

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF JESUS

Mark 9:1-13

Key Verse: 9:3

His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.

In this passage, Jesus shows his true image as the Son of God. His face became brilliant like the sun. It was not an imagination of the disciples. It happened on a high mountain and it was more spectacular than any special effects that the Hollywood people could produce. This morning, we want to think about the meaning of Jesus' transfiguration.

I. JESUS SHOWS HIS TRUE IMAGE (1-4)

Look at verse 1. *And he said to them, "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power."* This verse is sandwiched between two events: first, Jesus' command for us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him, knowing that our eternal life in heaven is much more important than the temporary life in this world, and second, the transfiguration of Jesus on a mountain. So what did Jesus mean when he said, some people who were standing there with him would not taste death until the coming of the kingdom of God? We have the benefit of the hindsight which is always 20/20. We know that those who were standing with him all died. All of them tasted death if it meant the physical death. All of them kicked the bucket. But we know Jesus' words are absolutely true. God kept every promise he made. In that context, we can understand that Jesus was promising some of them that they would not taste the "second death" which is the death of the soul, the condemnation of one's soul in hell for eternity. It was a promise meant to encourage his followers to deny themselves, take up the cross of mission and follow him faithfully. This promise gives us a hope in the kingdom of God (Jn 5:24; 11:25-26). Jesus says that the kingdom of God will come with power. I don't know what kind of flavor death has (it probably tastes bitter), but I am happy to know that I don't have to taste it, only because of Jesus.

Let us read together verses 2-3. *After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.* After six days, Jesus took three of his disciples, Peter, James and John, and climbed a high mountain with them. We have two questions: first, why did Jesus take only three of the disciples, and second, which mountain did they climb? The answer to the first question is most likely about his key member training. Jesus raised up 12 disciples as spiritual leaders to continue the evangelistic ministry after his crucifixion. But he sometimes focused on training the leaders of the leaders. For example, in at least two occasions, Jesus took only these three to be with him. When he raised Jairus' little daughter, he only invited the three to the room where the girl was lying (Mk 5:37). Also, Jesus took only these three to the Garden of Gethsemane to begin his intense prayer struggle to deny himself to obey God's will over his (Mk 14:33). As for the geographic

location of the mountain, we can only speculate. Tradition says it was Mt. Tabor which is located in the southwest of the Lake Galilee. However, given that Jesus and his disciples were traveling in the region of Caesarea Philippi at that time, Mt. Hermon is a good candidate. It is the highest mountain in Israel with an elevation of 9,232 feet.

More importantly, what happened on the mountain? Let us read verse 3 again. *His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.* Up on a high mountain, Jesus was transfigured before the disciples. Right before their eyes, Jesus changed his image. His clothes became dazzling white as the light. His face became brilliant, shining like the sun (Mt 17:2), emanating his glory as the Son of God. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments tablets in his hands, his face was radiant and the Israelites were afraid to come near him (Ex 34:29-30). Perhaps Moses' face shined like the moon. But Jesus' face shone like the sun. Let us think about the meaning of this transformation and why Jesus showed this image to his disciples at this time.

The original Greek word “transfigured” (metamorpho; μεταμορφώθη) means to transform. “Meta” means to change and “morphe” means form. So “metamorpho” means to change one form to another. It also means to change the outside to match the inside. Jesus is God who came down to this world to save sinners like you and me. He came down in human form and dwelled among humans for a while (Jn 1:14). Up to this point, the disciples saw only the image of a suffering servant in Jesus. Jesus was born in a stable and laid in a manger. He worked hard in his father’s carpentry shop. He didn’t even own a one-room apartment. He took care of many lowly people including widows and orphans, tax collectors and sinners. Now he was talking about suffering at the hands of the religious leaders and dying on the cross. St. Paul describes this in Philippians 2. He says that Jesus Christ, “who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Php 2:5-7). Jesus resembled a root out of dry ground (Isa 53:2). So the image of Jesus in the minds of the disciples was not that of the glorious Son of God. His true image was “veiled in flesh the Godhead see” as we sing during Christmastime in the song, “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.”



But this time, Jesus showed them his true image. His outward appearance was changed to match who he really is—the Son of God. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance (Rev 1:16). Have you tried to look at the sun with your naked eyes? Don’t try it; you may damage your eyes. Jesus revealed his glorious image as the Son of God. So the next question is why did Jesus want his disciples to see this image of himself at this time? Why might they need to see this vision of Jesus?

Just before this event, Jesus began to teach his disciples his upcoming suffering, rejection by the religious leaders, his death by crucifixion and his resurrection. The

disciples did not like this idea. They didn't want Jesus to suffer and die. Above all, they didn't want to suffer. They wanted glory without suffering. One thing they failed to notice in Jesus' prediction was the last part, "after three days rise again" (8:31). So Jesus had to teach them why he had to suffer and die. He told them that he would be a kernel of wheat that falls to the ground and dies so that our dead lives could spring up from his sacrifice. He also promised that after suffering, glory would certainly come, as he would return in God's power and glory. And now he assured them by showing his real image in a spectacular display so that they would know what he really was. This wasn't some Hollywood special effect. It was happening right before their eyes. Jesus wanted to plant a hope in the kingdom of God so that they would be willing to suffer for him.

Look at verse 4. *And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.* Elijah and Moses came to talk with Jesus on the mountain. Why did these two servants of God come? We know that Moses represents the Old Testament law and Elijah the prophets. And these two were suffering servants of God. What did they talk about with Jesus on the mountain? Given his upcoming suffering and death, they probably encouraged Jesus to obey the will of God to fulfill God's redemptive plan. Luke says that "They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem" (Lk 9:31). It was also a confirmation of God's continuous work in history. I also believe that their appearance was great encouragement to the disciples as well. The two servants did not talk to them directly. But they seemed to be saying to the disciples, "Hey, guys. Don't be afraid of suffering. We suffered a lot during our lifetime serving the Lord. But look at us now. We are in heaven with God. And it is the best place you can ever be. God sent us down today to show you that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. So take heart!"



Indeed, our suffering for Christ is different from sufferings for the things of this world. During the course of our lives, everyone suffers for one thing or another. Some people suffer because of health problems, money or job problems. Others suffer because of broken family or relationship problems. Some students on campus suffer when their roommates bring girlfriends into their rooms and sleep there. Many suffer because of the sin problem that gives them guilty feelings and self-condemnation. Sufferings of these kinds bear no good fruit. But Christian suffering produces spiritual fruit. Our suffering has a purpose in God. That is why St. Paul says in Romans 5: "Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Ro 5:3-5).

On the mount of transfiguration, our Lord Jesus revealed his true image to encourage us to endure sufferings so that we may join him in the kingdom of God after our

work is done in this world. If we have this image of Jesus in our hearts, we can endure our hardships for the Lord. May God help us to have this image of Jesus in our hearts!

II. LISTEN TO HIM! (5-8)

How did Peter react to the brilliant image of Jesus? Look at verses 5-6. *Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)* Peter was so frightened that he did not know what to say. But him being Peter, he had to say something. He blurted, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." How did Peter recognize Moses and Elijah whom he never met before? Someone suggested that they had their nametags on. Most likely it was God who helped him to recognize the great servants. Anyway, what Peter said was very revealing. He showed what was really on his mind. He did not want to suffer. He did not want to deny himself and take up his cross. He probably wanted to say, "Rabbi, I don't want to go down from this mountain if you keep talking about suffering and dying. Can we just stay up here with you, Moses and Elijah and forget about suffering and death?"

Look at verse 7. *Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"* The cloud represented the presence of God (Ex 24:15-16). God personally appeared and reaffirmed his love for Jesus (He had done this when Jesus was baptized by John). God was pleased with Jesus who was willing to obey his will, despite the pain and suffering. Then God commanded Peter and the disciples, "Listen to him!" God spoke to them directly out of the cloud to tell them to accept Jesus' teaching personally. The disciples would not accept Jesus' suffering and death for world salvation. They did not want to deny themselves and take up their cross. God told them, "Listen to him"

"Listen to him!" These are God's words to us as well. Not all of us here can say we listen to Jesus all the time. We may hear him but not listen to him. Our testimony writing should be a time to struggle to listen to him, but we often neglect to do that. Jesus told us to deny ourselves, take up the cross and follow him. He told us to lose our life to save it. He told us to love God with all our hearts and love our neighbor as ourselves. He said, "Do you love me? Feed my sheep!" Let us listen to God who tells us to listen to Jesus!

Verse 8 says that suddenly, *when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.* Peter probably felt disappointed. Despite the resistance at that time, however, the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain made an indelible mark on Peter's heart. Later, he remembered this image of Jesus. He said in his letter, "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2Pe 1:16).

III. I TELL YOU, ELIJAH HAS COME (9-13)

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They kept the

matter to themselves, discussing what "rising from the dead" meant (9-10). Jesus instructed them not to tell anyone what they had seen until his resurrection. Without resurrection faith they could not possibly understand the spiritual meaning of what happened on the mountain. Jesus told them to hold this secret in their hearts until later. Most of all, Jesus planted the hope of resurrection in them so that they might overcome their fear of his suffering.

Look at verse 11. *And they asked him, "Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?"* They were referring to Malachi 4:4-5 which predicted the coming of Elijah. Again their question revealed how much they disliked the idea of Jesus' suffering and death. They hoped that Jesus would not die, and that, according to this prophecy, Elijah would come and restore everything. What did Jesus teach them in response? Look at verses 12-13. *Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him."* Jesus knew what was on their minds. He was happy they remembered the Scriptures and reminded them that the Scriptures also prophesied about his suffering and rejection. They should not pick and choose from the words of God. Then Jesus taught them that the particular prophecy they had in mind referred to the coming of John the Baptist as the forerunner of Christ. With the spirit of Elijah, John the Baptist would come and prepare people's hearts for Jesus by urging them to repent of their sins. (cf. Lk 1:17: "And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous-to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.") And that's exactly what happened.

The transfiguration of Jesus was a preview of his Second Coming. We learned the importance of keeping this glorious image of Jesus in our hearts as we struggle to live a life of mission. We also learned that we must listen to Jesus even when he talks to us about something we don't like. May God help us hear his voice, "Listen to him"! May God help us to listen to Jesus through our Bible study and prayers!