

The Transfiguration
Matthew 17:1-13
Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

The account of the transfiguration of Jesus is directly connected to Matthew 16:28, "*Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.*" While this verse is separated by a chapter break from Matthew 17:1, In the Greek text there is no such separation and there is the conjunction "and" in the beginning of Matthew 17:1 that connects these two verses. Therefore, The transfiguration is a moment where some of the disciples see the Son of Man as He will look when He returns to establish His kingdom.

Jesus is transfigured (17:1-2)

Matthew commonly does not give time indicators and his gospel. But in this case he does so because of the connection to the last verse of chapter 16. Both Mark 9:2 and Matthew 17:1 give a time frame of six days. Luke 9:28 uses the phrase "*some eight days after these saying,*" which is an indication of an approximation which would fit six days later,

Jesus selected only three of the disciples to view His transfiguration. Three were chosen as multiple witnesses who would be able to confirm the event (cf. Deuteronomy 19:15; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19). These three were Peter, James and John. Earlier, Jesus selected them out from the other disciples when He raised the synagogue official's daughter from the dead. "*When He came to the house, He did not allow anyone to enter with Him, except Peter and John and James, and the girl's father and mother*" (Luke 8:51). Later, Jesus would take the same three out from the others at the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:37). They were His inner circle, and they are always listed in the first group in each the lists of disciples.

The mountain is not identified in the Scripture. Mount Tabor has been considered the location of the transfiguration, traditionally. It is between Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee. However, the historian Josephus describes a fortress located at the top of this mountain. A better guess would be Mount Herman, which is over 9,000 feet high and is right outside of Caesarea Philippi, where the disciples were with Jesus in the Gospels (Matthew 16:13). Obviously, the exact location of the transfiguration is not a matter of significance.

Jesus was transfigured (Greek, METAMORPHOO) before them. He did not simply change His appearance, He underwent a metamorphosis. His essential form was changed, likely with His post-resurrection body, *“and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light.”* This was how Revelation 1:16 describes Christ, *“and His face was like the sun shining in its strength.”* This is reminiscent of Moses’ face when he descended from Mt. Sinai with the tablets. Of course, the difference is that Moses reflected God’s glory, whereas Jesus radiated His own glory.

The reason *“His garments became as white as light”* was because for a brief time His true divine nature was not hidden. His garments were not changed, the essence of Jesus’ entire body shown through the garments, making them so white that no human had an ability to make them that white (cf. Mark 9:3).

Both Peter and John would refer to this event in their part of the New Testament. *“For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased’—and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain”* (2 Peter 1:16-18).

“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Moses and Elijah appear (17:3-8)

The appearance of Moses and Elijah represents the Old Testament, the Law and the Prophets. These were considered two of the great figures in Israel, with Moses establishing the covenant between Israel and God and Elijah leading them back to that covenant after their apostasy. Like Christ, both would suffer rejection by Israel (Acts 7:35; 1 Kings 19:1-8). Both would see a vision of God’s glory on a mountain (Exodus 34:29-30; 1 Kings 19:11-14).

While Matthew describes Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus, Luke tells of the content of their discussion. They *“were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem”* (Luke 9:31). This departure obviously refers to the crucifixion, which Jesus had just revealed about His coming death to His disciples. The three disciples wouldn’t have known what Moses or Elijah looked like and therefore, they must have learned who they were from Jesus.

They were so overwhelmed with this experience that Peter would say, *“Lord it is good for us to be here.”* This appears to be an understatement, but to have the opportunity to see two of the greatest figures in Israel’s history would itself be an incredible experience for any Jew. Mark would describe them as terrified at what they were seeing.

Matthew records Peter’s offer to *“make three tabernacles here, one for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah”* at face value. The other synoptic accounts give more information. Mark 9:6 adds *“for he did not know what to answer, for they became terrified”* and Luke 9:33 adds *“not realizing what he was saying.”*

Peter’s offer to build three tabernacles looks back to the time when the Israelites built tabernacles for themselves to live in the wilderness (Leviticus 23:42-43). Every year, the Jews would celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, commemorating their need to live in such shelters in the wilderness and looking forward to the day when they would live in permanence in the promised land.

This was Peter’s abrupt way to honor these three great men, by building them each a tabernacle. This shows he was equating Jesus with Moses and Elijah. He should have known better since he had just a week ago declared that Jesus was *“the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (Matthew 16:16). Furthermore, it was only Christ who was transfigured.

The response to Peter’s idea is most remarkable. *“While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, ‘This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!’”* God the Father spoke out to emphasize that Jesus is unique, His beloved Son. God had spoken these same words minus *“listen to Him”* at the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:17). Clearly, the point is that Jesus must be listened to because He is the only beloved Son of God. This is the essence of how mankind must respond to Jesus. He must be listened to.

The three disciples *“fell face down to the ground and were terrified.”* This is similar to Daniel’s response to his vision from God (Daniel 10:7-9). This was a common response to the realization of God’s presence (Isaiah 6:5; Ezekiel 1:28; Revelation 1:17).

Jesus lovingly encouraged them with a touch to *“Get up, and do not be afraid.”* This is consistent with His other exhortations to not be afraid (Matthew 10:26-31; 14:27; 28:10). When they looked up, this scene changed and they were back to being only with Jesus. Clearly, this remarkable event was designed for the encouragement of these three disciples.

The transfiguration further confirmed to them that Jesus was *“the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* Beyond a new revelation of who Jesus was, this event also confirmed the reality of the future kingdom. The presence of Moses and Elijah with the transfigured Christ verifies the Old Testament promises of the kingdom are valid.

In this account, we have representatives of all types of people in the coming kingdom. There will be saints like Moses, who have passed away and will return with resurrected bodies (Deuteronomy 34:1-12; 1 Thessalonians 4:15). There will be saints like Elijah, who did not die (2 Kings 2:11) but were translated to heaven and will also return with resurrected bodies. These people include Christians who will be raptured (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). There will be saints, like the three disciples with Jesus, who do not have resurrected bodies but who will by faith will not be taken away in judgment, but will be gathered at the second coming of Christ to enter the kingdom in their earthly bodies (Matthew 24:29-31, 37-41).

Jesus teaches the disciples (17:9-13)

The first thing that Jesus tells them as they begin their descent down the mountain is to not tell anyone about what they experienced until after His resurrection. This is the last of five different times that Jesus told His disciples to not tell anyone about what they had learned (Matthew 8:4; 9:30; 12:16; 16:20). From here, they head toward Jerusalem and this account will become known by the other disciples and their communication of it (such as we have in this Gospel) soon enough.

Mark 9:10 includes the discussion among the disciples after Christ told them not to relate what they had seen to anyone until He had risen from the dead. They pondered that statement by wondering *“what rising from the dead meant.”* This continues to show the degree of difficulty they had in understanding the words of Jesus and His meaning.

The reason the three disciples ask *“Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?”* is because they had just seen Elijah. The scribes rightly taught Malachi 4:5-6, *“Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.”*

Their puzzlement continues to surround Jesus’ revelation of His coming death at the hand of the elders, chief priests and scribes (Matthew 16:21). If Elijah had just come, to herald the day of the Lord, why would Jesus have to die? They will continue to seek to resist the idea of the death of Jesus.

Jesus explains that *“Elijah is coming and will restore all things.”* Therefore, what they had observed of Elijah was not the fulfillment of Malachi 4:5-6. This restoration remains in the future. As with other Old Testament prophecies, the prophecy of Malachi 4:5-6 will be fulfilled literally.

Jesus also states *“that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him,”* which refers to John the Baptist. Therefore, the literal fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi 4:5-6 does not mean that Elijah must be resurrected, but only a prophet must come in the ministry of Elijah, such as John the Baptist did. This coming of Elijah will precede the return of Christ in the establishment of His kingdom.

John the Baptist was unable to restore all things because he, like Jesus, was rejected by men. The scribes themselves taught the coming of Elijah, and when Elijah came as John the Baptist, they did not receive him. *“Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished.”* In this, Jesus explained how His death fit with the plan of God in sending Elijah to restore all things.

Just as John the Baptist was sent and rejected, so Jesus would also be rejected. The suffering of John preceded the suffering of the Messiah. Earlier Jesus linked the opposition to John the Baptist to His own opposition. *“But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places, who call out to the other children, and say, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon!’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds”* (Matthew 11:16-19). If John the Baptist was rejected in His ministry to restore all things, why should anyone expect the Messiah to be received differently?

Just as there is a two-fold aspect to the coming of Elijah, one of rejection in John the Baptist, and one of restoration and glory by the coming Elijah, so there will also be a two-fold aspect of the coming of Jesus Christ. The first coming of Jesus involved rejection, death and resurrection, so that He could be the Savior of the world through His atonement for sin on the cross. The second coming of Jesus will involve restoration and glory in the kingdom of God. This proves the kingdom must be in the future, for we are still waiting for the Elijah to come in fulfillment of Malachi 4:5-6. Therefore, since the promise of the kingdom remains to be fulfilled, we must resist efforts to spiritualize the kingdom of God by not valuing the promises of the kingdom in the Old Testament.

Matthew 17:13 does demonstrate that the disciples are growing in their understanding of what Jesus said. They recognize that John the Baptist was who Jesus was referring to when He said that Elijah had already come and was rejected. Yet while they grasped what He said about John the Baptist, they continued to have difficulty understanding why the Messiah would have to die.

Conclusion

To view that transfigured Jesus, with Moses and Elijah, had to have been a shocking revelation for the three disciples. They gained a greater privilege than anyone had even seen before or since. In addition, they heard the voice of the Father commending His Beloved Son. Of all people who should listen to Jesus, these three had the most revelation to lead them to do so.

It is noteworthy that they had already exclaimed their belief that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, prior to this vision. God gave them further revelation as they responded rightly to the revelation they were given.

Peter uses his eyewitness testimony of what he saw to demonstrate that he was not following some fictional story. *“For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased’—and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain”* (2 Peter 1:16-18).

Yet as convincing as such an event would be for Peter, he goes on to compare it with the even greater confidence in the Scripture itself. *“So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God”* (2 Peter 1:19-21).

So while we have not been blessed by a vision of the transfigured Christ, and we did not see Moses and Elijah, and we did not hear the voice of God giving glory and honor to Jesus, we do have *“the prophetic word made more sure”* We ought to be just as moved to listen to it as the three disciples would have been to listen to Jesus as they began to descend from the holy mountain.