

NCBC Youth Group
February 2, 2020

TRANSFIGURATION
MARK 9:1-13

Introduction

Jesus took on flesh and came to earth. For the most part, His appearance was that of a human being, even though He was God. But in one occasion recorded in the gospels, His appearance changed before a small group of disciples. What we just read is the account of the Transfiguration of Jesus.

The gospels are not merely a collection of random events and stories. There is a purpose for every account recorded in the gospels, and to understand how the Transfiguration fits in, we first need to understand why Jesus transfigured before His disciples.

In the previous passage, Jesus asked His disciples who people say He is (8:27). Some said John the Baptist, others said Elijah, or one of the prophets (8:28), but Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus wasn’t John the Baptist, Jesus wasn’t Elijah, and Jesus wasn’t one of the prophets of old, as great as those men were. Jesus is far superior to those people. The disciples correctly identified Jesus. They confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God (8:29; Matt. 16:16). Jesus was the Messiah, the Savior, and God.

This was a good moment for the disciples, because the long-awaited Messiah has come, and they recognized Jesus as the Messiah. In their minds and in the minds of most of the Jews, the Messiah would save them by overthrowing Roman rule and establishing an earthly kingdom. Undoubtedly, the disciples were expecting that of Jesus. However, much to their disappointment, Jesus said that He would suffer many things, be rejected, be killed, and after three days rise again (8:31). This was totally incompatible with their understanding of the work of Messiah.

Not only will Jesus suffer harsh treatment, anyone who follows Jesus should also expect suffering and even death for the sake of the gospel (8:34-38). This was very difficult for the disciples to accept, and in just a few months, Jesus will go to the cross and fulfill what He said about suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection.

Promise

In light of that, Jesus told His disciples in verse 1 that “there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.” He promised to show some of them a preview and a glimpse of the kingdom of God. And when He does transfigure before them, their faith will become sight.

Let me explain that. What is faith? Hebrews 11:10 says that faith is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Faith is not something we see. Do you see Jesus here and now? No, but we love Him and believe in Him (1 Pet. 1:8). We never saw the death and resurrection of Jesus with our own eyes, but we believe that He died for us to save us from our sins. We believe that He lived a righteous life and that righteousness is imputed to us who believe in Him, so that we are counted as righteous.

Certainly, our faith is not empty. We know, through experience, that God works in our lives. We know that He gives us supernatural peace and comfort in times of distress. We know that He hears and answers our prayers. But we still live by faith on this earth.

However, one day, our faith will become sight. When we die, we will see Him. In the great hymn, “It is Well with My Soul,” the fourth stanza says, “O Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight.” There will come a day when our faith will be sight.

Just as we have faith, the disciples also had faith in Jesus. Until the transfiguration, they saw Him as a human. They believed in His teachings and His works, and through those things they believed that He was the Christ the Son of the living God. But the transfiguration moved their faith to sight. They saw the glory of Christ. Matthew 25:31 says, “But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne.” They saw the Son of Man in His glory.

What is the purpose of the transfiguration and why did it come now? Seeing Jesus in His divine glory gave them indisputable proof that He is God, even though He will suffer, be rejected, and killed by the people He came to save. However incompatible that is with their perception of the Messiah, they would know without a shadow of a doubt that He is God and He knows what He is doing.

Preview

The promise that some will get a preview of the kingdom of God was made in verse 1. Verse 2: Six days later, the promise was fulfilled.¹ Three of His disciples, Peter, James, and John went with Jesus to a high mountain,² and there on that mountain, Jesus was transfigured before them. The word “transfigure” is translated from the Greek word *metamorphoo*, from which we get metamorphosis. It means to change into another form or to transform.

Luke 9 adds some details. It said that Jesus took them on the mountain to pray (9:28), and Jesus was transfigured while He was praying (9:29). However, the disciples fell asleep (9:32). It’s interesting to note that it is the same three who fell asleep while Jesus was praying in Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42).³

When they woke up, they saw His glory. He was transfigured and His appearance changed. Verse 3 describes His appearance: His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them.” Matthew says His garments became as white as light (17:2), and Luke 9:29 adds that His clothing became white and gleaming. The description pictures His garments as radiant, white, shining, and flashing like lightning.⁴ Additionally, Luke and Matthew recorded that His face shone like the sun (Matt. 17:2; cf. Lk. 9:29).

What they saw was the manifestation of the glory of Jesus (Luke 9:32). This is appearance is consistent with the rest of the Bible.⁵ When God appeared in the Old Testament, He appeared as light. Exodus 24:17 says, “The appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a consuming fire on the mountain top.” Ezekiel 1:27-28 also describe His appearance and His glory as radiant light and fire. Ezekiel 10:4 says describes it as “the brightness of the glory of the Lord.”

¹ Mark and Matthew record “six days,” and Luke records “eight days.” This is not a contradiction. Luke counted the day of the promise and the day of the transfiguration. Matthew and Mark just counted the days in-between.

² Most likely Mt. Hermon, the highest peak in the region of Caesarea Philippi, where Peter confessed Christ (8:27).

³ They probably slept because of their sorrow. Luke 22:45 says they were “sleeping from sorrow.” Sorrow will make us sleep, because sleeping is a way to escape the sorrow.

⁴ Luke uses the word *exastrapto*, “to flash out like lightning” (Thayer’s Lexicon, G1823).

⁵ There’s an interesting story in Exodus where Moses asked to see the glory of God (33:18). God answered (33:20), “You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!” Verses 21-23: “Then the Lord said, ‘Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand there on the rock; [22] and it will come about, while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by. [23] Then I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen.’” Unholy men—sinners—cannot see the full glory of God and live. If we see His full glory, we will be consumed. Instead God gave Moses an indirect revelation of His glory.

Now, it's very important to note that Jesus transfigured in appearance only. He did not change His nature. He was always God and did not "become" God just at the transfiguration; however, He did change His appearance. His glory was veiled for most of the time, but for a moment, He unveiled His glory and it became visible.

In verse 4, we find that two other people also appeared, talking with Jesus. Elijah and Moses also appeared in glory (Lk. 9:31). These two represent the Law and the Prophets, which is the sum of the Old Testament. The Old Testament points to Christ. After Jesus resurrected and He was on the road to Emmaus, He said, "Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" [27] Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures" (Lk. 24:26-27).

The Scriptures, the Old Testament, point to Christ and predicted His suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection. Here, we have Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus, confirming that Christ will suffer, be rejected, and be killed. Luke 9:31 tells us what they were talking about: They were "speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." If the disciples had any doubt that Jesus, the Messiah, must suffer and die, they should have all doubts erased after hearing from Moses and Elijah. God didn't make a mistake. God's plan was for the Messiah to suffer all along. While it didn't fit their notions of Messiah, they must accept it as the truth.

It's interesting to think about why Jesus took three disciples with Him, and Moses and Elijah appeared with Him. In Deuteronomy 17:6 and 19:5, we are told that a matter shall be confirmed on the evidence of two or three witnesses. This was the Law's requirement. Here, we have three disciples who witnessed His glory, and two witnesses confirming the truth of Christ's suffering and death.

At this point, Peter speaks up again. Luke 9:33 tells us that Peter spoke up as Moses and Elijah were leaving Jesus. Peter said in verse 5, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Listen, Peter still hasn't come to grasp with the fact that the Messiah must suffer. The word "tabernacle" means booths or tents. Peter is basically saying, let's make this permanent. Let's build booths here and set up Christ's throne. This is good, because there will be no suffering, no rejection, and no death for Christ. There will also be no suffering for us either. Let's make tents, make this permanent, and live with the glorified Jesus now.

Peter probably spoke up because he saw his opportunity escaping. Moses and Elijah were leaving, so he must speak up now. Verse 6 says Peter did not know what to answer; for they became terrified. He sort of just started talking, not realizing what he was saying (Lk. 9:33).

Verse 7, “Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, ‘This is my beloved Son, listen to Him!’” The cloud signals the presence of God, it is the cloud of glory, known as the *Shekinah*. Here is the voice of God, and God is the third witness in addition to Moses and Elijah, confirming the truth that Christ must suffer and die. This is God’s rebuke of Peter. Remember, Peter wanted to make tabernacles and make it permanent, but God said, “Listen to Him!” Listen to Jesus. Listen to what He has to say. Peter was rebuked by Jesus when he tried to prevent Jesus from suffering and death, and now Peter was rebuked by God Himself.

In verse 8, the preview and the glimpse of the kingdom was over, and as they came down the mountain, Jesus told them in verse 9 not to tell anyone “what they had seen, until the Son of Man rose from the dead.” Again, Jesus didn’t want them to preach an incomplete gospel. The gospel is incomplete without the death and resurrection of Christ. However, there will be a time that they will be able to tell others. Verse 9 says, “Until the Son of Man rose from the dead.”

Jesus’ death and resurrection will occur in their lifetimes because they will be able to tell others, and after the resurrection, they will understand that He came to die for sin, not to establish an earthly kingdom and overthrow Roman occupation. They obeyed His command not to say anything about this (Lk. 9:36).

Prophecy

Verse 10 says they were discussing what it meant by rising from the dead. They knew what resurrection meant because these three saw Jesus raise Jairus’ daughter in Mark 5. They were confused not about resurrection in general, but about the resurrection of Jesus. The notion of the Messiah suffering, dying, and resurrecting still did not fit into their belief of the Messiah’s work on earth.

So, they asked Him a question in verse 11: “Why is it that the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” This is a good question, because the Old Testament does prophecy that

Elijah will come before the final judgment and the establishment of the kingdom.⁶ What they're saying is, "If You are the Messiah, then where's Elijah?"

Jesus answered in verse 12, "Elijah does first come and restore all things. And yet how is it written of the Son of Man that He will suffer many things and be treated with contempt?" Jesus affirmed the fact that Elijah must first come according to prophecy. However, Old Testament prophecy also predicted that Jesus will suffer many things and be treated with contempt.⁷ In sum, Elijah must come and the Messiah must suffer. What they failed to understand is that Christ will come again. In His second coming, He will establish a kingdom, but the first coming was for a different purpose. Elijah will come before Christ returns in the second coming.

Verse 13 makes things a bit more confusing: "But I say to you that Elijah has indeed come, and they did to him whatever they wished, just as it is written of him." Who was Christ's forerunner? John the Baptist. Luke 1:17 says John the Baptist came in the "spirit and power of Elijah." John the Baptist was similar to Elijah in their physical appearance and powerful preaching (Mark 1:6 compared to 2 Kings 1:8). Even though he came as a forerunner of the Messiah, the people did not recognize him as such. They killed him.

Conclusion

Jesus was transfigured before three disciples, and His glory became visible. He assured them that glory will come, but first comes the suffering. For believers, the glory of heaven will come, but it will come after suffering for the sake of the gospel. Acts 14:22 says, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." Romans 8:17 says, "If indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him."

Through difficult times, their faith would remain unshaken. They witnessed the glory of Christ. For a moment, their faith became sight. John says in the gospel of John, "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

⁶ Malachi 3:1; 4:5-6; Isa. 40:3-4

⁷ e.g., Psalm 22; Psalm 69; Isaiah 53; Zechariah 12:10.