

THE MEANING OF THE TRANSFIGURATION

Every event in the life of Christ had significance. Nothing happened without purpose. This is also true of every passage in the scriptures which tells of Christ. Each account has a message, a meaning, a purpose.

Let us read Matthew's account of the transfiguration of Christ. As we read, let each of us try to determine the purpose which this event was designed to accomplish. "And after six days Jesus taketh with him Peter, and James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into a high mountain apart; and he was transfigured before them; and his face did shine as the sun, and his garments became white as the light. And behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elijah talking with him. And Peter answered, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt I will make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah. While he was yet speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold, a voice out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him. And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid. And Jesus came and touched them and said, Arise, and be not afraid. And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one, save Jesus only." (Matthew 17:1-8)

Background of the Text

Matthew and Mark indicate that this great event occurred six days after the previous happening. Luke indicates eight days. Matthew and Mark use the Jewish system, numbering the days between two events, while Luke uses the Roman system counting the days on which the two events occurred as well as those in between. It is also interesting to note that this is the time the writers of the gospel narratives link events of Christ's life in a time sequence. This begins to be possible because Christ is now in the final year of his life on earth and events from this time forward will be closer together in point of time than some of those in the past. Christ, at the time of the transfiguration, was likely only six months away from his crucifixion. The time appears to be the summer or early fall of the year before Christ was to die the following spring.

The transfiguration likely took place on Mt. Herman, which rises to an elevation of 9,166 feet and is located in the area of Caesarea-Philippi where the previous events had taken place. Peter, James, and John, the inner circle of the apostles were the only witnesses. These same three had witnessed the raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead and would soon be taken farthest into the Garden of Gethsemane with their Lord on his betrayal night.

It is interesting to notice what had just transpired before the transfiguration. In Matthew 16:13-20, we read of the conversation between Christ and the apostles in which he asked, "Who do men say that the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; some Elijah; and others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." He then asked, "But who say ye that I am?" It was then that Simon Peter answered and said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Following this conversation Christ revealed to the disciples what lay ahead of him in Jerusalem. Here are his words, "From that time began Jesus to show unto his disciples, that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and the third day be raised up. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee Lord: this shall never be unto thee. But he turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art a stumbling-block unto me: for thou mindest not the things of God, but the things of men ... For the Son of Man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; then shall he render unto every man according to his deeds. Verily I say unto you, There are some of them that stand here, who shall in no wise taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom." (Matthew 16: 21-23, 27-28). In these two incidents Christ has made plain his identity and his destiny. This leads naturally and logically to the transfiguration.

Transfigured

In Verse two of our text we read, "He was transfigured before them." Then the word transfigured is explained, "His face did shine as the sun, and his garments became white as the light." The *Encyclopedia Britannica Dictionary* defines the "transfigured" as, "To change the outward form or appearance. To make glorious, idealize." It is meaningful to know that the Greek word used here by Matthew and translated as "transfigured" is the same as that used by Paul in Romans 12:2, where the English translation is, "And be not fashioned according to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind." Paul also used the same word in II Corinthians 3:18, "But we all with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed in the same image from glory to glory ..."

In this spectacular scene on the mountain top God very meaningfully brought back Moses and Elijah to appear with Christ. Moses represented the law of the Old Testament which bears his name. Elijah represented the prophets. These are the two leading segments of Old Testament history. It is also interesting to remember that Moses had died in solitude on Mt. Nebo and had been buried by the angels in an unmarked grave, while Elijah, having been taken up to heaven in a chariot and a whirlwind, had never died. (II Kings 2:11). In Luke 9:31, we learn the subject of the conversation which these two from the past carried on with the Lord, for after naming them, Luke adds, "Who appeared in glory, and spake of his decease which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem."

At that point in the story the apostle Peter, the outspoken disciple, was so carried away with what he had seen and heard that he said, "Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, I will make here three tabernacles; one for thee, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Various conjectures have been offered as to why Peter made this suggestion. Some have thought that he was so thrilled by seeing Moses and Elijah with the Lord that he wanted to extend the experience, therefore, he offered to make dwelling places or booths for each of them. Some have thought that the offer of Peter was designed to show honor and reverence to each. Luke 9:33 adds the comment, after quoting Peter's statement, that Peter had spoken "not knowing what he said." This suggests that Peter was uttering words that God had placed in his mouth. This supposition fits logically with the response that God made to Peter's suggestion. Peter's comment beautifully set the stage for the cloud to pass over and the voice of God to say, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him." This same statement from God had been made almost exactly, as we read it in Matthew 3:17, on the occasion of Christ's baptism. On this occasion God had added, "Hear ye him." The disciples then fell to the ground in amazement. A little later Jesus touched them and said, "Arise, and be not afraid. When they looked up they saw no one, save Jesus only."

Meaning and Message

The first meaning discernable in the transfiguration is one that it had for Christ. It offered him assurance of God's love and endorsement. It helped to prepare him for the difficult weeks and months that lay ahead. It encouraged and strengthened him at a time when some of his disciples were leaving him. In our day, we think too exclusively of Christ's divinity in some situations. We forget that he was also human, and that he had to struggle mightily against the pressures and temptations that were brought with such force against him. He needed the encouragement and strength that came from this spectacular demonstration of God's love and endorsement.

The second very significant meaning of the transfiguration is that which it held for Peter, James, and John, and others of their time. This event more graphically and more forcefully than any other, demonstrates Christ's superiority over all previous systems and previous teachers. When Peter proposed to honor Moses, Elijah, and Christ, God immediately responded in such a way that it was clear that only Christ was divine and worthy of homage. The Jews had so long respected and honored Moses that it was necessary for a spectacular event to occur to awaken them to the realization that the Law of Moses was soon to be laid aside.

Christ came to fulfill the old law and to take it out of the way. Ephesians 2:14-15 suggests this, "For he is our peace, who made both one, and break down the middle wall of partition, having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances." Colossians 2:14 uses similar language, "Having blotted out the bond written in ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us: and he hath taken it out of the way, nailing it to the cross." After quoting from Jeremiah 31 the Old Testament prophesy of a new covenant, the writer of the book of Hebrews said about the Law of Moses, the first covenant, "... he hath made the first old. But that which is becoming old and waxeth aged is nigh unto vanishing away." (Hebrews 8:13)

Sometime after the church had begun it was necessary for Paul and Barnabas to go to Jerusalem and consult with the apostles and elders there concerning the matter of binding the old Jewish custom of circumcise upon Gentile Christians. Paul and Barnabas were supported by the apostles and elders in saying that such binding was not necessary. The old law had been taken out of the way. The transfiguration is designed to convey this to the minds of the Jews and for this clear-cut demonstration all of us are grateful.

The transfiguration also demonstrated to the apostles the glory and majesty of the Lord. It was somewhat difficult for these men who had eaten with Jesus, had slept beside him, and had known him so intimately over a period of several years, to realize that he was truly the divine Son of God. They knew it in their minds, but it was difficult for them to realize it in their feelings. This glorified scene in which the Lord was transfigured helped them to feel his majesty. Later, the apostle Peter wrote, "For we did not follow cunningly devised fables, when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye witnesses of his majesty." (I Peter 1:16)

Its Significance for Us

Finally, the transfiguration has rich meaning for each of us today. It enables us to feel the glory and majesty of the Lord more than we could possibly feel it without this dramatic scene. It helps us to get a little of the spine tingling, awe-inspiring feeling that we need when we contemplate the greatness of God and Christ. We will meet the Lord in all his glory at the judgment, but we are more likely to be ready to meet him if we feel something of it in this life. Our respect for the Lord and his teachings is greater because of the transfiguration.

Also, this passage clearly indicates that Christ is the center of Christianity. We need to remember that every aspect of Christianity takes its meaningfulness from its relationship to Christ. For example, the church is of no significance except as it relates to Christ. How we enter the Lord's family, which includes the act of being baptized, takes its significance also from the fact that we are doing Christ's will. Baptism by itself is meaningless. When we realize that it is the will of the Lord, that he asked us to do it, and that it symbolizes his death, burial, and resurrection, then it takes on deep and lasting significance. How we worship also takes its meaningfulness from its relationship to Christ. For example the Lord's Supper would be merely unleavened bread and grape juice, except that it symbolizes the body and the blood of the Lord that were given freely for our redemption. Christ is the center of our religion, and everything that we believe and do is significant because it comes from him.

Unfortunately, there are some who do not seem to realize this. Outward they do the correct things, but they have never really been converted to Christ. They emphasize the church apart from the Lord. They emphasize doctrine and practices without Christ as the motivating force behind them. At this point we need to remember the apostle Paul, whose loyalty to the Lord was the central force in his life. In II Timothy 1:12 he wrote, "For I know him whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to guard that which I have committed unto him against that day." In Philippians 3:8. he said, "Yea, verily, and I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but refuse, that I may gain Christ." In Galatians 2:20, he said, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me: and that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me." Paul was none the less loyal to the church and to the doctrines and practices of Christianity, but rather more loyal because of his central loyalty to Christ.

Conclusion

The experience on the mountain top was for the apostles an ecstatic experience, but when it was over they had to come back down to the earth and live and work for the Lord. In a sense they are like a modern airplane which flies in the brilliant sunshine above the clouds and the rain below. After a time, however, such a plane must come back down to earth. These apostles, from this mountain peak experience, had to come down to the toil and suffering of carrying the gospel to the lost souls of the world.

As we turn from our study of this great event, let us also, strengthened, inspired, and encouraged, go forth to live and work for the Lord. Let us remember that if we belong to Christ, some day we, too, will be transformed and that heaven will be our eternal home.