

## The Transfiguration of Christ

Matthew chapter 16 concludes with a promise to certain of the disciples of Christ: “Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom” (Mat. 16:28). Then immediately following is the occasion of what we call the Transfiguration of Christ. That this event is the fulfilment of Messiah’s promise is evident from the words of Peter, alluding back to this event, saying that “we were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Pet. 1:16). The event of the Transfiguration therefore, was a taste of the Kingdom to come, when Messiah shall be invested with majesty as his empire shall fill all of the earth. It is this aspect that we shall examine in our present considerations.

Matthew 17:2 describes how the Master was “transfigured” in the presence of certain disciples. The word means “changed”, and is only used twice elsewhere in Scripture, where it denotes the change that the disciples will undergo in preparation for life in the Kingdom:

“ ... And be not conformed to this world: but be ye **transformed** by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Rom. 12:2)

“ ... but we with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are **changed** into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18).

From these two passages, we learn that the believers must undergo a twofold change, or transformation. Firstly, there is a mental and moral renewal, and second there is the change of nature to that glorious nature currently possessed by the Son, even as by the Spirit of the Lord (see also Phil. 3:21). These two changes are absolutely needed for entry into the coming Kingdom, and they were prefigured in the change, or Transfiguration of the Lord.

Matthew 17 provides us with another interesting detail. Messiah’s “face did shine as the sun” (Mat. 17:2) in its radiant brilliance. This is very significant, for the record describes these events as being in the presence of Moses and Elijah (whether it were literally so, involving a resurrection, or whether it was a vision doesn’t change the principles here). Moses was previously denied seeing the face of Glory. When he asked to see the Glory of Yahweh, he was told:

“I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of Yahweh before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me and live” (Exo. 33:19-20).

Although Moses couldn’t behold the face of glory, when he ascended into the mount and appeared in the presence of Yahweh, his own face shone with a brightness that frightened the Children of Israel. Exodus 34 describes how Moses had to put a vail over his face, so that Israel would not see the glory that would otherwise be revealed to them.

In these things then, we see a tremendous irony. Moses wanted to see the fulness of Yahweh’s Glory – but was prevented from seeing the Face. But the Children of Israel could behold the Face of glory; (albeit in a lesser manifestation through Moses) – yet through fear, they would not go anywhere near it. They avoided Moses, unless he prevented them from seeing that glory by placing a vail over his face. But what

are we to make of all this? What are the Spiritual Lessons which these things are intended to convey? We are left in no doubt here, for the Spirit through Paul expounds them for our learning. In the Second Epistle to the Corinthians; we learn that the Glory of Moses's face represented the fading Glory of the Law which God gave through him:

“Now if the dispensation of death, carved in letters of stone, came with such splendor that the Israelites could not look at Moses' face because of its brightness, fading as it was, why should not the dispensation of the Spirit be attended with greater splendor? For if there was splendor in the dispensation of condemnation, the dispensation of righteousness must far exceed it in splendor. Indeed, in this case, what once had splendor has come to have no splendor at all, because of the splendor which surpasses it. For if what faded away came with splendor, what is permanent must have much more splendor. Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not see the end of the fading splendor. But their minds were hardened; for to this day, when they read the old covenant, the same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yea, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds” (2Cor 3:7-15, RSV).

In these words, a comparison is being made between the Glory (or “splendor” as the word is translated in the RSV) of the “dispensation of condemnation” of the Law, and the Glory of the “dispensation of righteousness”, of the New Covenant in Christ. And the point of comparison is that the Glory which came through Christ has a “greater splendor” – a greater glory which so greatly surpassed the Glory of the Old Covenant, that it makes that glory appear as nothing! And these principles, the Apostle informs us, are illustrated in the appearance of Moses' face; for just as the glory of the Law was to fade away, being replaced by the New Covenant, even so Moses face, which shone with glory as he received the Law, faded more and more as time went on until he once again stood in the Divine Presence. The fading Glory of Moses' face then, ought to have taught Israel that the glorious Law he brought to them would itself fade away, being replaced by something permanent and even more glorious.

In the case of the transfiguration of the Lord Jesus Christ then, Moses did behold the face of Glory, shining as the sun. He saw a glory that far exceeded the Law that came through him, in the face of Jesus Christ (see 2 Cor. 4:6).

Being in the presence of the glorified Christ, both Moses and Elijah “appeared in glory, and spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem” (Lu. 9:31). Here, the Greek word for “decease” is the word for “Exodus”, and is translated “departing” in the context of the people leaving Egypt (Heb. 11:22). It is significant therefore, that upon the mount of Transfiguration, we behold three leaders of an Exodus: Moses leading Israel out of Egypt, Elijah who shall lead the people through the wilderness of the people into the land of their inheritance, and Messiah himself who will lead those who trust in him out of the bondage of sin and death, into the glories of the coming Kingdom.

The record in Luke records for us concerning the Master that:

“as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistening” (Lu. 9:29).

We suggest that this transformation of appearance is representative of the transformation of Messiah into Immortality. In the prophecy of Zechariah, he is represented by Joshua as undergoing a change of raiment, which answers to his change of nature. So the angel spoke:

“he answered and spake unto those that stood before him, saying, Take away the filthy garments from him. And unto him he said, Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment” (Zech. 3:4).

This change of raiment would therefore appear to have a counterpart in the change of Messiah’s raiment at his transfiguration. This white raiment is promised to those who hold fast to the Truth in the degenerate days of darkness – as in the case of the ecclesia at Sardis:

“Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. He that overcometh, ***the same shall be clothed in white raiment ...***” (Rev. 3:4-5).

Again, we see that the events of the Transfiguration are representations of better things to come, at the appearing of the Master, and the changing of his servants to share his white garments.

Matthew chapter 17 speaks of how a voice emanated from the cloud that descended upon them:

“... while he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold, a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased: hear ye him” (Mat. 17:5).

This cloud was unusual, as it was “a bright cloud”, emanating light, which clouds ordinarily do not do. But this particular cloud represented the Glory of Yahweh: Peter alluded to this, in speaking of the source of the Voice:

“for he received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him ***from the excellent glory***, This is my Son, I whom I am well pleased” (2 Pet. 1:17).

This idea of a cloud representing glory brings to mind a number of allusions. The cloudy pillar that separated Israel from armies of Egypt (Ex. 33:9), represented the presence of their God. Again, 1 Kings chapter 8 describes how that a cloud filled the house which Solomon built, again speaking of the glory of Yahweh (1 Kings 8:10). This latter aspect is particularly relevant to our present considerations:

“And it came to pass, when the priests were come out of the holy place, that the cloud filled the house of Yahweh, So that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud: for the glory of Yahweh had filled the house of Yahweh” (1 Kings 8:10-11).

Again, just as the disciples could not stand (Mat. 17:6), before the Divine Presence, even so the priests could not stand to minister in the Temple due to the effulgence of glory that was manifested there. In the future, when the house of prayer for all peoples shall be built, the glory will once again dwell in that house, as seen by Ezekiel:

“Behold, the Glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east: and his voice as like a noise of many waters: and the earth shined with his Glory ... and the Glory of Yahweh came into the house by the way of the gate whose prospect is toward the east” (Eze. 43:2, 4).

And interestingly, Isaiah had a vision of that same glory, which caused the earth to shine, in terms that allude back to Solomon’s Temple:

“... Holy, Holy, Holy, is Yahweh of hosts: **the whole earth is full of his glory**. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of them that cried, **and the house was filled with smoke**” (Isa. 6:3-4).

Notice here, the House is filled smoke – which testifies of a fiery judgement having taken place – rather than a cloud. But in that day, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of Yahweh – all of these things being alluded to in the events of Messiah’s Transfiguration.

The voice that emanated from the bright cloud expressed the Divine approval of Messiah:

“... behold, a voice of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, **in whom I am well pleased**; hear ye him” (Mat. 17:5).

This language echoes that of the prophet Isaiah, in speaking of the Lord Jesus:

“Behold, my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, **in whom my soul delighteth**; I have put my spirit upon him: He shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles” (Isa. 42:1).

Interestingly, it is in this context that Isaiah also describes Messiah as being a “light of the Gentiles” (Isa. 42:6). The voice that came from heaven signified a Divine Approval of the Son, which was also demonstrated by his shining with the effulgence of Glory.

Returning to the Epistle of Peter, we read in chapter 5 of the Lord Jesus Christ:

“The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also **a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed**” (1 Pet. 5:1).

Peter was a partaker of the “glory” and “majesty” of the coming Kingdom. He witnessed a vision of future things, when he, with his Master, will be glorified in joyous immortal radiance. In that day, the things he witnessed upon the mount of Transfiguration will become a living reality. He will live and reign with his Messiah—as will we, if we also hold fast a vision of the future.

*Christopher Maddocks*