

A Sermon for the Transfiguration, given on August 9, 2009

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The Transfiguration of Jesus (Luke 9:28f.) is the one event in the life of Jesus on earth in which the glory of Jesus was revealed to his apostles. Peter, James and John “saw his glory.” Jesus’ glory is his grandeur of presence, his luminous appearance that reflects his identity as God’s eternally begotten Son.

To be sure, the disciples were able to recognize who Jesus is at his baptism, when he performed various miracles, and in the Resurrection. However, on none of those occasions does the Bible describe the appearance of Jesus as being particularly glorious.

In fact, the great mystery of the resurrection appearances is precisely that Jesus looks like an ordinary person—and not particularly like himself! Mary Magdalene mistook him for the gardener and the two men on the road to Emmaus walked with him for several miles without recognizing him.

The miracles revealed who Jesus is, but Jesus is never described as having changed appearance to perform them. In his baptism, the unusual things were that the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus and those watching heard the voice of the Father; but Jesus is described only as a man in the water. Not until John’s vision of the ascended and glorified Jesus in Revelation 1 is Jesus described as he is in the Transfiguration.

The Transfiguration bears obvious resemblance to the baptism of Jesus. The Father says the same thing in both events, “This is my beloved Son.” And the Holy Spirit, who descended in the form of a dove at Jesus’ baptism, is present in the form of the cloud. But the Transfiguration ends with a command from the Father to the apostles, “Hear him.” This implies that the apostles may have been a little hard of hearing; they did not understand what was about to happen.

The baptism of Jesus was the beginning of the ministry in which Jesus healed the sick, performed other signs and miracles and preached the gospel, calling Israel to repent. The Transfiguration marks a transition. We are now headed for the cross.

By the time of the Transfiguration, opinion in Israel was fixed concerning Jesus. The rulers of Israel were set in their rejection of Jesus. Jesus was no longer preaching with the idea that the nation would repent. Rather it is apparent that the growing hostility toward Jesus will lead to a final confrontation.

The Transfiguration points to the cross. Moses and Elijah appeared and “spoke of his decease that he should accomplish at Jerusalem.” These Old Testament luminaries appeared to confirm that it was Jesus’ vocation to die, and that this death was the fulfillment of the message of the law and the prophets. The Greek word for “decease” in this passage is “exodus,” which makes the connection between how Moses saved Israel and how the death of Jesus saves us.

The appearance of Jesus was transfigured just before this message from Moses and Elijah about the cross. It is as if to say, “Here is the glory that will again be yours after you die and rise.” Taken together, the altered appearance and the prophesy of death make the point that glory comes through the cross. Jesus could not enter into glory until he died his atoning death. And we, also, cannot enter

into our share of glory unless we embrace our share of the cross. As Jesus said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23).

The natural human desire is to find a way to glory that avoids the cross. This was one focus of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-12). The devil promised to give Jesus, by simple acts of disobedience, things that Jesus would eventually gain through his obedient life and death.

Likewise, many of our temptations are offers of shortcuts. The devil promises us things right now, the easy way, while God promises us eternal rewards for faithfulness and perseverance over time. And, we must always remember that the devil is a liar who does not give what he promises anyway!

The Transfiguration teaches us that we cannot receive the fullness of God's promises in this life. What we can receive is a taste or glimpse of the good things to come. God will give us what we might call "consolations." That is, we may be given experiences in moments or seasons of time when we have a profound sense of God's presence, as if we were in the cloud with Jesus on the mount.

However, such consolations do not last—and that is precisely the point. They are a taste of future glory that is meant to encourage us in the way of faith and faithfulness. They are not meant to be captured. Peter wanted to build a tabernacle for God's presence. That is, he wanted to capture and sustain the moment. Instead, the Father said, "Listen to my Son."

Our profound spiritual experiences inevitably give way to the call to listen and obey. When we come down from the mountain, when the cloud departs, the point is that we must enter back into the ordinary routines of life and strive to faithfully do the things that Jesus tells to do—even when they are hard to do.

The Transfiguration teaches us an important truth about the pattern of the spiritual life. Just as the moment of glory on the mount gave way to the cross, so our profound spiritual experiences inevitably give way to times that are spiritually drier. A common mistake is to think that the absence of any feeling of God's presence means that God is no longer there. The truth is that such dryness is a call to maturity.

When children are young, we give them all sorts of incentives and consolations to get them to do the things they ought to do. However, when they grow up, we expect them to do what is right on their own, not merely because they are bribed. In the same way, when God withdraws the sense of his presence, he is calling us to obey as an act of the will. He is calling us to mature obedience.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with wanting to experience the presence of God. There is nothing wrong with wanting to enter into the cloud. It is just that we must not see the cloud as an escape from the reality of life. Every genuine vision of God will lead us to faithfulness in the way of the cross in daily life. Every genuine temporary experience of glory in this life will keep us striving faithfully towards the eternal glory of resurrection and life in the world to come.

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