

The Transfiguration

By Malcolm H. Watts

The transfiguration is the word used to describe the miraculous change that took place in the appearance of Christ when he was visibly glorified in the presence of three of his disciples. 'Jesus', we read, 'was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light' (Matt 17:2).

One of the most remarkable events in Christ's earthly life, the transfiguration anticipated our Lord's future glory and also revealed the glory which will forever belong to his believing people. As we read the inspired narratives (Matt 17:1-9; Mk 9:2-9; Lk 9:28-36), we are still able to catch a glimpse of the invisible world and view some of the wonders of the kingdom

of heaven.

Eminent commentators and expositors have seen the transfiguration in that light. Among these is Dr. John Gill who, in his comments on Mark's account, says that Christ was transfigured 'that his disciples might have a visible display of his glory, as an emblem and pledge of that in which he shall hereafter appear'. James Foote in his 'Lectures on Luke', makes a similar point: 'We may infer, from this account, how glorious a place heaven must be. On the mount of transfiguration, heaven might be said,, in some measure, to be brought down to earth; and from what was then seen, some idea may be entertained of what heaven itself is. How glorious was that sight! And yet it was only a small specimen of what is within

the veil. There his redeemed people see Jesus as he is, and in all the splendour of his exaltation'.

In a choice little volume entitled 'The Transfiguration on the Mount', Jonathan Ranken Anderson wrote the following: 'The scene of the Transfiguration was a figure of heaven, for there the person of Christ will be the central object - "the Lamb in the midst of the Throne;" there the redeemed from among men will appear in glory - "A Lamb stood on the mount Zion, and with him an hundred forty and four thousand, having his Father's name written in their foreheads;" there the death of Christ will be the ceaseless theme of contemplation and praise - He appeared "as a Lamb that had been slain;" there the course of divine Dispensation will have reached its destination; there the lines of Divine truth will meet and converge in Him who is the Alpha and Omega'.

The Key to the Meaning

Scripture itself teaches that this is indeed the significance of the transfiguration; and it encourages us to look within the veil and gaze upon the glory that one day shall be revealed. Several verses and passages come almost immediately to mind:

First of all, we observe that not long before this event, Christ had predicted his approaching sufferings; and because the

disciples found that so difficult to accept, he had also predicted his future and ultimate glory. 'From that time forth', we read, 'Jesus began to show unto his disciples, how that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things of the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed...' (Matt 16:21). And shortly afterwards he says to those same disciples, 'the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels...' (Matt 16:27). Now, according to the Gospels, our Lord intimated to them that they would soon be granted a spectacular preview of his future and eternal glory. He said: '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'. (Matt 16:28). This was spoken just before the transfiguration took place. What can that mean except that Matthew (along with Mark and Luke) understood this event to be a demonstration of his final and glorious appearance?

Second, although the ineffable splendour of Christ's person was not generally seen during his life in this world, the apostle John did claim to have seen it on at least one occasion. In the Prologue to his Gospel, he wrote, 'we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father' (Jn 1:14). When did John - along with others - see 'with the bodily eye' (for so the word 'beheld' generally means) the 'glory' of the Son of God? It must surely have been on this holy mountain. Now, it

is clearly intimated elsewhere that, at some future time, all the Lord's people will see his glory. Although presently concealed to us, the saints in heaven see it even now, in all its dazzling brilliance (John 17:1,5). What happened at the transfiguration was that men were blessed with an early display of that glory.

Third, Peter, another of the witnesses, declared this event to have been a pledge or specimen of our Lord's future kingdom. Writing to believers in Asia Minor, Peter referred to the apostolic testimony - 'we made known unto you the power and coming (i.e. the second coming) of our Lord Jesus Christ'; but as he went on to tell his readers that they were only able to declare such things because they had been 'eyewitnesses of his majesty' (2 Pet 1:16). He was thinking, of course, about the revelation of his divine majesty seen at the time of the transfiguration. He specifically mentions 'the voice' heard 'in the holy mount' and - even more to the point - he refers to 'the excellent (or sublime) glory' (2 Pet 1:17,18). So there can be no doubt that for Peter too the transfiguration was a prophecy of things to come.

Fourth, our Lord revealed to believers the true nature of their sure and certain hope. In the High Priestly Prayer recorded in John 17, our Lord prays that one day his people will be able to enjoy the immediate sight of his unveiled glory. 'Father', he says, 'I will that they also whom thou hast

given me, be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory' (Jn 17:24). As Matthew Henry observes, 'the glory of the Redeemer is the brightness of heaven. That glory before which angels cover their faces, was his glory (John 12:41). The lamb is the light of the New Jerusalem (Rev 21).....The felicity of the redeemed consists very much in the beholding of that glory; they will have the immediate view of his glorious person.....' The transfiguration was only the dawn. In heaven Christ will be seen in full meridian splendour.

Fifth, after his resurrection, the glorified Christ appeared to Saul in a light so dazzling and unbearable that the persecutor was immediately struck blind. 'I could not see for the glory of that light', Paul later recalled (Acts 22:11 cf. 9:3,8,9). Later, he appeared in much the same way to John on the island of Patmos. Hearing a voice, John turned to see the risen Christ and 'his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength'. The apostle tells us that our Lord's appearance at that time was awesome and completely overwhelming. 'When I saw him', he says, 'I fell at his feet as one dead' (Rev 1:16,17). Surely, the transfiguration afforded to the disciples a brief sight of that majestic form in which our Lord now appears in heaven. It therefore showed to them how he will one day be seen by all his redeemed people.

Sixth, everything in that place pointed to

heaven: the holy mount, Christ in glory, white raiment, a luminous appearance, and even people from the other world. In fact, it was so much like heaven that Peter wanted to stay there indefinitely. 'Lord', he said, 'it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias' (Matt 17:4). Luke observes that he spoke this 'not knowing what he said' (Lk 9:33), but his words suggest that his heart could hardly contain its own joy. For Peter, that favoured spot was remarkably like the better land where 'the tabernacle of God is with men' and where throughout eternity 'he will dwell with them' (Rev 21:3). The apostle evidently wanted to construct such 'mansions or 'abodes' as the Lord has promised to his people (Lk 16:9; Jn 14:2,3).

Seventh, it is very significant that the Lord charged his disciples, 'Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead' (Matt 17:9). About twenty years later the apostle Paul was placed under similar constraint. Apparently transported from earth to 'paradise' ('the third heaven'), he enjoyed a 'vision' or 'sight' of the glorified Saviour, and he also heard - probably from the Lord himself - 'unspeakable words'. Describing that experience, Paul says that he saw and heard things 'which it is not lawful for a man to utter' (2 Cor 12:4). The common factors are that these men were confronted with heavenly things and that

they were forbidden to talk about them. In the case of Peter, James, and John, heaven came down to them. In Paul's case, he was taken up to heaven. This confirms our view that the transfiguration was meant to give Christian believers some idea of the blessedness awaiting them in the other world.

Guided by the gospel writers, we may now reverently approach this sacred mountain.

Time

'And after six days...' Something like a sabbath was about to begin. 'Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work', the Law said, 'but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God' (Exod 20:10). 'Seven is the number of perfection and rest; the sabbatical number; after an Hexameron (a group of six) of labour we come to the eternal Sabbath, in which we may hope to be transfigured with Christ' (Dr Christopher Wordsworth).

That ancient sabbath prefigured the future blessed rest when, ceasing from all earthly labour and conflict, believing souls will gather together to enjoy everlasting delight in the presence of the Lord. 'As the apostle wrote in one of his epistles, 'There remaineth therefore a rest (literally, a keeping of a sabbath) to the people of God' (Heb 4:9).

In what respects, then, will heaven be like the keeping of a sabbath?

- Heaven awaits us at the end of our work in this world (Exod 34:21. Jn 9:4; 1 Cor 15:58)
- We need to prepare ourselves for its service (Exod 16:23. Lk 23:54. Ps 26:6)
- There will be rest from sin, misery, and all the wearisome toil of this life (Deut 5:14; Rev 14:13; 21:4)
- The redeemed shall assemble in the eternal temple (Lev 23:3; 2 Thess 2:1; Rev 7:9,10)
- Praise shall arise from the contemplation of God's works, both in creation and in redemption (Ps 92:5 - note the title; Rev 4:10,11; 5:11,12)
- The saints will enjoy immediate and uninterrupted communion with God (Is 66:23; Rev 7:15 - the Greek word translated 'serve' could be rendered 'worship'; Phil 3:3)
- God's glory will be everlastingly promoted, as will the blessedness of all his people (Is 58:13,14; Rev 19:1-7; 21:7)

Place

'...an high mountain apart...' This was probably Mount Hermon, the highest peak of the Lebanon range which lay to the

north of Caesarea Philippi. [Traditionally Mount Tabor was recognized as the site, but this is at least 40 miles from Caesarea Philippi (see Matt 17:13ff) and, furthermore, it appears to have been a military fortification at this time]. Mount Hermon, 10,000 feet high, with a snow-capped peak, would have been at once recognised as the mountain in that neighbourhood. And, on this occasion, it was chosen to be an emblem of heaven.

Even in the Old Testament, Mount Zion, God's earthly dwelling place, was considered as the type or figure of heaven (Ps 3:4; 15:1), but when we come to the New Testament, that mountain is clearly understood to be a heavenly place: 'And I looked, and lo, a Lamb stood on the mount Zion, and with him an hundred and forty and four thousand...' (Rev 14:1) - this is a mystical number for the Church, 12 patriarchs multiplied by 12 apostles, and both multiplied by 1,000. In her poem, Immanuel's Land (based on the last words of Samuel Rutherford), Anne Ross Cousin expressed this truth most beautifully:

The King there, in His beauty,
Without a veil is seen:
It were a well-spent journey,
Though seven deaths lay between:
The Lamb with His fair army,
Doth on Mount Zion stand,
And glory - glory dwelleth
In Immanuel's Land

Heaven is most aptly described as a mountain:

- Heaven is superior to everything in the lower regions of this world (Phil 1:23; Heb 11:16)
- So transcendent are its glories that it is beyond the reach of evil and wretchedness (Matt 6:20; 1 Pet 1:4)
- The Lord's people find it to be the very summit of happiness (Ps 16:11; Matt 25:21)
- The strongest foundation ensures both permanence and security (Heb 11:10; Rev 21:12)
- Perfect peace may be enjoyed in this high and holy place (Ps 37:37; Is 57:1,2)
- Its climate is perfect, with air amazingly pure and healthy (Lk 20:38; Rev 22:1,2)
- There are many delightful views, not only of truth and grace, but of God himself, in the three Persons of the blessed and eternal Trinity (Matt 5:8; Rev 22:3,4)

The Lord

'...And (Jesus) was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light...'

The Lord Jesus will be seen in heaven.

Although he will be the very same person who suffered and died, he will appear with such majesty as becomes the King of Heaven. 'Thine eyes shall see the king in his beauty: they shall behold the land that is very far off (Is 33:17).

In particular, we may look forward to seeing his 'face'. What a blessed sight that will be! Once dreadfully disfigured by pain and grief (Is 52:14), it will then radiate the sum of the divine perfections. True it is that Moses' face once shone so brightly that he had to cover it with a veil, but his was only a borrowed lustre. Christ's face will show an essential and underived excellence, which will be recognised by adoring hosts as one and the same with the Father's. 'The glory which I had with thee before the world was' (Jn 17:5). This surely constitutes the greatest happiness of heaven. We shall be able to gaze upon the lovely face of the One who is both our Redeemer and our King. David, the Psalmist, expressed that very hope when he said, 'As for me. I will behold thy face in righteousness' (Ps 17:15). John confirmed that hope to all the Lord's people, writing, 'his servants shall serve him: and they shall see his face' (Rev 22:3,4).

Even his 'raiment' will be resplendent and royal. In the Scriptures, clothing is often expressive of rank or dignity; but no man has ever worn clothing like this. The robes of his humiliation will be laid aside and he

will be arrayed in garments befitting his nature and station. 'O Lord my God', says one inspired writer, 'thou art very great; thou art clothed with honour and majesty. Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment...' (Ps 104:1,2). Christ will manifest his glory through such a splendid dress. Not his face only but his whole person will be intensely radiant. Light beyond human comprehension will stream from his person and he will appear altogether heavenly (cf. Col 1:12). The sight will not just be wonderful. It will be transcendently grand. Believers will be granted a clear view of 'his glorious body' (Phil 3:21).

This divine Saviour shall stand in the midst of heaven, surrounded by his redeemed people. Evidently he is not just one of the prophets or apostles. He is the Son of God: heaven's true centre, its great interest, and its object of worship. By faith, view him there! He appears 'before' his disciples and the heavenly ones spend all their time talking 'with him' (Matt 17:2,3). You see, he has the most honoured place. The saints in glory simply gather around him. Blessings flow from him alone and to him therefore belongs the praise. Where will Christ be in heaven? He will surely be 'in the midst' (Rev 5:6; 7:15; 21:3). As someone has beautifully said, 'He stands fairer than the children of men in the midst of them as their common centre, as the leaves of a plant are around the stem, as the branches of a tree, the trunk, as the

planets are around the sun, as the children in a family are around their parent'.

Worthy of our further consideration is the 'bright cloud' which 'overshadowed them' (Matt 17:5). In this way, God the Father manifested his presence, even as he did in ancient times (Exod 13:21,22; Ps 97:2). This was not however a dark cloud, like the one seen at Sinai, but a bright cloud, the precious token of his love and favour. The descent of this cloud signified something of the Father's delight in his only begotten Son. This delight was confirmed by the voice which spoke, saying, 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased...' (Matt 17:5). Certainly, there will be in heaven the sweetest kind of fellowship between the three Persons of the sacred and eternal Godhead. The Father refers to the Son as 'mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth' (Is 42:1) while the Son freely confesses the affection he feels, saying, 'I love the Father' (Jn 14:31). Their communion with each other (and the Holy Spirit) will not cease in the future eternity. Christ will be 'set down with his Father in his throne' (Rev 3:21).

Yet it seems that, in heaven, there will also be sweet fellowship between Christ and believers. See what happened on that holy mountain. According to Luke, our Lord engaged in conversation with the others who were present (Lk 9:30,31); and Matthew records how he gracious

ministered to his disciples. Observing their fear, he 'came' and 'touched' them, and said, 'Arise, and be not afraid' (Matt 17:6,7). Does that not intimate that Christ will personally deal with our needs in heaven? As 'minister of the true sanctuary'(Heb 8:2), he will carry on his work there of looking after his people and it is clear that he will attend to their every spiritual need (Rev 7:17).

One further thing remains to be said. We read that, when the disciples looked up, 'they saw no man, save Jesus only' (Matt 17:8). Even so will it be in the heavenly and eternal state. Christ will be all the glory and our eyes will be only upon him.

Jesus, the very thought of Thee
With sweetness fills my breast;
But sweeter far Thy face to see,
And in Thy presence rest.

Jesus our only joy be Thou,
As Thou our prize wilt be;
Jesus, be Thou our glory now,
And through eternity.

His People

'...Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John...and behold there appeared unto them Moses and Elias (or Elijah)...'

Important truths are taught here about the redeemed in heaven. Although each deserves our consideration, we will state them quite briefly at this point:

- After death, the souls of believers go to a definite place. It is expressly called a 'place 'by our Lord (Jn 14:2,3); and while we may not know its precise locality, we may rest assured that it exists somewhere in God's universe but 'up' and 'far above all heavens' (Lk 24:51;Eph 4:10).
- Souls do not die or sleep at death. Like these prophets and apostles, they are very much alive. Christ said that the faithful departed enjoy fulness of life, 'for all live unto him' (Lk 20:38). This is emphasised by the apostle Paul, who says that Christ died for us in order that, living or dying, 'we should live together with him' (1 Thess 5:10).
- Immortal souls will meet together in the presence of the Lord. There was a 'gathering' on that mount; and glorified souls will one day enjoy one another's company in the eternal realm. Scripture speaks of the believer being 'gathered to his people' or 'gathered to his fathers' (Gen 25:8; 35:29; 49:33; Deut 32:50).
- Wonderful revelations will be granted to the departed. Those on the mount saw the cloud and heard the voice. Who knows what the sights and sounds will be in heaven? Certainly there will be manifestations and communications. Believers shall 'see God' (Matt 5:8) and they shall also

hear the 'voice out of the temple of heaven, from the throne' (Rev 16:17 cf. 14:13; 22:3).

- There will also be spiritual and heavenly conversation with one another. In Luke's account, we are told that those present spoke with Christ about 'his decease which he should accomplish in Jerusalem' (Lk 9:30,31). They were speaking together of Calvary. All their talk was about 'the Lord of the hill'. Will it not be exactly like that in heaven? Even in their praise, the saints will sing, 'Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation...' (Rev 5:9).
- In their fully conscious state, believers will enjoy great happiness. Peter exclaimed, 'Lord it is good (beautiful or pleasing) to be here' (Matt 17:4). Some have denied that there will be conscious existence in happiness, but Scripture says, 'Blessed (or, Happy) are the dead which die in the Lord...' - and all must agree that happiness is an emotion capable of being felt (Rev 14:13 cf. Lk 23:43; 2 Cor 5:8; Phil 1:23).
- Once there, people will want only to serve and praise the Lord. One of their number actually suggested that they build 'tabernacles', evidently

desiring a prolonged season of worship (like the Feast of the Tabernacles, Lev 23:33-43). In heaven we shall want nothing so much as to honour the Lord in rapturous ascriptions of praise. 'After this I beheld, and lo, a great multitude, which no man could number...cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb' (Rev 7:9,10).

The Hope of the Gospel

What a gathering that will be! Here, on the mount of transfiguration, Moses and Elijah, representing the Old Testament Church, met with Peter, James and John, representing the New. In the glory of heaven, we are told, the whole of Church of God will be both together and complete. On 'mount Zion' is 'the general assembly and church of the firstborn' (Heb 12:22,23).

Most interesting, too, is the fact that Moses had died long before and his body had been buried in Mount Nebo, east of the entrance of the Jordan River into the Dead Sea (Deut 34:4,5). It was therefore Moses' soul that appeared, yet his soul had assumed a human form and it was evidently recognisable to Peter and the others. Indeed, there seemed to be no great difference between him and Elijah, although the latter did not die, but was allowed to retain his body (2 Kgs 2:9-11). God's Word plainly teaches that, after

death, souls (like angelic spirits) have a definite appearance, so that they can be actually seen (Lk 16:22-24; Matt 14:26; Lk 24:37; Rev 6:9). The apostle John was given a sight of heaven, and he wrote in his book, 'I saw the souls...' (Rev 20:4).

'Yes'?

As for the others, we read 'Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up...' (Matt 17:1). Is that not a very sweet and precious thing? The time will come when the Lord Jesus will 'take' us from the lower world and he will 'bring us up' to a world where our joy will be uninterrupted and without mixture of sorrow, and where the Lord will display the full radiance of his unchanging and everlasting glory. When our darkest hour comes and the last storm begins to break, our beloved Saviour will appear, and say, 'It is I; be not afraid'. And immediately after that, we shall arrive at 'the land whither we went' (Jn 6:15-21). Death holds no fears for Christians. The Lord Jesus will come to 'take' us and to 'bring us up'.

A Final Word

My friends, have you received Christ as your Saviour? Have you entrusted your souls to him for safekeeping? Do you have the sure and certain hope of everlasting life in heaven? These are, without doubt, the most important questions you will ever be asked. Can you answer them from your hearts with a definite and emphatic