

The Transfiguration

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who transfigures you and me, Jesus Christ our Savior and our Lord, amen.

For those with no faith this is just another one of those unbelievable stories about Jesus that make Christians seem so weird and gullible. I mean come on, who can really believe Jesus shone like the sun or that he talked with long departed Moses and Elijah? For those of us who see the world through the eyes of our faith, this is another story that reveals exactly who Jesus is. Which camp are you in?

This story of the Transfiguration of Jesus is in all three of the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Why did this one event become so important? To find out why we must look at what happened before this event. Back in chapter 15 Jesus was going about his ministry healing the people's diseases and telling them about the Kingdom of God. Then in chapter 16 the religious leaders begin testing Jesus and asking for a sign from heaven. In response, Jesus goes on a long walk up north to Caesarea Philippi. This was the site of a large pagan religious center. There was a temple with numerous statues dedicated to Greek gods, Roman gods, and pagan gods of all sorts and flavors. In that multireligious setting Jesus asked his famous question, "Who do the people say that I am?" This must have been a burning question by this time in the minds of those who had heard about the things Jesus was doing. The disciples were quick to answer, some say you're Elijah or one of the prophets and some say you're John

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the Baptist reincarnated... Then Jesus turned the question to the disciples directly and asked, “who do you say that I am”? That’s when Peter opened his mouth and for the first time ever had the correct answer. He shouted out, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!” Having gotten the correct answer, Peter then proceeded to deny Jesus would suffer and die, but then be resurrected on the third day. Jesus called Peter Satan and told him to get behind him for he had his mind set on human things, not on God’s plan... All that happened just before Jesus brought his closest three disciples up to the peak of that mountain where they saw for themselves the glory and the divine nature of Jesus the Christ who was anointed by God almighty. This scene is included for all of us to see that this Jesus isn’t just some great prophet, nor is Jesus just an innocent man caught up in the political intrigue of the time. He is God’s perfect Son and our Lord and Savior.

Here's what we can say about this transfiguration of Jesus. First, this event happened 6 days after Jesus make the bold statement that some who were with him would not see death until they had seen the “Son of Man” coming in his Kingdom. Six short days later Jesus is on the mountaintop with Peter, James, and John when suddenly, Jesus face and entire body begin to glow like the sun... Then, both Moses and Elijah appear and begin talking with Jesus. Luke must have had a better source for this story because in his version he tells us the three men talked about Jesus’ upcoming Exodus or departure from this world. Peter blurts out

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something about it being a good thing he and James and John were there so they could build a booth or tabernacle or some kind of shelter for each of these great heroes of their faith. Peter wanted to commemorate the event by building something that would last, at least for a while longer. Before he's even finished speaking God the Father descends to the mountaintop, covers them in a thick cloud and with a voice as loud as thunder says, "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him!" In their fear they fall to the ground. When they can finally look up to the place where the three religious giants had been, now all they can see is Jesus, himself, alone...

There's a lot to unpack in this story... First is Jesus' appearance. The intention is to draw our attention to Moses and his mountaintop encounter with God. When Moses received the Ten Commandments, he was on the mountain for 6 days before God called to him. Then, when he came down from the mountaintop his face also glowed like the sun. Moses' glowing face eventually faded away. Moses was a mere reflection of the glory of God, but Jesus glowed because his true divine nature broke through his human nature. In his brilliance He was revealed to be God in the flesh. Matthew's intention was to show us by virtue of not one, but two Old Testament heroes, that the story isn't just about Jesus. It's about the reconciliation of the broken relationship that began all the way back in Genesis when mankind fell into sin. It's a story about the God who knew from the start

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humans could never repair the breach that happened when Adam and Eve rebelled against their loving creator. Jesus Christ, was and is the one anointed by God to be savior of the world. Jesus is the climax of that great overarching story of our faith.

Peter writes about the mountaintop experience in second Peter, Chapter 1, verses 16-18 where he writes; “¹⁶ For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” ¹⁸ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.” John also writes about this event... Do you remember the way John begins his Gospel? In the beginning was the Word... He goes on to say, “¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” John begins his Gospel letting us know he has actually seen Jesus, the Word of God made flesh in all his glory! Even James writes about it in his own way. He tells his readers not to be hearers of God’s Word, but to be doers of that Word. James put the emphasis on the final words of God spoken from the cloud, “Listen to Him!” In this mountaintop experience God revealed himself as Jesus Christ, the anointed one, the Messiah, to his inner circle of disciples in all His Divinity and Holiness.

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Moses and Elijah appear in this Transfiguration story precisely to connect Jesus to the God of the Hebrews. Moses brought the word of God down from a mountain and Elijah represents all the prophets God called to tell His word to the straying Hebrew nation. Now, Jesus is with both of them, but he isn't just delivering God's word in either law or prophecy, He is God's Word in the flesh...

In the end, what we are meant to remember from this transfiguring event? Any time the voice of God speaks from heaven or from a cloud we should probably pay close attention. In this case God reminds Jesus and makes it clear to us in no uncertain terms who this man Jesus actually is. This is God's Son, the Beloved. Caesar, Herod, Nero, and all the emperors liked to call themselves sons of god. They even had it minted on their coins of the empire. They required everyone to confess the emperor is the son of god and divine. This transfiguration leaves no doubt Jesus is the true, one and only, Son of God, period! Not even Moses, representing the Old Testament Law nor Elijah representing the Old Testament prophets are equal to Jesus. When Peter, James and John finally work up the courage to look up after God spoke, all they saw was Jesus alone. Jesus was revealed as the new covenant, as the Way, as the truth, and as the life.

God spoke on the mountaintop that day to Peter, James, and John, but also to you and me. God said Jesus is the only Son of God, not Caesar, or Herod, or Nero. Not even Mel Musser or the Pope, only Jesus. God left Peter, James, and John

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with one final command. “Listen to Him!” Jesus isn’t just another prophet who came and was killed by the rebellious religious leaders of the day. No! Jesus is the very Son of God whose blood shed on the cross literally saves the world from its own failure. Will you listen to Jesus? I’m pretty sure God didn’t want us to sit back in our easy chairs and listen to Jesus as we would a good TV crime drama. God wants us to listen and then act on the Word of God revealed in Jesus Christ. That means a lot more than listening. It carries with it the Old Testament connotation of obeying Jesus. After this theophany, Jesus appears by himself, alone. Gone are the Old Testament heroes of the faith. There is no heavenly host to show the glory of God. There is only Jesus alone. Without heavenly visitors, without heavenly glory He, Jesus is the tabernacle. There is no need for Peter to construct a tent or booth or whatever building he had in mind. Jesus is all the shelter we need from the storms of this world. Jesus is from this time forward God’s presence in the world. Jesus is still our shelter and our comforter in all of life’s struggles.

May we raise ourselves above our fears to gaze on the likeness of Jesus in all His glory. May we see Jesus shining like the sun and trust He is God with us now and forever. May we be emboldened to spread the Good News that Jesus has come and we are free to take up our cross now and follow Him. Amen.