

The Transfiguration

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[0 : 0 0] Transfiguration. What does it mean? The most basic human question is why. We don't have to teach a child how to ask why, they just pick it up automatically. We say to them, sweetheart, don't touch that kettle, and they ask why. We explain it's hot, and they say, why? We reply, it contains boiling water, and they ask why. And so, endlessly, until we finally say, because, only to hear a little voice piping up, why? That curiosity of children is a good thing, because it helps them to learn about the world into which they've been born. You know, it's a sad day when we lose our curiosity and stop asking, why? When it comes to the physical world in which we live, it's a good thing to want to know why. When it comes to our spiritual lives, and especially our reading of the Bible, it's also a good thing to want to know why. What is the reason this passage is included in the Bible? Why does Jesus say the things He does? Why does He do the things He does?

Why does Luke, the gospel writer, include this strange story of the Transfiguration where He does? And what do the events of this passage mean? As human beings, we're curious. We don't like the answer, because, especially because it seems there must always be real answers to real questions.

Now, this passage records for us the Transfiguration of Jesus, the story of how Jesus' face was changed, and His clothing became dazzlingly white. The great Old Testament figures, Moses and Elijah, appeared with Him and spoke with Him. A great cloud overshadowed the mountain, and a voice spoke from heaven. Even though we can't quite imagine what it must have been like to have seen Jesus shining in heavenly glory, and to have heard the voice of God, we still want to ask, why? Why is this passage situated where it is, immediately after Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, and Jesus' discussion of the cost of the cost of discipleship? We're curious about these questions. We want to know the meaning of Jesus' transfiguration, because we suspect there's important things for us to learn here.

Seems to me that we can ask two questions this morning. What it means for us, what does the transfiguration, first of all, mean for Jesus? And then secondly, what does it mean for us? What does it mean for Jesus, and what does it mean for us? It seems to me that if we stop asking that why question, why the transfiguration for Jesus, why the transfiguration for us, it's a sad day. Because as Christians, we're called to be inquisitive, and to ask why questions all the time. So, what did the transfiguration mean for Jesus, and what does it mean for us?

[3 : 3 6] Well, what did it mean for Jesus, first of all? When it comes to the Bible, Jesus is the hero. In John 5, Jesus says of the Bible, these are the scriptures that testify about me. It's all about him. He's the central figure of the transfiguration. It's Jesus who's gone up to the mountain to pray, it's Jesus who is transfigured before them, it's Jesus who shines with the brightness of the glory of God, it's Jesus to whom and about whom the voice from heaven speaks. The Bible is like our lives as Christians are supposed to look, Jesus at the center. Now, we're not even halfway through Luke's gospel yet, and already Jesus has done miraculous works, and He's preached with divine power. He's raised the dead. He's given the blind their sight. He's exercised the demons. He's made the lame walk. He's proclaimed the kingdom of God. He's unveiled its standards and its values.

Immediately prior to our passage, Jesus, in verse 20, is publicly confessed as being the Christ, the King of Israel, the King of Israel, whose kingship, as we saw, rather than resulting in Him sitting on a throne of worldly gold, will lead to Him being nailed to a Roman cross.

So, from verses 21 and 22, Jesus foretells His suffering and His death and resurrection, and He talks in verse 23 about a cross. Jesus knows full well what lies before Him.

Now, perhaps we might think, well, these truths didn't affect Jesus emotionally, that Jesus spoke with detached indifference about His terrifying fate. The reality was somewhat different.

Jesus was flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone, mind of our minds. He had a rich emotional life, and one can only wonder at the emotional impact His impending death on the cross had upon Him. How do you think it made Him feel to say these things? Before it was ever for our benefit, the transfiguration of our Lord was for Jesus' benefit. It was a message for Him, directed to Him in particular.

[6 : 18] It's what Jesus needed to hear at this very moment in time. And so, we read, on that mountain, His appearance changed. The word Luke uses is that from which we get our English word, although it's actually a Greek word, metamorphosis, metamorphosis. And again, on that mountain, as the great cloud overshadowed Jesus, He heard the voice of His Father.

What does all this mean for Jesus? Well, it means at least two things, assurance and strength. Assurance and strength. Assurance, first of all, there are certain things I really don't like doing. Building Ikea furniture is very close to the top of the list. The problem is, even though I'm trying to read the instruction manual, I always seem to get it wrong. The chest of drawers I'm trying to build ends up looking more like a double bed by the time I'm finished with it. What I need is Walter to stand over me and say, you're doing all right, or to say, you've just used the wrong screw in the wrong place.

Pardon the irreverent illustration, but on a far grander stage, that's what's happening in the account of the transfiguration. Jesus is being assured by His Father, you're on the right track.

You're doing the right things. He is the Christ who has explained that to be the Christ means that rather than sit on an earthly throne, He's going to suffer and die on the cross.

[8 : 01] His metamorphosis into divine glory, the appearance of Moses and Elijah and the voice of God speaking to Him from heaven all assure Him He is doing what God wants Him to do. That it was always God's intention that the Christ should first suffer and then rise. The crowds want to make Jesus an earthly king by force, but heaven has a different agenda, and now Jesus on this mountain is being assured by His Father that the crowds are wrong and heaven is right. You see, this glorious transformation of Jesus' appearance, it's just a foretaste of what Jesus shall look like after His resurrection and ascension into heaven. It's just a foretaste of what He looks like right now. He shall no longer appear in weakness. He shall shine brighter than the angels in His face like the sun in all its brilliance.

Moses, the great lawgiver of the Old Testament, and Elijah, the great prophet of the Old Testament, appear with Him, reassuring Him that He is fulfilling all that was spoken of Him beforehand.

And God speaks from heaven saying, this is my Son, my chosen one. God the Father is declaring His delight in His Son. How these wonderful events must have assured Jesus that no matter what He would have to suffer on account of His being the Christ, He was doing the right thing. He was doing the right thing.

You know, as human beings, we all need the assurance others give us, even if it's the voice of someone we love and respect saying to us, I'm proud of you. I love you. Jesus is walking the way of the cross.

Is He on the right path? Or should He listen to the crowds and allow them to make Him King by force? Heaven answers with an unmistakable voice. For as much as it will cost Jesus to die on the cross to take away the sins of the world, for as much as He must suffer as our substitute, He's on the right path.

[10 : 25] How these events of the transfiguration must have served to assure our Lord that all He'd said and done up to this point was right. But to be the Christ really did mean earthly suffering and not earthly glory.

Well, so we say, so what? Well, what relevance is this event to me? Well, listen, we're tempted to think of our salvation this way. A hateful God in heaven wanted to condemn us all.

But Jesus, because He loves us so much, persuaded that hateful God otherwise. God is full of wrath on account of our sin, but Jesus is full of love. And finally, the love of Jesus defeats the wrath of God.

God loves us so much as Jesus did. God and He were working together to save us from our sins. It was always from eternity. God's plan to rescue us through the sacrifice of His Son. And that's because the God who we think of as hateful, in fact, loves us infinitely, eternally, and unchangeably.

[11 : 47] We are deeply loved by the same God who spoke to Jesus on this mountain. Surely this should serve us in the same way it served Jesus, to assure us to rest in the embrace of the love of God.

So, assurance, that's what it meant for Jesus. Second, strength, strength. Now, I'm not a Man United fan, but they say that Sir Alec Ferguson was the most successful Premier League manager of all time.

I'd like to think it was maybe Arsene Wenger, but never mind. Sir Alec from Govan was known for many things, but he was especially famous for his hairdryer halftime team talks. Man United would be losing at halftime.

Ferguson would get his players into the dressing room and give them a wee talk, as he called it, throwing football boots about and stuff like that. And like us not, they'd come out in the second half and they'd win the game in Fergie time.

Wouldn't you have loved to have been a fly on the wall in the Man United dressing room at halftime? I guarantee the players would have been pretty happy to return to the pitch with new strength and resolve not to lose.

[13:00] Now, it's not as if Jesus was flagging or his determination to go to the cross for us was waning, but the transfiguration was for him a strengthening experience.

Again, pardon that irreverent illustration about Sir Alec, but Jesus was getting his halftime team talk. Not so much that what he'd done before was a failure and he must up his game in the second half, but that he's on the right track.

He's winning. He needs to keep going in the way he has been. He's being strengthened here by receiving a foretaste of his divine glory, that which shall await him beyond his suffering.

He's being strengthened by the presence of Moses and Elijah, who both reassure Jesus that he's the fulfillment of all that the law and the prophets of the Old Testament predicted.

He's being strengthened by the voice of his father, this is my son, my chosen one. Now, the language of my chosen one, my elect one, is taken directly from Isaiah 42 verse 1.

[14:18] For of the Messiah, Jesus, God says, Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights.

I have put my spirit upon him, and he will bring forth justice to the nations. Jesus, as God's servant, prophesied all those years before, the chosen one in whom God the Father delights.

No father could delight more in his son than God did in Jesus. The Jesus who brought life from the dead and brought hope to the desperate.

And upon Jesus rests the great Holy Spirit of power who strengthens him in his mission of living and dying for his people. You see, there's new strength for Jesus on this mountain.

Strength to go the distance. Strength to finish the mission upon which he's been sent. Here then is the motive and the strength, the delight of God in the path his son has chosen.

[15:24] But again, so what? What does this mean for us who live in 21st century Glasgow? It means at least this. The strength God had for Jesus, he has for you today.

The strength to keep going to the end. To renew our strength, as Helen read to us from Isaiah 40. So that even though we might feel like giving up and that we're clinging on by our fingernails, we can go on.

Are we trying to do the mission of God in our own strength? Are we trying to depend upon our own resources to live for him? This passage calls us to depend and trust upon him.

For just as he strengthened his son, so when we need it most, God will strengthen us also. What did it mean for Jesus?

Well, secondly today, and a bit more briefly, what does the transfiguration mean for us? What does it mean for us? For the perspective of Jesus, this passage makes very rich reading.

[16:44] His heavenly Father is assuring him and strengthening him that he's going in the right direction, he's walking in the right path. But what does this passage mean for us today? As we read this passage and ask the question, why was Jesus transfigured?

We can answer, it was for his benefit. But we can also answer, it was for ours. As far as this passage is concerned, it answers four questions for us.

It first of all, assures the doubting. It assures the doubting. Many of Luke's first Christian readers were under pressure from both Jews and Gentiles to renounce their faith in Christ.

You see, to Jews, the message of a crucified Christ was a stumbling block and to the Gentiles total foolishness. They did not spare those Christians with whom they rubbed shoulders.

How can you possibly believe in a Christ who was crucified? Because according to the traditions of our fathers, he should ride at the head of Israel's armies and sit on a golden throne.

[17 : 55] And perhaps some of Luke's first Christian readers were tempted to lose their faith in Christ, to return to their previous lives in Judaism. Luke is assuring the doubting that Jesus is who he really says he is, that he really is the fulfillment of all the promises of the Old Testament, and that faith in him, though it might result in suffering here, will eventually lead to resurrection glory.

You see, God is graciously answering the doubts of the uncertain. He says from heaven, this is my son, my chosen one, listen to him.

He did not say these things about any other figure in the Bible, only about Jesus. So unless Luke is lying, God is setting his seal of approval upon Jesus as the Christ.

Then these two greatest figures of the Old Testament, Moses, who represents the law, and Elijah, who represents the prophets, appear with Jesus, proving that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the promises of the Old Testament.

To trust in Jesus is not to take leave of one's Jewish culture and background. It is to embrace it and to engage with it. And lastly, by describing the glory of the transfigured Jesus, Luke is reinforcing to the doubting that no matter how much we may have to suffer here and now on account of our being Christians, one day, one day, we're going to join with Christ in the glory of that majesty.

[19 : 51] This passage is designed to assure the doubting in the early church and the doubting among us also. Consider the Jesus who will suffer and die on the cross for all that others may tell us that it's foolish to follow Him.

God tells us different. Listen to Him, God commands. The second reason for us, the transfiguration is included, is to encourage the anxious.

To encourage the anxious. The story of the transfiguration comes immediately after some of the hardest things Jesus ever said. He told His disciples about His suffering and His death.

Then He told them, if you want to come after Me, if you really want to be My disciples, you need to deny yourself. You need to take up your cross on a daily basis and follow Me into that suffering.

You're going to suffer too, Jesus said, just like Me. Now, this is not what the disciples wanted to hear, and it's not really what we want to hear either. Having publicly confessed that Jesus is the Christ, these disciples now expected Jesus to come out in public and claim His kingship, to be the Christ they expected Him to be.

[21 : 22] But rather than talk of kingship, He talks of a cross. And rather than talk about self-promotion, He talks about self-denial. One can quite easily understand how they must have felt the sharp sword of anxiety in their hearts.

Is this really what it's going to mean to be a disciple of Christ? Given all the suffering, is it really worth following Jesus?

Well, Luke includes the story of the transfiguration to encourage the anxious that it really is worth every penny of sweat and every drop of blood to be a disciple of Jesus.

Because what's going to follow the suffering and the humiliation is the glory of Christ's transfigured majesty. What's going to follow our self-denial and cross-bading and all our humiliation and suffering will be the glory of Christ's transfigured majesty.

It's not a case of looking up for us. It's a case of looking ahead for us. At a greater glory than this world can ever imagine which awaits every true disciple of Jesus.

[22 : 48] The sharp sword of anxiety piercing our hearts is overcome by the glorious transfigured hope of a transformed future. The third reason the transfiguration is here is to motivate serious discipleship.

To motivate serious discipleship. Now, all these first disciples of Jesus were Jewish. And as such, they were brought up to believe that a man who died on a cross was cursed by God.

For religious Jews, that's why the cross was and remains such a stumbling block. The mere thought that Christ, the most blessed one of heaven, could be cursed by God on a cross was blasphemy.

While Jesus told His disciples about His upcoming suffering and death, it must have raised questions in their minds about whether He really will, is He really the Christ at all?

And one of the reasons Luke includes this passage in his gospel is to reassure these early followers of Jesus that the suffering of Christ on the cross is not incompatible with the glory of His kingdom.

[24 : 02] That the suffering of the Christ on the cross is not incompatible with the glory of His kingdom. that it's possible for Christ both to be the blessed one and the cursed one, to die on a cross cursed by God, but to be raised to glory blessed by God.

Because the transfiguration shows that after the cross, Jesus is raised to glory unspeakable. Present sufferings for Christ and future glory with Christ are not incompatible. They are not a stumbling block to genuine discipleship. They're a springboard. This passage reminds us that serious discipleship does not consist in avoiding suffering on account of our faith in Christ, but includes it because eventually and ultimately those who suffer for Christ shall have a greater glory than it can presently be imagined. Scores of religion, religions, poor scorn in Christianity because we worship a crucified Christ. But the thing is that though Christ was crucified, He was raised to new and glorious life by scorning the suffering, they miss the glory. If we want to be serious disciples of Jesus Christ and not just cultural Christians who renounce our faith at the first sign of trouble, we need to remember that present suffering and future glory are not incompatible but in the pattern Jesus has set Himself for us. [25 : 57] They belong together. And then the last reason that the account of the transfiguration is here is because it promises our salvation.

It promises our salvation. As we close, I want to reflect briefly on this wonderful conversation that took place between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Now, they were talking and we read, it's about the departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. That departure He's about to accomplish in Jerusalem. They're talking about the cross on which He would die and they're framing it in terms of a departure. Now, we know that the exact word Luke uses here is the word exodus. Exodus is made up of two Greek words, ex, which means out of, and odos, which means way, a way out of. It draws us back to an event that placed nearly one and a half thousand years prior to the Mount of Transfiguration when Moses was used by God to deliver His people from their slavery in Egypt.

[27 : 12] We sung of this in Psalm 105. Remember the story. The Jews were enslaved in Egypt and God sent ten plagues upon the Egyptians and eventually the Jews were released.

Even then, the Egyptian army pursued them. God rescued His people by dividing the Red Sea and allowed them to pass on dry land. But when the Egyptian army tried to cross, God destroyed it completely.

So, the exodus, the departure in mind here is deliverance, rescue, and salvation. What Jesus is about to accomplish in Jerusalem will be will be an even greater deliverance, rescue, and salvation than it was through Moses.

The exodus of the Jews under Moses shall just be a shadow of the rescue, deliverance, and salvation Jesus shall shortly accomplish and about which Moses and Elijah have come to talk to Him.

They're referring to His suffering and death. The departure, the exodus, the way out in mind is how through His death on the cross for us, Jesus is going to rescue us from the darkness of our slavery to sin, the horror of subjection to the curse of a broken law, and the despair of a hopeless, godless future.

[28 : 42] He, Jesus, might be gloriously transfigured in Luke chapter 9, but shortly He's going to be hideously disfigured on the cross.

The transfigured one shall become the disfigured one. No two scenes could be so different. The glory of the mount of transfiguration and the gloom of the cross on which our Savior died. What this means for us is that through faith in Jesus, through believing and trusting in Him, we have the promise of rescue, salvation, and deliverance from sin and death and a godless future. It is a basic human instinct to ask why. And I hope in this study we began to at least begin to answer this question.

There's so much more in this passage. But ultimately, it all resolves down into this one question which every single one of us here must answer for ourselves for no one else can answer it for us.

[29 : 55] What will we do with this Jesus, the transfigured one who shortly shall become the disfigured one? Will we ignore Him and carry on with our lives as though He never existed?

Or will today we bow before Him as our Savior and Lord in repentance, asking Him to forgive us all our sins and to make us His disciples? which of these shall it be for us?