

“THE CHRIST OF CELESTIAL GLORY”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Mt. 16:13-17, 21-25; 17:1-8

There are some moments in a man's life that are so sacred in meaning, so luminous in quality, we hesitate to even speak of them lest we be guilty of intrusion. It seems to me the transfiguration of Jesus is such a moment. We cannot even read it without feeling that somehow we are treading on holy ground. For these majestic moments on the mount were, without question, one of the high-water marks in the life of our Lord.

A number of theories have been set forth to explain this unusual event. Some have said it was a resurrection appearance which early translators in the Bible had misplaced. Or a fairy tale which early Christians had conjured up in their imagination. Or, as some left-wing theologians have suggested, did not really happen at all. Jesus just *seemed* to be transfigured, bathed as he was in sunlight as the morning mist cleared the mountaintop.

But to the gospel writers this wonderful incident was neither dream nor fancy, but real. To them it was the Divine attestation of the truth of Peter's confession,

“Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

And coming, as it does, about halfway through the gospel of Matthew, it blends with the voice heard at his baptism at the beginning of his ministry, and the confession of the centurion at his crucifixion at the end of his ministry, to form a kind of triumvirate of testimony that Jesus was indeed the Son of the living God.

The transfiguration, then, is a part of the life of Christ which is brilliant in its simplicity, staggering in its implications, and blessed in its hope.

To aid you in your thinking, I have selected four words I suggest you use as pegs upon which to hang your understanding of this particular part of Jesus' life.

The first word, “transfigured,” has to do with the scene of this most wonderful event.

The second word, “transfixed,” has to do with the saints who witnessed it.

The third word, “transfused,” has to do with the Son who experienced it.

The fourth word, “transformed,” has to do with the sequel that followed it.

Transfigured

As I have said, this first word, “transfigured,” has to do with the scene of this most wonderful event. As we piece together the evidence found in the three gospels, we discover it was along about evening that Jesus took the three members of his little band of twelve with whom he seemed to be the closest, and ascended the slopes of Mt. Hermon for a period of prayer.

Luke’s reference to prayer as Jesus’ main purpose for climbing the mountain must not be overlooked. As one writer points out,

“To have ‘mountaintop experiences’ it is not enough to go up on a mountain; one must go up on ‘a mountain to pray.’”

Jesus’ purpose for climbing Mt. Hermon was not to be transfigured, but to pray. The transfiguration, with all of its attendant majesty and mystery, was God’s answer to that prayer. And, if we would “get the glory,” as our Negro friends sometimes put it, if we must escape the chains of mediocrity which often bind our souls. For, the holy hours of the heart are most apt to come when we are lost in high communion with our Father which is in heaven.

As they began their ascent, a delicious coolness swept over them. The mountain air and the scent of snow must have been a welcome brisk change from the summer’s heat. As the four climbed higher the sun dropped lower in the west until finally, as Alfred Edersheim describes it,

“A deep ruby flush came over all the scene, and warm purple shadows crept slowly in.”

To borrow the words of Canon Tristran, “The sea of Galilee was lit up with a delicate greenish-

yellow hue,” and the “long pyramidal shadow” of the mountain began to creep across the plain until everything to the east of it was swallowed up in darkness. And then, as the sun slid out of sight into the sea, the summer stars began to twinkle in the sky. With dazzling splendor the mellow moon shone down on broad patches of snow until the very air was charged with enchantment, and the scene was surrounded with “an ethereal calm” so often sought, but seldom found, amid the hurly-burly of life.

In a setting like *that* the transfiguration of our Lord took place. After the disciples, wearied by the long ascent and the enervating effect of the thin mountain air, dropped off to sleep, our Savior drew apart to pray. We are indebted to Dr. Luke for the subject of Jesus’ prayer, because he tells us in Lk. 9:31, Jesus was praying about his “exodus (or departure) which he would accomplish at Jerusalem.”

It was the crucifixion which preoccupied Jesus’ thoughts that night. And, as we think of this one who was so in love with life, and who lived a life of love, we can understand how he must have shrunk from the thought of dying. Jesus was not “in love with death” as some critics have charged. But, as he looked ahead to his cross, the prospect of prolonged agony and shame must have cast a dark shadow over his spirit.

Jesus did not want to die. “In Him was life,” says John. He was made for it and he loved it. Passionately. And we miss the point completely if we imagine that Jesus accepted Calvary casually. No! He hated death! It was one of man’s enemies he had come to destroy! But however great his desire to live, his desire *to live in the will of God* was greater still, and, if that meant he should die, then die he would. So he prayed, not that he might escape death, but that when death came he would meet it with the same calm which had characterized every other act of his.

As he prayed, his soul rose above all earthly shadows and he was transfigured. In his wonderful book, The Life Of Christ, Carl Gieke put it this way,

“Drawn forth by the nearness of his heavenly Father, the Divinity within.
shone through the veiling flesh until his tunic glistened with a dazzling
brightness, and his face glowed with a sun-like majesty.”

Transfixed

In the midst of such radiance it was impossible for the three disciples to sleep. Aroused by the splendor of the transfigured Christ, they gazed transfixed at the wonder of this staggering sight. As they watched, two men also clothed in glory, came and stood with Christ. In their heightened sense of spiritual alertness, his disciples immediately recognized these two to be Moses and Elijah.

This is a portion of the transfiguration which is staggering in its implications. Moses was the heroic giver of the law. Elijah was the lion-hearted prophet of God. Moses had received the law and given it to the people. Elijah had called the people back to the law and to a revival of righteousness. To have these representatives of the law and the prophets uniting with Christ in the hallowed glory of his transfiguration, is really important.

It signifies that in Jesus the law, “with all of its forbidding and forebodings,” is fulfilled in Christ. And the righteousness to which Elijah continually called people would now be *given* to them. As a gift! And thus, on the mount of transfiguration, Moses was allowed to meet the One who was to complete the work he had started. And Elijah was allowed to meet the One who is righteousness itself. The One who would not only *tell* men what to do, but would *empower* them to do it.

But, if this meeting on the mount of transfiguration had meaning for Moses and Elijah, it also had meaning for Jesus, himself. *They* had passed through death and knew what lay on the other side. *They* knew what blessings were in store for the faithful followers of God. And of all the saints whom God *might* have sent to be with Christ, none could have spoken with such authority about the things to come as Moses and Elijah. *Their* presence spoke of a glory which far out-weighed the dismal prospects of the cross and the grave. And as these two, who had passed through death

into life everlasting talked sympathetically with Jesus about his coming death, all fear of the future, all weakness of the flesh, all anxiety about what lay ahead was banished, and Jesus knew it would be well with his soul.

Some insights come to mind as I relect upon this text. First, Jesus talked with two *men*. No angel wings or other-worldly manifestations. Second, Moses and Elijah retained their *essential being* or identity. Peter, James and John *knew* who they were. Third, these two *men* were in a *conscious state*. Their minds followed the same thoughts as on earth. “They talked of his exodus” from earth. Theirs was not mere existence, but *conscious* existence. Fourth, not only did they enjoy a conscious existence, but a *continuity* of existence. With enlarged powers. They were interested in what was taking place on earth, with this added benefit, *they knew how it was all going to come out!*

All of which gives us some clues into life after death. Those who have gone before us retain their *essential being*. They are in a *conscious state*. They also enjoy a *continuity* of existence. They are interested in what’s taking place on earth. With this added benefit: *They know how it’s going to come out!* They know the promises of God are sure! They know *that*, and *how*, God works everything together for good. When they pray for us, their prayers are in perfect harmony with the will of God. And those prayers are answered according to the word of God. Praise the Lord!

But the glory of that special night was not ended. As those three dazed disciples sat transfixed before the wondrous sight of Moses, Elijah and Jesus engaged in conversation -- their very beings aglow with the glory of God -- a cloud passed over the brow of the mountain. And the disciples were seized with a nameless terror as a voice came out of the cloud saying,

“This is my beloved son, *hear him.*”

At the sound of that voice, the three dazzled disciples fell on their faces before what they knew to be the very presence of God!

We don’t know how long they lay there in awe-struck worship, but after a while the glory was gone as suddenly as it had come, and looking up, the disciples, paralyzed with wonder, “saw none

save Jesus only.” The heavenly visitors were gone. The last glow of the glistening garment had faded away. The echo of the voice from heaven had died out. Above them were twinkling stars. Beneath them were the fields of snow made bright by the light of the moon. About them were the silent hills. It was night. And they were alone with Jesus, and with Jesus only.

What was the outcome of all this? It seems to me there was a two-fold consequence. The first affected the Son who had experienced this flood of glory. The second affected the disciples who witnessed it, thus making possible a happy sequel to the story.

Transfused

As far as the Son was concerned, the third word I suggested as a memory peg -- transfused -- has some meaning here. As I mentioned a moment ago, Jesus was not “in love with death.” He did not want to die. But if it was the will of God for him to die, he knew he could not do it in the weakness of the flesh, so he sought the strength of the Spirit. He submitted to a transfusion from on high, through which divine strength and sinew was poured into his human frame, and he received the encouragement and hope he needed to face the cross.

The transfiguration was God’s seal of approval upon Jesus’ commitment to Calvary’s cross. In the very midst of his struggle with the dark spectre of death Jesus heard the same voice which had commissioned him at his baptism, and Jesus knew, as the apostle Paul later said, God had not abandoned him, but was “working all things together for good.”

Here was a timely reinforcement of our Master’s faith as he was given light and power with which to meet the approaching darkness. And all of us need a high-water mark of the soul like that to sustain us when life is in ebbtide. The “weather” of our soul varies. It runs from sunlight, through dense fog, to pitch darkness. But if we keep the memory of our high hours sharp and clear, they will steady us when life comes tumbling in.

During Dr. Baxter’s last visit I had an occasion to chat with him about this very thing. He shared with me the fact that shortly after the war he had a physical breakdown that threatened to put an

end to his ministry. The terrible tedium of the war, and the lack of adequate diet, had taken their toll. According to Ethel, his wife, it looked very much as if Sid would never preach again.

Dr. Baxter said,

“John, it was during those dark days that I learned the meaning of life’s high hours. For while I was filled with despair and doubt, and the very God I had preached seemed unreal and far away, there were a few holy hours which I had spent with Christ, and I could never forget them. The memory of those personal experiences with God are what pulled me through, and I clung to the hope that I would know the glory of such high hours of the soul once again.”

Yes, all of us need some high-water mark on the soul to sustain us through those trying times when life turns into ebbtide. And Jesus was no different. The transfiguration was that instrument through which his struggling spirit was transfused with new hope, and power, and the blessed reassurance that his heavenly father would never leave him or forsake him.

Transformed

And what can be said of the effect of the transfiguration upon *Jesus*, can be said of the disciples as well. Because of their encounter with “The Christ of Celestial Glory” the sequel to their story was transformed, and almost a generation later the memory of that night was as vivid as ever, as the apostle Peter wrote in his second epistle,

“We were eyewitnesses of his majesty, when we were with him in the holy mountain” (II Peter 1:17-18).

To be sure, the transfiguration was not the end of their training. It took the resurrection to put the final seal upon their faith, but nevertheless, there is no eluding the fact that those mysterious and majestic moments on the mount played a part in changing Peter from a weak, vacillating turncoat, into the passionate preacher of Pentecost, facing ridicule and opposition without batting

an eye. And in the end, writing of his own death in words borrowed from his experience on the mount of transfiguration, he called it “my exodus” (not my end), but “my exodus” into life eternal.

And just as surely as the transfiguration had a transforming influence upon Peter, so too it had an impact upon James and John. James became the first to seal his faith in the blood of martyrdom. And John, inspired by the memory of those hallowed hours, wrote of the wonders of Christ as the Son of God, proclaiming fearlessly the blessed truth,

“We beheld his glory, as of the only begotten of the Father.”

We don’t know if, when they came down from the mount, their faces shone with the reflected glory of Jesus, but we *do* know the people took notice of them, and that’s good enough for me. God grant that each of us shall climb with Christ those altar stairs which lead to God, so we, too, can behold his glory, and folks around us will know we have been with Jesus and, as a result, life for us will never again be quite the same.