song of heaven's choir, he heard:

“...ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain.”¹²

¹¹ Revelation 5:6.

¹² Revelation 5:11-12.

You see, my friend, in the midst of this glorious transfiguration of Jesus Christ there emerges the cross. The death of Christ is on the heart of the Savior. And the death of Christ is upon the hearts of the glorified saints in heaven.

Indeed, what were the white garments glistening upon the Savior, but the white garments of the high priest as he is about to prepare to enter into the most holy place with the blood of his own sacrifice.

Who were Moses and Elijah but representatives of the law and of the prophets which all testified as Christ told the two men on the road to Emmaus of his sufferings and the glory that should follow. Yes, the world... to the world the cross is a place of shame. They have no time. They have no interest in the blood. And they have no interest in a suffering sacrifice.

But the cross of Christ is it not which heaven glories? Paul spoke his heart when he said:

“God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹³

God forbid, strong phrase, may it never be, he said, that I brag about anything but the cross of my Savior.

With the hymn writer we all have to say tonight, “My sinful self, my only shame, my glory all the cross.”

In my sin there is much to be ashamed of. In my many years that I despised the Savior and lightly esteemed his cross, there is utter disgrace. But when I think that all of my sin was laid upon the Lamb of God who is unspotted and when I think of my sin breaking the heart of my Savior, then I can say with the redeemed ones in glory:

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain.”¹⁴

Who better needed to hear this message of the cross than Peter, James and John? You recall it was Peter who rebuked the Lord of talking about his death, actually rebuked his master.

“Stop talking about your death. You are the Messiah.”

“Peter, all the glory of heaven, all that the law and the prophets talk about represented by Moses and Elijah is my cross work, my decease, what I am going to fulfill by my suffering and by my death.”

It was James and John we find who were jockeying for position and power in the kingdom they thought was about to take over Rome. But here on the mountain in Christ’s glorious majesty Peter hears the message of the cross. Here James and John learn the

¹³ Galatians 6:14.

¹⁴ Revelation 5:12.

glory that is to be sought after is not in the throne, but in the death of Christ, the cross. And if the great interest of the saints of heaven is the cross of Christ, what ought to be the supreme object of our interest? If this is... and it is. My "if" is not conditional. It is since it is true, that Christ crucified, the Lamb of God slain is the centerpiece of heaven. It is all the talk of the redeemed. Their songs, the choirs sing about:

"Worthy is the Lamb that was slain..."¹⁵

What ought to be the object of our interest in this world as Christ's people? What ought to be the centerpiece?

You know, I find, brothers and sisters, in so many other things other than Christ crucified. Believers will spend hour upon hour upon hour studying out eschatology. Try to find out the answer to the doctrine of the last things. They will spend all kinds of time talking about politics, sports, job, but Christ crucified, preaching so much upon so much fluff when this is the centerpiece. This is what preaching is all about, to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ, to preach Christ crucified, Paul said, "I was determined to know nothing."

Hear those words. But, brothers and sisters, that was Paul's ministry. It was always setting Christ before them.

We are told to remember the Lord's death for the simple reason that we too easily forget his death. And too easily we allow the things and people and circumstances to steal away our hearts. And if you would enjoy a bit of heaven on earth, then go afresh to Calvary and blaze upon the glory of the cross.

In the cross of Christ I glory,
Towering o'er the wrecks of time.

Finally there is a message of caution. We see and hear the response of Peter when he awakens and sees Christ transfigured speaking with Moses and Elijah. And it is as Moses and Elijah began to depart back into glory that Peter blurts out:

"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."¹⁶

Luke adds the comment:

"...not knowing what he said."¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Mathew 17:4.

¹⁷ Luke 9:33.

Luke was very gracious in putting it like that. Peter spoke before he thought that night. His tongue went into gear and his brain was in neutral. And what happens next was a wise word of caution to Peter, his disciples and to us. The cloud came, God spoke:

“This is my beloved Son: hear him.”¹⁸

What the Lord was telling them by this was that there is no one who is to be put on the plain of the Lord Jesus Christ. However, great Moses and Elijah were—and they were great men. There is no denying that—there stood one before him who excelled them all, who had no peers. They were but servants and he was the master. They were but stars and he was the sun. They were but witnesses, but he was the truth itself.

Therefore, first caution. Make sure the one you are following and hearing is Christ. Make sure the one that you are following and hearing is Christ, not Moses, not Elijah, but Christ. The Father says, “Hear him.”

We live in a day of great Christian personalities and all too soon and all too easily Christians become followers of men. Oh, I listen to Dr. so and so or I go to so and so’s church. And that is the emphasis. But never ever become a follower of men, no matter how great that man may be in God’s kingdom.

Yes, let the ministers of Christ be honored in obedience to God’s Word. They are to be honored. That is as plain as the nose on your face if they are God servants. But let them be honored because of whose servants they are and not because of who they are. Never be satisfied until you can say through the witness of the Holy Ghost within that you hear Christ himself and you are his disciple. Learn to depend upon Jesus Christ for direction in your life.

I want to underscore that again.

Learn to depend upon Jesus Christ for direction in your life and not upon men. One day those men will be gone. And those men at best are just men. The Lord just set aside two of the greatest Old Testament saints—Moses and Elijah—and says, “Don’t listen. You hear him.”

Second caution. The way to prepare for transfiguration is through consecration to suffering.

It was after Christ had spoken very directly to them about their need to deny themselves and to take up their cross daily and endure suffering that he then takes up these three men to behold his glory, lest they think that the crown and the throne and the kingdom of God was going to be had in some other way.

Take the lessons of caution to heart, what we find so very little of in our day in Christianity are believers who have consecrated themselves to suffering in order to obtain

¹⁸ Luke 9:35.

glory. The crown only comes to the cross. That is the ancient truth. The crown only comes to the cross. Christ said, “If you don’t do this, you cannot be my disciple. If you do not take up the cross, you cannot be my disciple.”

Instead of self denying Christians, there are too many self centered Christians. Instead of believers who take up their cross daily we discover that there is a plethora of Christians who want to lie down on a bed of ease.

There is a great text there, you know.

“Be sure your sin will find you out.”¹⁹

It is usually taken out of context, used to preach upon, well, one day your sin is going to catch up with you.

That is all very true, but that is taking the text out of its context. Its context was to those two tribes. If you don’t come into the land and fight with us, it is going to catch up with you one day. It is going to find you out.

If you do nothing, if you just stay on this side of the Jordan and just feed your flocks and go on and forget all about us in the land of Canaan and our battles and our fightings, it is all going to catch up with you one day. It is the sin of doing nothing. That was the sin that would find them out. And that is a pet sin in the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, the sin of doing nothing, the sin of not sacrificing, of not putting one’s back to the work and one’s shoulder to the grindstone where it costs something and you have to sacrifice.

Make no mistake about it. Following Christ involves sacrifice. There are things you will be called upon to give up. You can’t have your cake and eat it, too, in this accord, in this sphere. It is all about sacrifice.

Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease,
While others fought to win the prize and sailed through bloody seas?

Never shun the cross of suffering, sorrow and persecution. To do so is to shun Christ and it is to sun the only way to transfiguration.

Third caution. If you would see the glory and the beauty of Christ, if you want to get, if you want for yourselves to get a sight of Christ that you have never had before, just as these men had a sight of Christ that they had never had before, then you must ascend the mount of prayer.

He took these men up the mountain to pray. The Lord took them up to pray. It was as he prayed that he was transfigured. It was on the mount of prayer that Peter, James and John saw the beauty and the majesty and the glory of their master. If you don’t think that didn’t ... wasn’t an object lesson for them...

¹⁹ Numbers 32:23.

We saw him in his majesty when it was in the place of prayer.

Well, would they remember that scene and well would they remember the lesson that they learned from it. It was when he took us up the mount to pray that we had that experience and we saw a Christ we had never seen before.

You will look here and there and everywhere to see Christ, but to really see him you have to climb to the mountain of prayer and get alone with the Lord.

I know there are dimensions of Christ that I have never pondered. I know there are sights of Christ I have never enjoyed. I know there are sights of Christ that I have enjoyed and I need to see them again. But I want to tell you something, children of God, this whole business of sanctification and living holy lives is not about rules and regulations. It is about seeing Christ.

1 John chapter three and into chapter four.

It is beholding the glory of God. As we behold Christ we are changed into his image. As we see Christ in the Word that image, as we gaze upon it began to be reflected in us. That is what holiness is all about.

And there is only one way I now to get the sight of Christ. It is to get up the mountain of prayer with the Word of the Lord speaking and seeing him.

Final caution and I am done. Don't let the experience of beholding Christ's glory on the mountaintop be an end in itself.

You read in verse 37 that they were come down from the mount.

Remember, Peter was saying, "Lord, it is good for us to be here." He wanted just to stay on top of the mountain. And I understand that. My heart goes out to Peter. Wouldn't you have wanted to stay there on a mountaintop? I have had a few mountaintop experiences in my Christian life, times when the Lord has come down in a season of prayer and I didn't want to go away. I didn't want to stop. I wanted to go on and on and on and on. But there were kids outside the door or over in the house that had to be dealt with. And there were problems that called for my attention. And there were sermons that had to be prepared. And there was grass that had to be cut. There were people that had to be have their needs addressed that wanted to talk with me.

Oh, I would love, love to stay on the mountaintop and, Lord, it is just wonderful up here. But that is not why you have a mountaintop.

You see, down below at the bottom, at the foot there was these other disciples and they were having a difficult time of it, because they couldn't cast a demon out of a boy. They hit a brick wall. And so Peter, James and John are taken down the mount and

immediately they face opposition from hell. But that was the point of the mountaintop, preparing them to go down and to live out in the world.

I want for you and for me these sabbath days to be mountaintop experiences. I want you to come to Sunday to God's house on a Lord's Day and expect a mountain top, expect God to wonderfully show himself to you and speak to you, but not that you might just stay within these walls and say, "Isn't it wonderful to be here? I don't want to leave." You have got to leave and you have got to go back out into the world and unto your family in the midst of problems on the strength that you received from being in the mount of prayer and worship.

If that is not done, you will live in dream land. That will not be reality. We must learn well from this those special visitations of God are not simply that we might behold his glory and revel in his love. They are given to us in order to strengthen us. And we are strengthened in order to go back into this world of sin and sorrow and suffering and bring the sight of Christ that we have had to them, to bring the sight of Christ that we have had on a sabbath day in his house, not just to keep it all to ourselves, but to tell others.

You know what the preacher said in church on Sunday?

Have you gone into work and said that to anybody?

You know my pastor says about Christ? What do you think about this?

Isn't that putting into practice what we hear? Isn't it wrong for us to simply be blessed by the gospel truth and then to hold it all within and never say a word to anybody about it? Why does God feed us? Why does he bless us? Why does he bring messages that speak directly to the needs of our hearts? Just for selfish blessing?

Not on your life. But that you might go back out into that world out there and that tomorrow you look for something to say to someone. You might need to encourage a believer who is pretty down and out and say, "You know, my pastor preached about depression yesterday. And do you know what he said?"

And you could turn to Psalm 42 and mention David's own depression, a man after God's own heart. That is the sermon from the Mount of Transfiguration. Now we have got to do something with it. It is not enough just to hear it. It is time to live it. Let's do that by the grace of God.

May the Lord write his Word upon our hearts for his name's sake.