The Transfiguration of Jesus

During His 33 years of earthly life and ministry Jesus’ outward appearance was very ordinary. He looked much like the Jews of His day (Isa. 53:2). There is only one exception and that was during His transfiguration when His glory was revealed briefly to three of His disciples on a mountain. This monumental event in the life of Christ is also recorded in Mark 9:1-13 and Luke 9:28-36.

1. The promise of the transfiguration (Mt. 16:28)

Jesus had promised that some of His disciples would see Him coming in His kingdom splendor and this promise was now fulfilled. This was a preview of Christ’s future kingdom.

2. The time and place of the transfiguration (17:1)

This event took place six days after Jesus made the promise. Luke 9:28 mentions eight days, so it is likely that he included the day of the promise and the day of its fulfillment, whereas Matthew and Mark 9:2 refer to the six days in between. The exact location of this event is not known, but it probably took place on a spur of Mt. Hermon, which rises to about 9,400 feet above sea level.

3. The witnesses of the transfiguration (vs. 1)

Peter, James, and John were with Jesus on the mount. These disciples along with Andrew comprised Christ’s “inner circle,” those who were closest to Him and at times alone with Him (Mt. 26:37; Mk. 5:37; 13:3). John MacArthur suggest four reasons why these three disciples witnessed the transfiguration: 1) they were reliable witnesses to confirm this event (Deut. 19:15); 2) they were probably chosen because of their closeness with Jesus; 3) these men could reliably and convincingly articulate what they witnessed; and 4) they were chosen to witness the event rather than a large crowd because the people could have pressured Christ to become the political and military deliverer they expected Him to be (Matthew 16-23; 62).

Peter spoke of himself and the disciples as eyewitnesses of Christ’s majesty (2 Pet. 1:16-18).

4. The description of the transfiguration (vs. 2)

Jesus underwent a dramatic change in appearance so the disciples could see His glory. Luke tells us that this occurred while Jesus was praying (Lk. 9:29). The word “transfigured” (Gk. metamorphoo) has the basic meaning of changing into another form (our English word, metamorphosis). Jesus had lived over thirty years in ordinary human form, but on this occasion He provided a glimpse of His divine glory (Col. 1:15; 2:9; Heb. 1:1-3).

5. The purpose of the transfiguration (vs. 3)

First of all, the transfiguration confirmed Christ’s teachings at Caesarea Philippi about His death, resurrection, and future glory. Secondly, the transfiguration prepared the disciples for Christ’s death. Also the transfiguration prepared Christ for His death by reminding Him of...
future glory (Heb. 12:2). Finally, the transfiguration provided a foretaste of Christ’s future coming in glory (Mt. 24:30; 25:31).

6. The response to the transfiguration (vs. 4)

From the account in Luke 9 we know that Peter and the other disciples had trouble staying awake (Lk. 9:32). Peter also spoke without thinking (Lk. 9:33). He wrongly placed Jesus on the same level with Moses and Elijah by suggesting that a tabernacle (tent) be made for each one (Mt. 17:4). This event may have taken place at the same time as the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:34-43). Peter was content to stay on the mount and prolong this time with Christ.

7. The confirmation of the transfiguration (vs. 5-7)

As Peter spoke he was overshadowed by a bright cloud and interrupted by the voice of God the Father confirming that Jesus was His beloved Son in whom He was well pleased. The Father’s words were identical to those spoken at His baptism (Mt. 3:17). This confirmed Christ’s deity and His perfect character and obedience (Jn. 8:29). The Father commanded the disciples to hear (and heed) Christ as God’s authoritative prophet (Dt. 18:15-19; Heb. 2:1-4). MacArthur sees a strong connection to Christ’s prior teaching in Matthew 16: “He was saying, in effect, ‘If My Son tells you He must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die, believe Him. If He tells you He will be raised up on the third day, believe Him. If He tells you He will be delivered up, believe Him. If He tells you to take up your own cross and follow Him, that is what you are to do. If He says He will come again in glory, then believe Him and live accordingly’” (Matthew 16-23, 68).

8. The conversation after the transfiguration (vs. 9)

Jesus commanded the disciples to keep the vision secret until after His resurrection. Most people in Israel had an incorrect view of the Messiah. They looked for a reigning ruler, not a suffering servant, as MacArthur explains: “The Christ that most Jews of that day were expecting was not the Christ who had come. Instead of coming to conquer, He had come to die. Instead of coming in divine glory, He came in humble meekness. And instead of coming to deliver the Jews from political bondage, He came to deliver from sin’s bondage all men who would trust in Him” (Matthew 16-23, 70). The report of this event would likely have caused the people to take and force Him to be king, as they tried on other occasions (Jn. 6:15; 12:12-19). The disciples asked Jesus about the coming of Elijah before His kingdom. They wanted to know how the appearance of Elijah they had just seen on the mount would fit in with Biblical prophecy. In effect they asked, “If You are the Messiah, as you have declared and we have believed, why did Elijah not appear before You began Your ministry?” The scribes correctly taught that Elijah would precede the King in His glory (Mal. 4:5-6). Jesus confirmed the accuracy of the scribes’ teaching. This prophecy about Elijah had both a future fulfillment (Rev. 11:3-6) and a present fulfillment in John the Baptist (Mt. 14:1-12).

9. The lessons of the transfiguration

The first lesson is to confirm the absolute necessity of Christ’s death, something that Peter had denied in Matthew 16:22. According to the parallel account in Luke, Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus about His decease (Gk., exodus) that He would accomplish at Jerusalem (Lk. 9:31). Both the law (represented by Moses) and the prophets (represented by Elijah) predicted Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension. The second lesson is to confirm that Christ will return to reign in glory. The final lesson is to confirm that Jesus is the Son of God who deserves our complete trust, reverence, and obedience.
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