

The Transfiguration **Malcolm Watts**

The transfiguration is the word used to describe the miraculous change that took place in the appearance of Christ when he was visibly glorified in the presence of three of his disciples. Jesus', we read, 'was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light' (Matt 17:2).

One of the most remarkable events in Christ's earthly life, the transfiguration anticipated our Lord's future glory and also revealed the glory which will forever belong to his believing people. As we read the inspired narratives (Matt 17:1-9; Mk 9:2-9; Lk 9:28-36), we are still able to catch a glimpse of the invisible world and view some of the wonders of the kingdom of heaven.

Eminent commentators and expositors have seen the transfiguration in that light. Among these is Dr. John Gill who, in his comments on Mark's account, says that Christ was transfigured 'that his disciples might have a visible display of his glory, as an emblem and pledge of that in which he shall hereafter appear'. James Foote in his lectures on Luke', makes a similar point: 'We may infer, from this account, how glorious a place heaven must be. On the mount of transfiguration, heaven might be said, in some measure, to be brought down to earth; and from what was then seen, some idea may be entertained of what heaven itself is. How glorious was that sight! And yet it was only a small specimen of what is within the veil. There his redeemed people see Jesus as he is, and in all the splendour of his exaltation'.

In a choice little volume entitled *The Transfiguration on the Mount*', Jonathan Ranken Anderson wrote the following: The scene of the Transfiguration was a figure of heaven, for there the person of Christ will be the central object — "the Lamb in the midst of the Throne;" there the redeemed from among men will appear in glory — "A Lamb stood on the mount Zion, and with him an hundred forty and four thousand, having his Father's name written in their foreheads;" there the death of Christ will be the ceaseless theme of contemplation and praise — He appeared "as a Lamb that had been slain;" there the course of divine Dispensation will have reached its destination; there the lines of Divine truth will meet and converge in Him who is the Alpha and Omega'.

The Key to the Meaning

Scripture itself teaches that this is indeed the significance of the transfiguration; and it encourages us to look within the veil and gaze upon the glory that one day shall be revealed. Several verses and passages come almost immediately to mind:

First of all, we observe that not long before this event, Christ had predicted his approaching sufferings; and because the disciples found that so difficult to accept, he had also predicted his future and ultimate glory. 'From that time forth', we read, 'Jesus began to show unto his disciples, how that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things of the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed...' (Matt 16:21). And shortly afterwards he says to those same disciples, 'the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels...' (16:27). Now, according to the Gospels, our Lord intimated to them that they would soon be granted a spectacular preview of his future and eternal glory. He said: Verily, I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom' (16:28). This was spoken just before the transfiguration took place. What can that mean except that Matthew (along with Mark and Luke) understood this event to be a demonstration of his final and glorious appearance?

Second, although the ineffable splendour of Christ's person was not generally seen during his life in this world, the apostle John did claim to have seen it on at least one occasion. In the Prologue to his Gospel, he wrote, 'we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father' (In 1:14). When did John — along with others — see With the bodily eye' (for so the word beheld' generally means) the 'glory' of the Son of God? It must surely have been on this holy mountain. Now, it is clearly intimated elsewhere that, at some future time, all the Lord's people will see his glory. Although presently concealed to us, the saints in heaven see it even now, in all its dazzling brilliance (John

17:1,5). What happened at the transfiguration was that men were blessed with an early display of that glory.

Third, Peter, another of the witnesses, declared this event to have been a pledge or specimen of our Lord's future kingdom. Writing to believers in Asia Minor, Peter referred to the apostolic testimony — we made known unto you the power and coming (i.e. the second coming) of our Lord Jesus Christ'; but as he went on to tell his readers that they were only able to declare such things because they had been 'eyewitnesses of his majesty' (2 Pet 1:16) he was thinking, of course, about the revelation of his divine majesty seen at the time of the transfiguration. He specifically mentions 'the voice heard 'in the holy mount' and — even more to the point — he refers to 'the excellent (or sublime) glory' (1:17,18). So there can be no doubt that for Peter too the transfiguration was a prophecy of things to come.

Fourth, our Lord revealed to believers the true nature of their sure and certain hope. In the High Priestly Prayer recorded in John 17, our Lord prays that one day his people will be able to enjoy the immediate sight of his unveiled glory. 'Father', he says, I will that they also whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory' (In 17:24). As Matthew Henry observes, 'the glory of the Redeemer is the brightness of heaven. That glory before which angels cover their faces, was his glory, John 12:41. The lamb is the light of the New Jerusalem, Rev 21 The felicity of the redeemed consists very much in the beholding of that glory; they will have the immediate view of his glorious person ' The transfiguration was only the dawn. In heaven Christ will be seen in full meridian splendour.

Fifth, after his resurrection, the glorified Christ appeared to Saul in a light so dazzling and unbearable that the persecutor was immediately struck blind. 'I could not see for the glory of that light', Paul later recalled (Acts 22:11 cf. 9:3,8,9). Later, he appeared in much the same way to John on the island of Patmos. Hearing a voice, John turned to see the risen Christ and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength'. The apostle tells us that our Lord's appearance at that time was awesome and completely overwhelming. When I saw him', he says, I fell at his feet as one dead' (Rev 1:16,17). Surely, the transfiguration afforded to the disciples a brief sight of that majestic form in which our Lord now appears in heaven. It therefore showed to them how he will one day be seen by all his redeemed people.

Sixth, everything in that place pointed to heaven: the holy mount, Christ in glory, white raiment, a luminous appearance, and even people from the other world. In fact it was so much like heaven that Peter wanted to stay there indefinitely. 'Lord', he said, 'it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias' (Matt 17:4). Luke observes that he spoke this 'not knowing what he said' (Lk 9:33), but his words suggest that his heart could hardly contain its own joy. For Peter, that favoured spot was remarkably like the better land where 'the tabernacle of God is with men' and where throughout eternity 'he will dwell with them' (Rev 21:3). The apostle evidently wanted to construct such 'mansions' or 'abodes' as the Lord has promised to his people (Lk 16:9; In 14:2,3).

Seventh, it is very significant that the Lord charged his disciples, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead' (Matt 17:9). About twenty years later the apostle Paul was placed under similar constraint. Apparently transported from earth to 'paradise' ('the third heaven'), he enjoyed a 'vision' or 'sight' of the glorified Saviour, and he also heard — probably heard — probably from the Lord himself — 'unspeakable words'. Describing that experience, Paul says that he saw and heard things Which it is not lawful for a man to utter' (2 Cor 2–4). The common factors are that these men were confronted with heavenly things and that they were forbidden to talk about them. In the case of Peter, James, and John, heaven came down to them. In Paul's case, he was taken up to heaven. This confirms our view that the transfiguration was meant to give Christian believers some idea of the blessedness awaiting them in the other world.

Guided by the gospel writers, we may now reverently approach this sacred mountain.

Time

'And after six days...' Something like a sabbath was about to begin. 'Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work', the Law said, but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God' (Exod 20:10). 'Seven is the number of

perfection and rest; the sabbatical number; after an Hexameron (a group of six) of labour we come to the eternal Sabbath, in which we may hope to be transfigured with Christ (Dr Christopher Wordsworth).

That ancient sabbath prefigured the future blessed rest when, ceasing from all earthly labour and conflict, believing souls will gather together to enjoy everlasting delight in the presence of the Lord. As the apostle wrote in one of his epistles, 'There remaineth therefore a rest (literally, a keeping of a sabbath) to the people of God' (Heb 4:9).

In what respects, then, will heaven be like the keeping of a sabbath? (1) Heaven awaits us at the end of our work in this world (Exod 34:21; In 9:4; 1 Cor 15:58); (2) we need to prepare ourselves for its service (Exod 16:23; Lk 23:54; Ps 26:6); (3) there will be rest from sin, misery, and all the wearisome toil of this life (Deut 5:14; Rev 14:13; 21:4); (4) the redeemed shall assemble in the eternal temple (Lev 23:3; 2 Thess 2:1; Rev 7:9,10); (5) praise shall arise from the contemplation of God's works, both in creation and in redemption (Ps 92:5) (note the title); Rev 4:10,11; 5:11,12); (6) the saints will enjoy immediate and uninterrupted communion with God (Is 66:23; Rev 7:15 — the Greek word translated 'serve' could be rendered 'Worship', Phil 3:3); and (7) God's glory will be everlastingly promoted, as will the blessedness of all his people (Is 58:13,14; Rev 19:1-7; 21:7).

Place

'...an high mountain apart...' This was probably Mount Hermon, the highest peak of the Lebanon range which lay to the north of Caesarea Philippi (Traditionally Mount Tabor was recognised as the site, but this is at least 40 miles from Caesarea Philippi (see Matt 17:13ff) and, furthermore, it appears to have been a military fortification at this time). Mount Hermon, 10,000 feet high, with a snow-capped peak, would have been at once recognised as the mountain in that neighbourhood. And, on this occasion, it was chosen to be an emblem of heaven.

Even in the Old Testament, Mount Zion, God's earthly dwelling place, was considered as the type or figure of heaven (Ps 3:4; 15:1), but when we come to the New Testament, that mountain is clearly understood to be a heavenly place: 'And I looked, and lo, a Lamb stood on the mount Zion, and with him an hundred and forty and four thousand...' (Rev 14:1 — this is a mystical number for the Church, 12 patriarchs multiplied by 12 apostles, and both multiplied by 1,000). In her poem, Immanuel's Land (based on the last words of Samuel Rutherford), Anne Ross Cousin expressed this truth most beautifully:

The King there, in His beauty, Without a veil is seen: It were a well-spent journey, Though seven deaths lay between: The Lamb with His fair army, Doth on Mount Zion stand, And glory — glory dwelleth In Immanuel's Land.

Heaven is most aptly described as a mountain: (1) heaven is superior to everything in the lower regions of this world (Phil 1:23; Heb 11:16); (2) 50 transcendent are its glories that it is beyond the reach of evil and wretchedness (Matt 6:20; 1 Pet 1:4); (3) the Lord's people find it to be the very summit of happiness (Ps 16:11; Matt 25:21); (4) the strongest foundation ensures both permanence and security (Heb 11:10; Rev 21:12); (5) perfect peace may be enjoyed in this high and holy place (Ps 37:37; Is 57:1,2); (6) its climate is perfect, with air amazingly pure and healthy (Lk 20:38; Rev 22:1,2); and (7) there are many delightful views, not only of truth and grace, but of God himself, in the three Persons of the blessed and eternal Trinity (Matt 5:8; Rev 22:3,4).

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