

The Transfiguration

Matthew 17:1-13

Jesus has turned toward the cross. “From that time”, after Peter’s great confession, “Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised on the third day” (16:21). For those who trust God the pattern is always cross and then crown, suffering and then victory, death followed by resurrection. From now on Jesus talks a lot about death because it’s the only way to abundant, radiant, everlasting, transfigured life.

Up On the Mountain

Six days later Jesus takes Peter, James, and John to the top of a high mountain where He is transfigured, His face shining like the sun and His clothes as white as light (vv. 1-2). Going up on the mountain and being clothed with light reminds us of Moses up on Mt. Sinai. He came down with his face shining so brightly that Aaron and all the children of Israel were afraid to come near him (Ex. 34:29-30). God’s people always meet with Him on high places whether physically or symbolically at altars, the tabernacle, the temple or now at Mount Zion in heaven (Heb. 12:22). Moses and Elijah appear and Luke tells us that they discuss “His going out (*exodon*) which He was about to accomplish in Jerusalem” (Lk. 9:31). Jesus will die and liberate His people from bondage to sin and death like Moses lead Israel out of Egypt. Moses and Elijah both had irregular deaths: Moses died on Mount Nebo but then was laid in an unmarked grave (Deut. 34:1, 5), and Elijah was taken to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kgs. 2:11). God told Moses that another prophet like him would arise in Israel (Deut. 18:15), and Malachi told Israel to remember the law of Moses spoke of Elijah returning to prepare the way for coming of the Lord (Mal. 4:4-6). So we have two major prophetic witnesses along with three of Jesus’ disciples to hear who Jesus is and what He is going to do. Peter testifies that he was not making up cunningly devised fables about Jesus but was an eyewitness of His majesty at the transfiguration (2 Pet. 1:16-18). God gives us a sure word so we have every reason to believe it.

The Glory Giver

Even though Jesus called Peter Satan and told him to get behind Him, he’s up on mountain, excited to be there, and offers to make a tabernacle for each of these legends (v. 4). While he’s still talking, a bright cloud overshadows them and the Father speaks: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!” (v. 5). All these witnesses from the old and new covenants are here to see who Jesus is, and the thing that thunders and knocks them off their feet is the word of the Father (v. 6). Israel couldn’t look at the shining Moses, but Jesus touches them and tells them to get up and not be afraid (v. 7). They look up and see only Him, the fullness of God, the true prophet in whom all the promises are yes and Amen (v. 8). Some interpreters think the three witnessed a glimpse of Jesus’ divinity here, and of course you can’t look at Jesus and not see the man who is fully God, but what’s on display here is His glorified manhood. It’s the sixth day, the day of man when Adam was created, and Jesus tells them not to tell anyone until He rises from the dead (v. 9). The transfigured, glorified Christ anticipates the risen, fully glorified Jesus who as a new Adam has redeemed us from sin and death, never to die again. At Jesus’ baptism, the Father opened up the heavens, sent the Spirit in the form of a dove, and said “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:16-17). And now that Jesus is headed to the cross, the Father again declares His love for and pleasure in the Son. God gives glory. He bestows praise, honor, renown, pleasure, and delight on His Son. The Westminster Confession of Faith says the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. When we glorify Him, He does not suck all the glory into Himself like a black hole where we never

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see it again. The reason we can glorify Him in the first place is because He shines out like the sun. Peter writes that believers are blessed, “for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (1 Pet. 4:14). In our sins of rivalry, covetousness, envy and the like, we think that only by taking glory from others will we get more. Siblings compete for parental affection and approval. Parents put their kids down or chafe to see them rise above them. Colleagues strive against one another. In short, we think glory is a zero-sum game. When we behave as if it is, we do in fact become depleted. Those who tear others down bring themselves down. But God gives glory and is never diminished; in fact, it is because He gives that we are able to reflect it, and therefore glorify and enjoy Him forever. Scripture plainly requires us to pursue this: “[God] will render to each one according to his deeds: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality” (Rom. 2:6-7). C.S. Lewis describes those who pursue rewards by wrong or unnatural means: “Money is not the natural reward of love; that is why we call a man mercenary if he marries a woman for the sake of her money. But marriage is the proper reward for a real lover, and he is not mercenary for desiring it.” We seek God in order to be received by Him, to be loved by Him, and obey, please and delight Him. This can’t happen without Him bestowing glory upon us. How can a holy and righteous God delight in us who have sinned so grievously against Him in the past and continue to sin in the present? This is the gospel. God receives you in the Son who paid for those sins, and this is why the disciple witness His transfiguration: “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” Is this how you think of the Father? Would you stop Him or try to do something first to make yourself pleasing to Him? If so, you’re replacing the good news of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ with your dead works dressed up to make you acceptable.

The Suffering Son

Peter wants to prolong this moment. It’s a glorious one, but we are made to go from glory to glory. Jesus has work to do and so do the apostles: “Hear Him!” He says not to talk about it until the Son of Man has risen from the dead. The disciples want to know why the scribes say Elijah must come first, and Jesus replies that he did come and the scribes didn’t know but did whatever they wanted with him. John the Baptist came in the spirit of Elijah, was executed, and soon the Son of Man will suffer at their hands as well (v. 12). Glory and suffering go hand in hand, and there are many parallels between this mountain scene and Matthew’s account of the crucifixion on the hill of Golgotha: here Jesus is accompanied by two victorious saints, there by two criminals (27:38); here His garments shine in glory, there He has no clothes (27:35); Elijah appears here and it’s thought he might appear to rescue Him at the cross (27:47-49); the apostles hear the Father’s pronouncement and are afraid, and the centurion and those with him realize Jesus is the Son God and are greatly afraid (27:54). We are risen with Christ now and receive His pleasure, but we also walk by faith, looking to hear at the last: “Well done, good and faithful servant.” We can’t look to “arrive” in this life or dwell on the old “glory days.” By faith See what God is doing, knowing “if you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (1 Pet. 4:14).