

JESUS' TRANSFIGURATION

Matthew 17:1-13

Key Verse: 17:2

“There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light.”

This passage is the transfiguration of Jesus on a high mountain. In this transfiguration Jesus' appearance changes from that of an ordinary man to the holy Son of God. It had a profound effect on his disciples that changed their image and lifestyle throughout their lifetimes. Many people seek some kind of change to reinvigorate their lives. In recent years “makeovers” have become popular. There is a “before” appearance that is overweight, unkempt, and unattractive. Then there is an “after” appearance that is slim, well groomed and gorgeous. This is done through liposuction, intense hair styling, heavy makeup and so on. It fascinates people and encourages them for a while. But the makeover does not deal with the underlying causes of an undisciplined lifestyle and usually the person reverts back to the same old appearance again. Jesus' transfiguration revealed the substance of God to the disciples. It was not just a temporary phenomenon, but revealed who Jesus really is on the inside. Anyone who glimpses the glory of God in Jesus will be forever impacted to live a holy and godly life. May God bless us to meet the glorious transfigured Jesus through this study.

First, Jesus reveals the glory of God (1-3).

Look at verse 1. “After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.” “After six days” refers to the time since Peter had made his confession of Christ and Jesus had begun to teach the work of the Christ. It was to suffer, die and rise again. Peter did not want to hear this so he took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. But Jesus strongly taught Peter that he must deny himself and take up his cross for world salvation. Not only must Jesus do this, but Peter must do it too. Peter really didn't like to hear that. Since that moment, there had been tension in the air. Jesus would not compromise with God's plan for world salvation. Peter felt that he would die to accept Jesus' teaching. Probably Peter looked at Jesus from time to time, wondering how they would ever solve their difference. Likewise, we sometimes get stuck in our lives of faith because the truth that we must accept seems too hard to digest. There are times that we look at Jesus wondering how we are ever going to follow him. Peter was stuck, but Jesus was not. Jesus had a way.

Jesus took Peter, James and John with him. These three men were the inner circle of Jesus' disciples. Jesus had allowed them special glimpses into his person and work. They were with him when he raised Jairus' daughter to life. They were with him in the garden of Gethsemane. Special grace was given them because they had to stand as leaders after Jesus left this world. James would be the first martyr. John would live long and write the most spiritual gospel book. And Peter would pick up Jesus' mantle in the early days of the church and provide spiritual leadership. The cross each of them was called to bear was heavy indeed. But Jesus gave them special grace to prepare them and to equip them.

They went up a high mountain. Most likely this was snow capped Mount Hermon, which rose about 9,200 feet above sea level. It is good to go up a high mountain from time to time. When we go up on a mountain we can find an overall perspective; we can see the big picture. The daily problems that seem so hard to deal with in the valley are completely forgotten when we gaze down from the serene surrounding of a high mountain. Near my home in Oregon is a mountain known as Mary's Peak. It is about 5,200 feet above sea level. When we go up there, we can see the beautiful Willamette Valley, winding rivers, and the snow covered Coast Range mountains on the other side of the valley, and our minds are really refreshed. Of course, Jesus did not take the disciples up a high mountain just for sightseeing. Jesus wanted to show them something about himself. Still, it is good to go up the mountain from time to time. It is good to fly in an airplane to visit a mission field to attend a conference, center dedication or wedding. It gives us a fresh perspective on things. Now Missionary Sarah Sohn is going to Germany to visit her daughter, Missionary Sarah Youk. May the Lord refresh her spirit and give her God's perspective on the problems she faces here in Chicago UBF.

What happened on the mountain? Look at verse 2. “There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.” The word “transfigured” comes from the Greek word “metamorphosis.” Sometimes children use the word “morph” to describe this kind of transfiguration, especially when they refer to Power Rangers turning from an ordinary into a super-powered state. Action heroes like Superman

or Spiderman change from ordinary looking people into men with great and extraordinary powers. This is a kind of metamorphosis. When Jesus was transformed, he was changed from his ordinary looking human form to reveal his original image as God.

Jesus is the incarnate God. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. Though he is in very nature God, he renounced his power and glory and majesty and came into this world as a man. He was veiled in human flesh and took the nature of a servant, being obedient to God to the point of death. While on earth he was humble and lowly in appearance. Isaiah said, "He had not beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isa 53:2b). These days, to many young people, looking good is a matter of life and death. The two boys who killed their classmates at Columbine High School were very frustrated because they did not make a good impression on their classmates and they had no friends; especially they had no girlfriends. Most young people would highly value having a buffed body, and an exotic sports car and being able to drive around giving others an impression of freedom and abundant coolness. Mary Miranda is very sensitive about the fact that she grew up in a poor, immigrant family. But Jesus, who is in very nature God, became an ordinary man.

As an ordinary looking man, Jesus had taken the problems and agonies of many kinds of people as his own. Jesus healed a blind beggar. Jesus made friends with a wayward Samaritan woman. Jesus drove out demons from a totally deranged psychotic man. In taking the agonies and pains of people on himself, Jesus took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows. In addition, Jesus went through the humiliating persecution of the Jewish leaders. In their blatant wickedness, they lied and they said all manner of base things about Jesus. For the Son of God to be slandered by his creation is an abhorrent violation of his creation order. As Jesus bore all this, his features began to look pain-stricken. In addition, Jesus' clothes were very ordinary. He did not have the shiny silk vestments of the religious leaders, but the ordinary cloak of a tradesman. Perhaps because of his humble appearance Peter was bold and confident to talk back to Jesus, which may have been the most offensive thing for Jesus to bear among them all.

But now, when Jesus was transfigured on the mountain, his face shone like the sun. The wrinkles of worry and pain over sinners gave way to a bright and marvelous light that was so powerful it could only be compared to the sun. As we cannot look upon the sun directly, because of its brilliance, so the disciples could not gaze upon Jesus. Jesus' shining face was too bright to look at. This blinding light is the presence of the holy God Almighty. Jesus is the light of the world. God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. The bright light shining forth from Jesus was the very presence and essence of God himself. It was the holy, almighty, pure, majestic, powerful, dazzling presence of God Almighty.

Jesus showed this glorious appearance to his disciples intentionally. The power of his blazing figure could drive out all the darkness from their hearts and all the relativism and doubt and human thinking and restore them in the image of God and as the children of God. Jesus' disciples need this blazing image of God in Christ planted in our hearts. It heals us from all the wounds and pains and restores the image of God in us. St. John was on the island of Patmos as an exile because of his testimony about Jesus and his preaching of the word of God. But he did not sit down and feel sorry for himself. He held Sunday worship services and did his best to have a house church on Patmos. One Sunday he was in the Spirit and the Lord showed him a glorious vision of Christ in heaven. Revelation 1:13-16 says, "...and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun, shining in all its brilliance." With this glorious image of Christ in his heart, John could endure all hardships and continue to shepherd the early church by writing the book of Revelation in his old age.

Martin Luther King Jr. was a great shepherd for his people in leading the civil rights movement of the late 1950's and 1960's. He faced many kinds of persecution and the hatred of large groups of powerful people. His life was constantly threatened. But in his speeches, he said, "I've been to the mountain top and seen the other side. And it's wonderful. And we're going to get there. I am not fearing any man because I've seen the Lord." When he had a glorious vision of Christ in his heart, he could bear all the hardships of serving his people as a shepherd.

Serving American campus ministry in this generation is not easy for us. We face rejections, misunderstandings, persecution and many troubles. These can leave wounds and scars in our souls that make us weak and lead us to fall into despair or fatalism. We must come to Jesus and see his glorious transfiguration and hold this image in our

hearts. Then we can have power and joy to take up the cross and follow Jesus. For the last two years and four months I have been struggling with the IRS about the status of our staff members for tax purposes. They have not understood our ministry and have looked down on us because we don't have the traditional paperwork of the mainline protestant churches. Though we have tried hard to explain, they have not understood and have discredited our staff members again and again and given us a big tax bill. Each time I have met them has been a time of discouragement and frustration. Many times they win their cases by simple intimidation. They scare their opponents and wear them down and collect a nice tax bill. But through prayer and the word of God, I have been encouraged by the glorious vision of Christ in glory. Jesus is my strength and my song. I am not getting weaker, but stronger as time goes by. Now we are coming down to the last round. And the Lord helped me to launch a strong counter attack by the help of a lawyer and to present a good case for our staff. We must pray and see what the outcome is. But I thank God for helping me to go through this suffering and to get stronger in faith in Christ.

Now we have a number of young fellowship leaders in Chicago UBF who are struggling with many problems to have a victorious registration battle for our summer conference. May the Risen Christ strengthen each of us one by one and help us have his glorious image in our hearts. May he strengthen each of us to fight a good fight and render victory and glory to God.

Look at verse 3. "Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus." There is indeed deep meaning to the appearance of Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. First of all, Moses and Elijah were alive and they were transformed into glory. While on earth they had suffered much to do the work of God, as Jesus had. Moses had been humiliated for many years in many ways until he became the most humble man on the face of the earth. Elijah had suffered so much with idol worshipers and the threats against his life that he once prayed that God may take his life. But now these suffering servants appeared in glory and were talking with Jesus. Those who suffer for Christ and his kingdom will be clothed in everlasting glory when their mission on this world is done. Dr. Samuel Lee suffered much to serve the work of God in Korea and in America and throughout the world. He was humiliated in many ways and bore many pains and hardships. But now he is in heaven with the Lord and he is in glory and majesty with Christ. All of God's servants who suffer for Christ will also share in the glory of Christ.

Luke 9:30-31 says, "Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem." Moses and Elijah spoke about Jesus' departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. Jesus' departure means his suffering, death and resurrection. In this way, Jesus would leave this world and go back to the Father. Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection were the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. In this case, the Law is represented by Moses and the Prophets are represented by Elijah. Only Moses and Elijah could understand what Jesus was doing. Only Moses and Elijah could encourage Jesus at this time. When we need real spiritual encouragement, we must visit spiritual men who have participated in the suffering of Christ and receive their words of counsel. This was a source of great spiritual strength for Jesus. This was what enabled Jesus to make his final push for Jerusalem with conviction. May God bless each of us to spend time on the mountain with Jesus, Moses and Elijah when we have to take up our cross of mission in these times.

Second, "Listen to him!" (4-8).

Upon seeing Jesus in glory, flanked by Moses and Elijah, Peter burst out with the words, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." This reveals Peter's true inner heart. He wanted to stay up on the mountain with Jesus and Moses and Elijah indefinitely. He had not accepted the way of the cross. Jesus, Moses and Elijah were speaking about Jesus' departure. But Peter spoke about enjoying the glory of the transfiguration forever in this world. This is fallen man's human thinking. We all want to enjoy ease and glory in this world without much suffering. We want to go to a place and find a way to live a comfortable and glorious life. We want to have a fruitful ministry without making hard decisions to put God first in our personal lives, our families and our ministry. We want to see much fruit without much effort. We want to have wonderful families without any sacrifice or investment. We want to get rich quick and to live comfortably in this world. This is what it means to have in mind the things of men.

While Peter was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" It was God's voice. It was God's rebuke to Peter to repent his human thinking and to accept the teaching of Jesus about suffering, death and resurrection.

God was pleased with Jesus because Jesus had in mind the things of God. Jesus understood God's mind and heart. Jesus was living to please God. Though the whole world was against him, and his disciples did not understand him, Jesus was standing on God's side and doing what God wanted him to do. The same words from God came to Jesus when he was baptized by John in the Jordan. This was a time of decision for Jesus in which he accepted God's call as the Messiah. In a word God was pleased with Jesus because Jesus is God's Son and because Jesus obeyed God's will.

The point of their mountaintop experience was to listen to Jesus and to learn the way of the cross and resurrection. We also must accept Jesus' way of the cross as the fruit of our mountaintop experiences. We are preparing a Midwest/Missouri Valley Region Summer Bible Conferences for July 27-30. We pray to accept the love of God. But the point of accepting the love of God is not just to be happy and to get an emotional high. It is to find the strength to enable us to carry the cross of mission when we come back. A deep and meaningful experience based on the word of God that touches us on all levels, including the emotions, is important. But it has a point of leading us to obey God's call for campus mission and for world mission.

When they heard the voice of God from the cloud, the disciples fell facedown to the ground. This shows that the fear of God was restored in their hearts. The right view of Jesus as the holy Son of God was restored in their hearts. They were ready to listen to Jesus with trembling hearts. But they were actually too frightened to do anything. Then Jesus touched them and said, "Get up. Don't be afraid." Though Jesus is God and he would not compromise in his teaching of the truth, he was full of grace and love toward his disciples. He understood their weakness and touched them with his strong hand and imparted power to help them overcome themselves. Jesus is gentle and humble. But the Father says to us regarding Jesus, "Listen to him!"

Third, a suffering Elijah and suffering Jesus (9-13).

Verses 9-10. "As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, 'Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.' The disciples asked him, 'Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?'"

Jesus instructed them not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had been raised from the dead. Without resurrection faith they could not possibly understand the spiritual meaning of what Jesus had shown them. It was such a fantastic experience, but they did not really understand its meaning. They would only bring confusion. So Jesus told them to hold this secret in their hearts until he was raised from the dead.

The great promise hidden in these instructions is Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Jesus would go to Jerusalem to suffer and die on the cross. But on the third day God would raise Jesus from the dead. It would be the final victory of God over all the sin and evil and the power of death. It would open the way for eternal life for all who believed in Jesus. It was good news of great joy for all mankind.

But the disciples had a problem in accepting Jesus' words. They asked why the teachers of the law said that Elijah must come first. They taught that Elijah would return in glory and splendor and herald the coming of the Messiah. The teachers of the law had not recognized John as the forerunner and were still looking for the return of Elijah. It is similar to the Jews of our time who are still waiting for the Messiah to come. He has already come, but they did not recognize him.

Verses 11-13. "Jesus replied, 'To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.' Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist." God sent John in the spirit and power of Elijah. If they had accepted John they would have opened the way for the Messiah's coming and for the restoration of paradise. But when they rejected John they set off a chain of events that would result in the public rejection of Jesus as the Messiah and in God's wrath against Jerusalem. There would be a glorious Elijah and a glorious coming of the Messiah. But first there was a suffering Elijah, John the Baptist, and a suffering Messiah, Jesus Christ.

In this passage we learn that Jesus wants to give us the grace to go with him up the mountain to see his glory. Jesus wants us to have fellowship with Moses and Elijah. How can we do this? We must read the word of God and listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. May God fill your soul with glory in meeting Jesus through Bible study.