

The Mount of Transfiguration

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Date: 06 November 2017

Preacher: Rev Andrew Coghill

[0 : 0 0] in the account which we read this evening it includes within it this account of the Mount of Transfiguration that is one of those few occasions in scripture when the canopy of heaven is opened a crack as it were and living mortals are granted a glimpse of the glory of that spiritual realm that spiritual realm which is in one sense all around us heaven is in one sense a genuine physical place and location but the spiritual realm is all around us and we're just not conscious of it if you think for example in instances in 2nd Kings I think it's chapter 6 where Elisha is on the walls of Dauphan and all the Sillians I think it is are coming against the city and his servant is getting anxious and nervous and Elisha prays to the Lord open his eyes so that he would see things as they truly were and then when the Lord opened the servant's eyes he saw the whole hillside filled with chariots and horses of fire in other words the Lord's angelic host they were always there but he couldn't see them and we usually can't see anything of the spiritual realm of that part of God's kingdom which our physical eyes cannot discern it is of course a miracle that this is happening on the mount of transfiguration the fact that the disciples can see not only Jesus but Moses and Elijah as well it is a miracle of course though we might legitimately say it is one performed more by the father than by the son it is while Jesus is at prayer in the mount in Luke's account of the gospel there that the miracle occurs and there is nothing really to suggest that it is Jesus who initiates that

I am saying that with all reverence just going by the narrative there is nothing in it to suggest that Jesus in his praying is initiating the opening of the heavens and Moses and Elijah coming rather when Moses and Elijah have appeared and the cloud overshadows the disciples it is obviously the father who speaks and we read that as he was saying these things a cloud came and overshadowed them they were afraid as they entered the cloud and a voice out of the cloud saying this is my son my chosen one now clearly Jesus can't be saying that God the son can't be saying that it's God the father saying that this is my son my chosen one listen to him it is spiritually as well as literally a mountaintop experience and one which clearly makes a deep impression on the three disciples who saw it Peter makes explicit reference to it in his second epistle in 2 Peter chapter 1 we read in verses 16 to 18 for we did not follow cleverly devised myths 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 and the voice was born to him by the majestic glory this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased we ourselves heard this very voice born from heaven for we were with them on the holy mountain now in case you're thinking yeah but that's a different point it says in Luke and Peter is quoting you like that

Matthew's form of words that he uses there Matthew's phraseology but that's the words that are uttered that is a mountaintop experience that Peter is making reference to years afterwards and it's made such a deep impression indeed it is such an experience as no one was ever likely to forget but it was not an end in itself indeed it was never meant to be there were things it had to teach the disciples and there are things it has to teach us as well first of all if they were still in any doubt the experience confirms to the disciples who Jesus is you might think well that's a that's a dead obvious thing I mean why would they bother about that there is the cloud which is almost always symbolic of the presence of God if you think about it throughout scripture Old Testament and New Testament there's a cloud covering something it almost always symbolizes the presence of God and so far the disciples remember that they know bits about who Jesus is and they've put a certain amount of trust in him but they don't understand everything perhaps they do not fully grasp that this is

God the Son but the cloud is symbolic of the presence of God and the voice of course from the midst of it is very obviously God but there is also Moses and Elijah and this is the appearance of their spirits or souls for it cannot be their bodies if you think about it it cannot be their bodies since Moses body was buried and nobody knows where the grave is Deuteronomy chapter 34 we read verses 5 and 6 so Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab according to the word of the Lord and he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth Peor but no one knows the place of his burial to this day and Elijah although he did not die but went up to heaven in a fiery chariot as we read in 2nd Kings in chapter 2 at verse 11 still could not in his physical imperfect body have entered into heaven but rather that body must have been sloughed off and his soul only enter into glory why do we say that well it's not we who say that it is the word of God that says it 1 Corinthians 15 verses 50 and 51

I tell you this brothers flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable behold I tell you a mystery we shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed and Elijah would be one for whom although he wasn't there when the Lord returns indeed the Lord hadn't come the first time in Elijah's day he clearly does not die but he is changed he needs must be changed he needs must slough off this mortal body if he is to enter into heaven this I say brethren flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God it cannot be Elijah's body which is being seen on the mount of transfiguration it cannot be Moses' body which is being seen it is their souls their glorified souls or spirits neither of these godly men can have had their resurrection bodies yet because Christ's own resurrection had not yet happened and we know if we go back to 1 Corinthians 15 verse 20 but in fact

[7 : 07] Christ has been raised from the dead the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep in other words nobody is getting their resurrection body until Christ gets it first there will be many who will die in the faith and in the Lord their spirits their souls will be in heaven they will be glorified with the Lord but that will be their souls their resurrection body which will endure to all eternity we won't actually get to the last day but there is nobody in heaven with that resurrection body except Christ yet because he has to be the first fruits of them that slept like the rest of us Moses and Elijah will only get their resurrection bodies at the last day when the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible and we shall be changed in the meantime the disciples glimpsed the glorified souls of Moses the personification of the law and Elijah representing the prophets in general the spirits of just men made perfect as Hebrews tells us chapter 12 and these are talking with Jesus the personification of the law the representative of the prophets are talking with Jesus they are there conversing with him now I would love to be able to tell you that Jesus was standing in the middle and there was

Elijah on one side and Moses on the other and there was Jesus slapped down in the middle because that's the place he jolly well should have and that may be how we picture it but of course scripture does not tell us that just as I would love to think that the penitent thief on the cross was on Jesus right and the bad thief was on his left but scripture doesn't tell us that that is how we may imagine things but he could just as easily have been standing to one side and they were both standing on one side and we can't say this for sure and it was always sort of depicted that way and I always think of it that way I would have to confess but we don't know at all they may have been huddled in a group or both to one side of him or whatever it's just one of those things you know as we say like always assuming the good thief was on the right of the cross and the bad one on the left but we just don't know we have no grounds for saying so this then is a glimpse of heaven's glory and nothing surely is more certain to make the disciples want the rest of it the whole of it the continuation of it forever once you've had a little taste of that kind of glory you're just going to want it to go on and last forever no wonder

Peter tries pathetically yet devoutly to encourage Moses and Elijah and Christ to remain and dwell even for a time in this earthly sphere one of the things that my wife and I like to do to relax sometimes if we've got an evening in together which is a rare thing is we'll maybe get a DVD and watch it and as we're watching something or other then there might be trailers for another program and the trailers are designed or the retasters are designed to make you want to watch the rest of it they'll show you a wee bit of a film or a documentary or whatever and they'll show some of the most interesting and the most exciting bits and the whole purpose is to make you tune in when that program is on or to go and watch that particular film or that particular program or whatever they give you a little trailer because they want you to get a little taste and they want you to want more nine times out of ten we will choose to rent or to watch something which we've already seen a little trailer for and and found it to be interesting or good or exciting looking and that's exactly what's intended by the television people that's what they want you to do give people a wee taste whet the appetite stimulate the interest with the promise of more and better to come if I can say it reverently this glimpse of heaven is like a wee trailer of a program to the disciples

I don't mean to reduce the divine to the banal but it's like that in a sense it gives them a little taste of heaven a little sense of something a little glimpse of what it can be like and it's going to make them long for heaven and the glory of Christ they see there it makes it real close urgent and they are left wanting more Moses and Elijah are talking with Jesus not in general conversation they are talking about his death and this is the second point it is so vital to grasp not just who Jesus is God the son whose rightful realm is glory but also this is the thing we've got to recognize second point not just who Jesus is his divine identity but the second point centers on the death of Christ this is what it says Moses and Elijah they were speaking of his departure which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem as the old bible has it they speak of his decease his going away in the original it's the word exodus the going out from the earth that's what they're talking about that is the great subject of their conversation

God himself speaks from the cloud that this is his beloved son but if we were in any doubt about the centrality of his son and what he had come to do it's here remember Moses is the personification of the law Elijah the personification of the prophets and the ultimate objective of the law and the prophets is to point people to Jesus the son of God and the ultimate objective of Jesus own life and ministry is his death on the cross that is what he has come to do every time people may it perhaps with sentimentality or perhaps with genuine devotion celebrate his birth what must be recollected is that he didn't just come to be born and isn't that sweet and isn't that nice and isn't that great he came to be born so that he could die you can't die unless you've first been born the great objective of Jesus life and ministry is his death on the cross this is what all the old and new testament scriptures are ultimately about it is what they are pointing to it is the great subject matter of conversation in heaven

[13 : 50] I'll say that again think about it when the curtain is pulled back and you've got something of the glory revealed and there's Elijah and there's Moses and they're talking with Jesus what is the subject matter of their conversation his death on the cross it is the great matter of heaven it is that which heaven itself counts most glorious now crucifixion of course is of itself anything but glorious and we shouldn't romanticize it at all it is a judicial atrocity it is intended to be bloody and humiliating designed to shock and to terrify and the Romans knew that it had this effect on people because when they first encountered crucifixion as practiced by their enemies the Carthaginians when they were at war with them that is precisely the effect it had on the Romans and they recognized wow this is terrible that's horrible it's horrendous and if that's the effect it had on them battle hardened pagans as they were and they thought it's bound to have that effect on other people as a weapon of terror it was simply too good to ignore but they such was its horror value the Romans restricted its use to criminals and slaves but the one who was seamless should be willing to undergo that kind of horror for love for love not even of his friends but rather for those who were still his enemies such a love glorified

God and brought the love of God slap bang into the middle of pagan atrocity destroying death with the sacrifice of this sinless and divine life Romans puts it this way in chapter 5 verses 6 to 8 for while we were still weak at the right time Christ died for the ungodly for one would scarcely die for a righteous person though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us while we were still at enmity with God he went through this he died for us upon the cross on this event hinges all the history of the world and the salvation or damnation of each individual soul that ever lived wherever they lived whenever they lived you think about that all the vast eons of history as far as we know it although the history of man is comparatively short that all the souls that have ever lived in China or Mexico or Canada or Europe or Africa or whatever it should be every soul their eternity will be decided in terms of their relationship to this event the death of Christ upon the cross it doesn't matter where they've lived or when they've lived or however long or short a time they have lived if this event the death of Christ be the most important thing that ever happened as far as

God and all of heaven are concerned would you like to be the one to explain to God what justified you in putting something else anything else before it to God this is the great subject matter of heaven yes yes we will all be judged according to our sins yes we'll be justified according to our faith or not if we don't have it but we'll be judged according to our works but at the end of the day whilst our sins will be many and great they'll be manifold really the key question that God will want to know is where were you in respect of my son my son who was crucified at Jerusalem where did you stand in respect of him and all the other sins we have committed will either be washed clean or will stand against us as petty change compared to our rejection of Christ because this is the big deal to heaven it is the big deal to God it is the big deal by which all angels and men will be judged how are we going to be the ones to explain to God how we justified putting something else anything else before this reality but the mountaintop experience passes and this is the third thing we must learn after any occasion or experience however blessed or life changing we must all come down from the mountain and it's always a rude awakening when Moses in his day came down from

Mount Sinai he found them worshipping the golden calf when Elijah in his day came down from Mount Carmel he had to flee from the wrath of Jezebel and now Jesus and the disciples find a dispute going on between the other disciples and the scribes as Mark tells us chapter 9 verse 14 of Mark that scribes are disputing with the disciples and the broken hearted father of a boy possessed a grim dispiriting scene which Jesus eventually resolves it seems clear from the text that Jesus was disappointed in his own disciples after all they had cast out evil spirits and healed people before you know they go back to chapter 9 of Luke the beginning of the chapter you know we read he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal and we find at verse 10 on their return the apostles told him all that they had done and he took them and withdrew to a town called Bethsaida and so on so he had given them power over demons and evil spirits they had clearly been successful that scripture does not imply at all they came back to Jesus saying Lord it just didn't work at all we didn't have any success we never cast out any demons rather other accounts say they came back rejoicing saying even the devils are subject to us so they had the tools and they had the means and they had the power to do it

Matthew who would have been one of those disciples who had tried and failed to cure the boy gives us a slightly fuller picture in his own account we read in Matthew 17 verses 19 to 21 that when the disciples came to Jesus privately and said why could not we cast it out he said to them because of your little faith for truly I say to you if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed you will say to this mountain move from here to there and it will move and nothing will be impossible for you so maybe this particular devil was especially virulent but there is still the suggestion that given appropriate levels of spiritual preparation with prayer fasting or whatever they should have been able to do it their faith was found wanting and this is part of what we must learn in this third point we must always come down the mountain and when you do the devil will always be waiting for you perhaps not attacking you personally perhaps attacking someone you love or someone you want to be able to help and cannot each of us is given different gifts and different things we perhaps can and cannot do we need to learn this truth there are some things you cannot do is it not the serenity prayer that recovering addicts are sometimes taught

[22 : 27] God grant me the serenity to recognize the things I cannot change courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference there are some things you will never be able to do and some things you should have been able to do and Jesus might have legitimately expected us to be able to do but lack of faith or lack of spiritual preparedness prevented us and the Lord knows I say this as much to myself as to anyone else sometimes our faith fails and our heart convicts us thank God our salvation is not dependent upon our own strength and effectiveness when we feel our faith is failing we have the infallible truth of God's word that says in the case of

Peter Simon Simon behold Satan that desired to have you that he may sift you as wheat but I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not I have prayed for thee it's not our petitions ultimately but the knowledge that our intercessor is at the right hand of God when we are convicted and condemned in our hearts we have the infallible truth of God's word that says 1 John chapter 3 verse 20 if our heart condemn us God is greater than our heart and knoweth all things doesn't say if your heart condemns us that's okay it doesn't really matter and say you are bigger and stronger than your heart it says God is greater than our heart and knoweth all things so yes we come down from the mountain and yes the devil will try again to make us think it was all an illusion you just imagine that blessing up there we're only fooling ourselves because surely if we were better disciples we wouldn't fail so badly and so soon and so often but as this passage comes to a close and as we can picture the disciples perhaps hurt and mystified walking away from the scene with

Jesus to what does he direct them not to their failures not even to the mountain top nor the glory of the transfiguration but to the cross verses 44 and 45 there let these words sink down into your ears the son of man is about to be delivered into the hands of men but they did not understand this saying and it was concealed from them so that they might not perceive it and they were afraid to ask him about this saying doesn't alter the fact that Jesus keeps pointing them to his death just as it is the great subject matter of heaven it is the teaching likewise of Jesus on earth he is pointing them to his death maybe we don't fully grasp it either any more than they did but we must never let go of it because this is what it's all about this is the great event on which the whole of salvation history hinges the whole of history even outside of salvation it is that by which all nations peoples individuals and countries and countries will be judged where they are in relation to the death of

Christ this pivotal event to them still future to us now past but to all things absolutely central here is in the death of Christ for sinners here is the guarantee of salvation and redemption to all who will have it here is the price and the wages of sin paid in full here are the failures washed away and the glimpses of heaven made sweeter and neater this glorious resurrection which shall be ours if we are trusting in Christ this wondrous cross that is ever only his not ours this death so lately remembered in bread and wine until he comes in all the world there is nothing for which it was ever more needful or more appropriate to give thanks let us pray a