The Transfiguration


The transfiguration is one of those events in the Savior’s earthly history which students of the Word would rather pass over in reverent silence. The argument for such silence might be made in the same way the Gospel narrative kindly deals with Peter’s foolish speech concerning the three tabernacles: “For he did not know what to answer” (Mk. 9:6a). Who knows what to say any more than Peter? Who is fully capable of speaking about that wonderful night on the mountain? For a brief few minutes, heaven came down to earth. The mortal body of Jesus, being transfigured, shone with celestial brightness. The spirits of two men, Elijah and Moses, who were now perfect, appeared and had conversation with Him about His approaching death. A voice came forth from the excellent glory pronouncing Him to be God’s well-beloved Son. This majestic spectacle is too high for us; it is too lofty for us to attain. Its grandeur overwhelms and astonishes us. Its mystery surpasses our comprehension. Its glory is inexpressible. Therefore, we need to avoid all speculation, curious questioning, theological inquiry, and ambitious attempts to make word-pictures about the remarkable occurrence that is recorded here. We will confine ourselves in this chapter to the humble task of briefly explaining its significance for Jesus Himself and its lesson for His disciples.

To be understood, the “transfiguration” must be viewed in relation to the announcement Jesus made shortly before it happened. It was about His death. This is evident because all three evangelists who carefully tell the story take notice of the time of its occurrence. In all three accounts, they attach the event to the announcement and to the conversation that accompanied it. All tell how Jesus took three of His disciples, Peter, James, and John, within six or eight days of His announcement, and brought them alone to a high mountain. There, He was transfigured before them. Usually the Gospel historians are not accustomed to being so careful about matters of time. Their detailed accuracy tells us, in effect: “While the previous communications and sermons about the cross were fresh in the thoughts of all the people, the wonderful events we are now writing about took place.” In fact, the relative date is a sign pointing back to the conversation on the passion, and says, “If you want to understand what is coming, remember what happened before.”

Jesus, Moses, and Elijah

Luke makes a statement that further substantiates the inference about the time of the transfiguration. It has to do with the conversation that took place between Jesus and the celestial
visitors. “And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Lk. 9:30-31). That departure, so different from their own in its circumstances and consequences, was the theme of their talk. They had appeared to Jesus to talk with Him about His death. And when they had finished speaking about it, they left for their heavenly home. We do not know how long the conference lasted. However, the subject matter was sufficiently interesting. There was the surprising contrast between the death of Moses and that of Jesus. Moses’ death was immediate and painless. His eyes were not even weak nor his strength gone (Deut. 34:7). Jesus’ death was painful and disgraceful. Then, there was another remarkable contrast between the way Elijah departed this life. He was translated to heaven without tasting death at all, making a triumphant exit out the world in a chariot of fire. Jesus, on the other hand, would enter into glory by the via dolorosa of the cross. Why did the representatives of the law and the prophets have the privilege of being exempt from death, or from the bitterness of death, when it was denied Him who was the fulfillment of the law and prophecy? On these points and others like them, the two celestial messengers, who were enlightened by the clear light of heaven, may have had intelligent and sympathetic conversation with the Son of Man. And it refreshed His weary, saddened, solitary soul.

Luke further records that Jesus had been spending time in prayer prior to His transfiguration. We can see the Father’s answer to His Son’s supplications by the way He bestowed honor and glory on Him. From the nature of the answer, we can infer that Christ had been in prayer. It was the same after He had prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. The cup of death was present to His mind now, as it was then. The cross was visible to His spiritual eye. He prayed for the nerve to drink it, for the courage to endure. The presence of the three confidential disciples, Peter, James, and John, offers a significant hint to the similarity of the two occasions. The Master took these disciples with Him to the mountain, as He later took them into the garden. This was so He might not be totally without company and warm sympathy as He walked through the valley of the shadow of death and felt the horror and the loneliness of the situation.

**Why the Transfiguration?**

It is now clear how we must view the transfiguration scene in relation to Jesus. It was an aid to faith and patience. It was especially given to the meek and lowly Son of Man in answer to His prayers. Its purpose was to encourage Him on His sorrowful path toward Jerusalem and Calvary. Three distinct aids were supplied to His faith in the experiences of that wonderful night. The first was a foretaste of the glory with which He would be rewarded after His passion because of His voluntary humiliation and obedience unto death. For the moment, he was absorbed with heaven, where He had been before He came into the world. His face shone like the sun, and His clothing was as white as the pure snow that has not been walked on in the high alpine summits of Hermon. The sudden flood of celestial light said, “Be of good cheer; the suffering will soon be over, and You will enter into Your eternal joy!”
A second source of comfort to Jesus in the experiences on the mount was the assurance that the mystery of the cross was understood and appreciated by the saints in heaven - even if not by the darkened minds of sinful people on earth. He greatly needed this comfort. Except for His chosen disciples, there was not one person He could speak with on this theme who would give an intelligent and sympathetic response. Only a few days ago, He had determined in a painful way that the Twelve were utterly incapable of comprehending the mystery of His passion - even the brightest and most compassionate among them. Could they even believe in it as a certain fact? Truly, the Son of Man was most lonely as He passed through the dark valley! The very presence of ignorant, unsympathetic companions served to enhance the sense of solitariness. When He wanted company who could understand His thoughts about His passion, He was obligated to have conversation with the spirits of righteous men who had been made perfect. As far as mortal men were concerned, He had to be content to finish His great work without the comfort of being understood until after it had been accomplished.

The conversation with the great lawgiver and the great prophet on the subject of His death was, without a doubt, a real comfort to the spirit of Jesus. We know how He comforted Himself at other times: He would think about being understood in heaven, if not on earth. When the heartless Pharisees questioned His practice of associating with sinners, He sought His defense and His consolation in the blessed fact that at least there was joy in heaven over one sinner who repented - more than over ninety-nine who needed no repentance. It didn't matter what they thought. When He considered how “little ones” - the weak and helpless - were despised and run over by others in this proud inhuman world, He reflected with unspeakable satisfaction that in heaven their angels always beheld the face of His Father. He was saying that in heaven, there were angels who made taking care of little ones their special business. Therefore, these weak ones were fully able to appreciate the doctrine of humility and kindness, which He was trying to impart to the ambitious and quarreling disciples. Surely, then, we can believe that when He looked forward to the time of His own death - the crowning evidence of His love for sinners - it was a comfort to His heart to think this way: “In heaven they know I am supposed to suffer. They comprehend why and eagerly watch to see how I move on without faltering, with my face set to go up to Jerusalem without wavering.” Wouldn't it be especially comforting to have tangible evidence for this by having an actual visit from two citizens from the upper world who were commissioned and sent to express the general thinking of the whole community of glorified saints? These two would understand that their presence in heaven was due to the sacrifice which He was about to make by offering Himself on the hill of Calvary.

A third, and the main source of comfort to the heart of Jesus was the approving voice of His heavenly Father: “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; hear Him!” (Mt. 17:5). The words He spoke meant: “Go on Your present journey, devoted to death. Do not avoid the cross. I am pleased with You at all times. I am most emphatically delighted with You when You display Your fixed purpose to save others rather than Yourself. You recently did this when You
made the announcement to Your disciples.”

The Voice from Heaven
The divine Father spoke from glory on three occasions in the hearing of His Son during His life on earth. The first occurred by the Jordan after the baptism of Jesus. It was the same as this one except that it was spoken to Him, and not about Him. The last was uttered at Jerusalem shortly before the crucifixion. This one was similar to the other two, but different in form. Jesus’ soul was troubled with the nearness of His death, so He prayed, “Father, save Me from this hour; but for this reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name.” Then we read that a voice came from heaven saying, “I have both glorified it (by Your life), and will glorify it again (more by Your death).” All three utterances served one purpose. They came during these crises in Christ’s history when He manifested unusual intensity in His devotion to the work for which He had come into the world. He was determined to finish it, no matter how wearisome the task might be to flesh and blood. These words were for His encouragement and strengthening, and expressed the Father’s quiet satisfaction over His humiliation and obedience unto death. At His baptism, He (so to speak) confessed the sins of the whole world. By submitting to the rite, He expressed His purpose to fulfill all righteousness as the Redeemer from sin. Therefore, for the first time, the Father pronounced Him His beloved Son. Shortly before the transfiguration, He had energetically repelled the suggestion of one of His loving disciples that He should save Himself from His anticipated doom. He considered it a temptation from the devil. Therefore, the Father renewed the declaration. This time, however, He changed the second person (“You”) into the third (“Him”) for the sake of those disciples who were present, especially Peter, who had listened to the voice of his own heart rather than to his Master’s words. A few days before His death, Jesus overcame a temptation similar to that to which Peter had subjected Him. This time it came out of the sinless infirmity of His own human nature. Beginning His prayer with the expression of His wish to be saved from this dark hour, He ended it with the petition, “Glorify Your name.” Therefore the Father repeated once more the expression of His approval. In effect, He declared His satisfaction with the way in which His Son had glorified His name until now. He also was expressing His confidence that He would not fail to crown His career of obedience by a God-glorifying death.

The Lesson for Christians
This is the meaning of the vision on the mountain for Jesus. Now we have to consider what lesson it taught the disciples who were present and, through them, their brothers and all Christians.

The main point is the command attached to the end of the heavenly voice: “Hear Him.” This refers especially to the doctrine of the cross which was preached by Jesus to the Twelve, but which was not well-received. It was meant to be a solemn, deliberate endorsement of all that He had said concerning His own sufferings and concerning their obligation to bear their crosses. Peter, James, and John were invited to recall all that had come from their Master’s lips about this
unwelcome topic. They were assured that it was totally true and in accordance with the divine mind. As these disciples had received the doctrine with whispers of disapproval, the voice from heaven addressed them with a stern word of rebuke, which said, “Do not grumble, but devoutly and obediently listen.”

This rebuke was all the more necessary in that the disciples had just demonstrated that their thinking was the same as it had been six days earlier. Peter was still in no position to consider bearing a cross. He had been overcome with drowsiness (Lk. 9:32) and was now waking up and able to think more clearly. He observed the two strangers who were leaving and exclaimed, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah” (Mt. 17:4). He had it in his mind, we think, to enjoy the privileges of heaven without going through the process of cross-bearing. He thought to himself: “How much better to live up here with the saints than down below in the middle of unbelieving, fault-finding Pharisees and miserable human beings. Rather this, than enduring the arguments of sinners and battling with all the ills with which the earth is cursed! Stay here, my Master, and you can say goodbye to all those dark warnings about sufferings that are coming. You will be beyond the reach of evil priests, elders, and scribes. Stay here, on this sun-lit, heaven-kissed hill. Do not go down into the depressing, somber valley of humiliation any more. Farewell, earth and the cross; welcome, heaven and the crown!”

We should not forget, while we are paraphrasing Peter’s foolish speech, that when he spoke these words he was just waking up from his sleep and was overwhelmed by the midnight scene. Yet, when consideration has been given for this, it still remains true that the superficial suggestion was an indication of the disciple’s present state of mind. Peter was drunk, though not with wine. But what people say, even when they are drunk, is revealing. There was a serious meaning in his senseless speech about the tabernacle. He really meant that the celestial visitors ought to stay, and not go away, as they were in the process of doing when he spoke (see Lk. 9:33). This is apparent from the conversation which took place between Jesus and the three disciples while they were descending the mountain (Mt. 17:9-13; Mk. 9:9-13). Peter and his two companions, James and John, asked their Master: “Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” We think that the question referred, not to the command Jesus had just given the disciples - “Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead” - but rather to the vanishing scene that had just occurred on the mountain. The three disciples were not only disappointed, but perplexed that Moses and Elijah were so much like angels in that they had such a short stay and departed so suddenly. They had accepted the current thinking about the coming of Elias, that he would return before the restoration of the kingdom – and then actually accomplish the restoration. They fondly hoped that this was he who at last had come with Moses. He would be heralding the approaching glory in a similar way that swallows coming from tropical climates are a sign that summer is near and that winter, with its storms and hardships, is over and gone. In truth, while their Master was preaching the cross, they had been dreaming of crowns. We will
find them continuing to do this until the very end.

“Hear Him.” This voice was not meant for the three disciples alone, or even for the Twelve, but for all who consider themselves followers of Christ. It says to every Christian: “Listen to Jesus, and strive to understand Him while He speaks about the mystery of His sufferings and the glory that will follow - those themes into which even the angels desire to look. Listen to Him when He proclaims cross-bearing as a duty required of all disciples. Do not give in to selfish suggestions made by your flesh, nor to the temptations of Satan who counsels you to put self-interest or self-preservation as your highest goal. Listen to Him, once again, and do not grow weary of having to constantly confront the things the world offers. Do not seek to lay down your burden before it is time. Do not dream of tabernacles where you may live securely, like a hermit in the wild who has removed himself from everyday life. Do your part like a man and, at the proper time, you will not have a tent, but a temple to live in - a house that is not made with hands, but one that is eternal in the heavens.”

It is true, indeed, that we who are in this tabernacle of the body living in this world of sorrow cannot help but agonize every now and then, because we are burdened. This is our infirmity. In itself, it is not sinful. Neither is it wrong to let out a great sigh and make a passing wish that your cross-bearing could be over. At times, even the holy Jesus felt this weariness of life. An expression of something like impatience escaped His lips during this time. When He came down from the mountain and learned what was going on at the base, He spoke about the unbelief of the scribes who were present, about the weak faith of the disciples, and about the miseries that all mankind experienced because of the consequences of the curse. He said, “O unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?” Even the loving Redeemer of mankind felt tempted to be weary in well-doing, weary of encountering the opposition from sinners and of putting up with the spiritual weakness of the disciples. This weariness, therefore, as a momentary feeling, is not necessarily sinful. Rather, it may be a part of our cross. However, you must not give in to it, nor yield to it. Jesus did not give Himself up to the feeling. Though He complained about the generation of people among whom He lived, He did not stop His labors of love to benefit them. Having thoroughly rebuked those who were intent on hindering His work, He commanded that the poor epileptic boy be brought to Him so He could heal him. Then, after He had performed this new miracle of mercy, He patiently explained to His own disciples the cause of their inability to deal successfully with the people’s illnesses. He taught them how they could obtain the power for casting out all sorts of devils, even those who had the most obstinate hold on their victims. They would come out by faith and prayer (Mt. 17:19-21; Mk. 9:28-29). So He continued laboring to help the unfortunate and to instruct the ignorant. Jesus did this until the time came when He could truly say, “It is finished.”