

Sermon 46: Luke 9:28-36: The Transfiguration

OUTLINE

Glory revealed
Glory misunderstood
Glory confirmed

INTRODUCTION

The transfiguration is one of the most important Christological events in the Bible.¹ It establishes the identity of Christ as the Messiah and the divine Son, and the nature of the mission that He had come to accomplish. It is a repeat and an expansion on what the baptism of Christ has already revealed. The transfiguration brings to a climactic crescendo a number of OT themes pointing to Christ. The transfiguration reveals Jesus to be the new Moses who ascends the mountain entering the glory-cloud, but instead of receiving the word of the law Jesus is the final word of God. He is the new Moses who ascends the mountain into the cloud to receive the architectural designs for the New Temple the Church. Where the first Moses descended the mountain and failed to lead God's people into the promise Christ will lead His people to the promised land. In the OT no one could see God's face and live, there were many glorious manifestations of God's glory where some saw God's back, or a representative called the Angel of the Lord, or a vision of God from the waist down. All of these were pre-incarnate manifestations of Christ and now Christ's true glory as He reveals the Father's glory is manifested and seen. All of this and more comes to us through this momentous event we know as the transfiguration. The word transfiguration is the English translation of the Greek word 'metemorphothe' in Matt. 17:2.

We are in that portion of Luke's gospel which is exploring the identity of Christ. When Jesus calmed the storm the disciples wondered who Jesus was; the demons gave a startling testimony to His identity; Herod asked questions about His identity, the crowds speculated on His identity all leading to Peter's confession that was soon followed by the revelation that the Son of Man must die, and His disciples suffer. We have heard all sorts of theories and even the truth, we will now see Christ's glory unveiled and hear the testimony of the Father about who Jesus really is. We will look at our portion under three headings, the glory revealed; the glory misunderstood; and the glory confirmed.

Glory revealed

V28, 'Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray.' First lets us attend to the matter of timing. Luke says about 8 days, which is the usual way of saying a week later. If you start counting off the days of the week on any particular day and end your count on the same day it is eight days. But Mark and Matthew say 6 days, this is likely counting the days since the day the statement was said, so the numbers all agree. Secondly, we must consider the setting, just take some of the basic aspects of the situation into consideration, Jesus ascends a mountain, he takes people with Him, there is a glory-cloud on top of the mountain, God's speaks in an audible voice, are there any other times that the Bible records that these sorts of things happened? There seem to be echoes of Sinai here. The feeding of the 5000 and the manna of heaven precede arriving at the mountain. Jesus divided the people into

¹ I am greatly indebted to Alastair Roberts and series of blog articles he wrote on this issue:
<https://alastairadversaria.com/2016/07/22/transfigured-hermeneutics-10-transfigural-interpretation/>

groups, Moses divided the people into groups. Moses goes up the mountain with Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and 70 elders, Jesus ascends with Peter, James and John. Moses descends the mountain to find unbelief, and so does Jesus. These parallels underline the significance of the moment and cause us to consider Christ's identity and mission.

Humanly speaking Christ always prayed before major events, the transfiguration was one of them. And Jesus also took men into His confidences and had deeper friendships with them, He leaned upon His disciples in times of difficulty for Himself, Gethsemane was one of them, and this seems to be another.

V29, 'And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white.' Now the disciples had been sleeping, v32. It is likely that due to their busy ministry schedule and having climbed a mountain they were tired. Jesus began to pray and they fell asleep. Then something happened and they woke up. The first details placed before us are those things that happened to Christ, the appearance of His face was altered, and His clothing became a dazzling white. Firstly, Christ's face, Matt. 17:2 that His face shone as the sun. Any of you who attempted to look at the sun will know the white hot light that we have to look away from, as it is not something that we are meant to look at but by. We must see a development here, when Moses was on the mountain and asked to see God's glory He only saw God's back. Moses would have seen a pre-incarnate manifestation of Christ. Here we see His face. The glory that we see here is no mere light show, this is a revealing of the glory that Jesus had with the Father before the foundation of the earth, but also a revealing of the future glory that we will all participate in. Secondly, all the gospel accounts draw attention to Christ's clothing as well. The Bible does have a theology of clothing. In the garden of Eden Adam and Eve being made in the perfect image of God wore nothing but glory. When they sinned they experienced shame. God covered their nakedness in clothing taken from a sacrifice as a type of the glorious restoration of the glory that mankind would one day receive in the New Creation. Those animal skins pointed to Christ's sacrifice and imputed righteousness covering us in Christ's perfection that we can stand in God's presence dressed in a righteousness not our own. The garments of the priests were pointing forward to Christ's perfection as our High priest. Here we are given a glimpse in the changing of His clothing of the future glory that we will all one day wear because of what He what He has done for us. One day we will be dressed in His glory conformed to His likeness. Clothing also had a large part to do with marriage. When getting betrothed a man would cover his would be bride with his garment as a symbol of taking her into his home and providing for her. Christ has clothed us with His imputed righteousness. And then on the wedding day the bride would wear beautiful clothes and Jewelry, Christ too will provide these for us at the marriage supper of the lamb when we are glorified.

V30-31, 'And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, ³¹ who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.' Not only did the disciples see Christ in His glory, they saw Moses and Elijah, and heard some of what they were talking about with Jesus. V 30 starts off with the words, 'and behold' to make the point that this is another startling aspect that we must take note of. Moses and Elijah are two of the more important people in the OT and are thought to represent the law, Moses; and the prophets, Elijah. Both of these men encountered the glory of God on Sinai. Why are they here? Here is how Alastair Roberts describes the significance, 'In Malachi 4:4-6, the final verses of the Old Testament prophets, the coming Day of the LORD is announced and the people are told to remember the 'Law of Moses,' God's servant. It is also promised that 'Elijah' will appear 'before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.' This prophecy is prominent in the context of the Transfiguration account, where Matthew's account records Jesus referring the prophecy concerning Elijah to John the Baptist (Matthew

17:10-13). As Moses and Elijah are the great witnesses and the ones who will prepare the way for the climactic coming of the LORD himself, their appearance with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration is very fitting.²

But not only is their presence important but also what they are talking about, 'and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.' Now if you look at your footnote in the ESV you will see that the word for departure is literally 'Exodus.' As Jesus is being portrayed as a new Moses and His work that lies before Him what He will do in Jerusalem is being discussed as Jesus exodus, this brings the suffering of Christ and His cross work into the foreground. Jesus as our Passover lamb will die; He will lead His people through the judgement waters of the Red Sea safely; He will ascend the mountain to the glory of God's presence disappearing from the sight of those below, and instead of bringing down the law He will send the Spirit. He will sustain the people of God in their wanderings, and where Moses failed enter himself or to bring the people of God into the promise, for only 2 of that first generation received the promise; Christ will bring us over the Jordan into the final Sabbath rest of God. All of the types and shadows given in the Exodus will find their fulfillment now in the work of Christ.

Glory misunderstood

Now it is clear that the disciples do not understand what they are looking at. V32-33, 'Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³ And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said.' The text clearly tells us that Peter did not know what he was talking about, and perhaps we should have a little mercy upon him as we are told that he had just woken up. Imagine for a moment that you were a Jew in this situation. You know Jesus is the Messiah, you have speculations about the Messiah's kingdom coming soon. You know that Elijah has something to do with the Messiah's coming kingdom and the law of Moses too from the closing verses of the OT. Everyone is glowing and you are probably thinking, this is it, the kingdom has arrived. Then you see Moses and Elijah finishing up their business and make moves to walk away. You want to make this moment last forever, you want to ensure that things move forward in the way that you expect, so you try and get Elijah and Moses to stay. This is probably something along the lines of what Peter is thinking when he says, 'Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.'

It has been suggested from Peter's reference to tents that he is thinking of Zechariah 14:16-19. That is a prophecy of the coming day of the Lord where God will wage war against the nations and set up Jerusalem as His capital. There will be a feast of booths celebrated which all the nations of the earth must come and celebrate. Peter might be doing some simple here, Jesus is the Messiah, He is glowing in regal glory, Moses and Elijah are here, I heard them mention Jerusalem, this must be about that feast of booths in Zech. 14. It is quite possible that Peter is thinking along these lines. Since Jesus is the Messiah the kingdom must come now. Despite the fact that Jesus has just explained that He must die and His disciples will have to suffer as well. Peter is clinging to triumphalistic notions and is impatient to see the kingdom realized now.

² <https://www.reformation21.org/blogs/the-climactic-word.php>

Peter is like us in this regard isn't he? We too can be triumphalistic thinking that because Jesus is Lord all the happy endings must flow now, we can be impatient to get to the happy ending. We too want the kingdom without the cross and discipleship that debates who will sit at the right or left hand of Christ but not the discipleship of daily taking up our crosses. There are many brands of Christian teaching with this emphasis. The prosperity gospel is all about realizing the kingdom; modern social justice warriors are all about building a worldly utopia and others.

As goes the King so goes the Kingdom, Jesus walked in humility in veiled glory walking the path of obedience and suffering, conquering through sacrifice not military might. The footsteps of Christ that we are called to walk in are these ones, the obedient, trusting, suffering footsteps of Christ. The world is still fallen and not yet liberated that means you will still get sick and experience pain; the devil is thrown down to earth and allowed to wage war against the saints so we will experience the daily warfare of living in the world under his sway; our sinful nature has not yet been glorified so we will continue to experience the war within. But like Peter we forget we want to kingdom without the cross, to make the sweet moments of blessing last forever.

Another problem with Peter's perspective is that he seems to have equated Jesus with Moses and Elijah. Moses and Elijah will go away, just as the law and prophets will be fulfilled. Christ is the Messiah, He is God in the flesh, Peter and the disciples have just learned that any of those theories that made Jesus out be another prophet and not the Prophet were wrong. Jesus is superior to all. He can have no equals or competition. Once again Peter helps us to see one of our common weaknesses. We forget the superiority of Christ and allow things to compete for His place in our lives. For some it is a pet sin, for others a personal comfort, it may be a person, here Peter is taking the best of men and equating them with Christ not recognizing that Christ must be the unchallenged Lord of our lives. Is there anything in your life right now that it competing with Christ?

Glory confirmed

V34-35, 'As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!" Here is the cloud, the familiar manifestation of God's presence in the OT. Ex. 16:10, 'And as soon as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.' This was the same presence of God that settled on the tabernacle and visited Solomon's temple. Any Jew would know what this cloud was and to be taken into the cloud as Moses was would have been a terrifying notion for any Jew. Matthews account tells us that the disciples fell on their faces, a way of averting their eyes and honoring the presence of God.

And here we see a repetition of what happened at Christ's baptism. Both were preceded by speculation about His identity; both are preceded by talk of John's heavenly witness; both are followed by a satanic confrontation. At the baptism the Spirit descends as a dove and the Father speaks audibly; here the Spirit descends as a cloud and the Father speaks audibly. Both are overt manifestations of the Trinity.

It is not often that the Father's audible words are recorded let us consider them. "'This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!" Matthew's account adds, 'with whom I am well pleased.' All these words from God's own mouth tell us much about Christ's identity.

'My Son.' These words have a variegated meaning, they have multiple layers. Firstly, Christ is the ontological Son, the second person of the Trinity, very God of very God. Son was also an Adamic title indicating a ruling role over Creation. It was also a name for Israel who were placed under the law but were disobedient, Christ is the Son placed under the law who obeys the law and enters into its promises. It was a title for the Davidic King.

'in whom I am well pleased.' There is no other human being of which this could be said but Christ. He alone is the perfect one, the obedient one, and the apple of God's eye. These words remind us that Christ is the perfect offerer and offering who alone is able to save us, and His work on our behalf is acceptable to God.

'My chosen One.' Christ is the One promised from Gen. 3:15 and is promised, prophesied and prefigured in many ways in the OT. However, this title is also the title of the Servant promised in Is. 42:1, 'Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.' It is this Servant who is also the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. Here God is confirming the suffering ministry of the chosen one. Peter and the disciples struggled to accept this point, here it is divinely confirmed.

'Listen to Him.' These words are an echo of Deut 18:15, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen.' Here God dots all the I's and crosses all the T's. God Himself explains that Christ is the promised one who is fulfilling these promises. God gave the law through Moses but grace and truth through Jesus Christ.

This portion is given to us to reveal and confirm the identity of Jesus, to put beyond any doubt who He is and what He has come to do. He is God made flesh come to save us from our sins.

The key application that we can make in closing is in obeying those words, 'Listen to Him.' Listen to Him when He tells you what to believe. When Jesus talks about a literal Adam and Eve, a literal devil, the real existence of angels and demons, the nature of the scripture as reliable to the very jot and tittle. The existence of heaven and hell, marriage as between one man and one woman, that we are sinners who can receive the free gift of eternal life by believing upon Him, listen to Him, believe these things.

Listen to Him as He gives you instruction. Love one another as I have loved you; love your neighbor as yourself; love your enemies, and Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. That we should fulfil the great commission, deny ourselves, carry our cross daily and follow Him. As He commands you to pray, fast, be ready, seek first the kingdom and trust your Father for your daily needs.

Listen to Him as He makes promises that any who come to Him will not be turned away; that if you believe you will receive eternal life; that He will be with you unto the end of the age; that there is blessedness in being poor in spirit, in mourning over sin, in hungering and thirsting after righteousness, in being merciful, pure of heart, peacemakers and even in being persecuted for righteousness sake.

V36, 'And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen.' Here we see that the disciples were to keep silent, Matt. 17:9 says, 'Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.' Well good news Jesus has risen from the dead and we can now declare these things from the rooftops.

