

THE TRANSFIGURATION SHEDS LIGHT ON THE CROSS

I. His cross

II. Your cross

God's Word is clear. Not just on some topics or in regard to certain teachings, but in absolutely everything it addresses. You don't have to take my word for that. Take God's. Consider Psalm 119, a psalm that extols the virtues of the Bible. The psalmist writes words we know well, *"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path."* If the Word of God serves as a lamp and a light, then it must be clear, all by itself. In other words, you need not have an IQ of 140 to read the Word of God with understanding. You don't need some great spiritual guru to reveal to you what it means.

However, while the Scripture is clear, our thinking is not always so clear. Because of the weakness of our flesh, we don't always grasp what God says in his Word. There are passages of Scripture that appear to us to be less than clear. Even then, though, we ought not think that it's too hard for us to grasp. One of the basic principles in studying God's Word is this: allow those passages that are clearer (from our perspective) to shed light on those sections that are not so clear to us. Only when we see those difficult passages from the perspective of the clear truths of Scripture will we view them correctly.

This morning we want to apply that principle in a little different way. While the account of the suffering and death of the Christ is crystal clear (who could possibly miss the historical events recorded in the Holy Gospels?), it can easily be misunderstood. You need only consider the widely divergent views held about Jesus' suffering. Some label Jesus a victim (a victim of jealous, insecure Jewish leaders; a victim of sadistic Roman soldiers who enjoyed making Jews suffer; a victim of a spineless leader who could only think about himself). Others view him as a martyr, so convinced of the importance of his cause that he was willing to give up his life for it. Those views fail miserably to capture the essence of the passion of the Christ. That's why we so need the account before us this morning. The Transfiguration sheds light on the cross; it helps us understand the events that will be the focus of our attention during the season of Lent. Let's center our thoughts on that truth: **THE TRANSFIGURATION SHEDS LIGHT ON THE CROSS.**

The synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) all include the account of the transfiguration. Each of those Gospels also makes a clear connection between the transfiguration and an event that happened about a week earlier. St. Luke says it this way: *"About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, James, and John with him and went up onto a mountain to pray."* What happened about eight days before this? If you have your Bible open, you could take a peek at the heading that the NIV gives for the previous section: *"Peter's Confession of Christ."* Jesus asked his disciples what people were saying about him, not in some fit of insecurity, wondering whether he was being appreciated and respected by the common folk, but rather to lead them to a confession. The disciples rattled off the answers: *"Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others that a prophet from the past had come back to life."* Then Jesus got to his point – *"But what about you? Who do you say I am?"* Simon Peter gave a beautiful confession – *"You are the Christ of God."*

Jesus then explained what being the Christ of God entailed. It didn't guarantee a life of ease and the admiration of the multitudes. Rather, it meant that he would suffer and die. If you have your Bible open, look at verse 22: *"The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."* Both Matthew and Mark record for us what Peter then did and said in response. He took Jesus aside and rebuked him for such negative talk. He insisted that nothing of the sort could or would ever happen to Jesus. Jesus had to rebuke Peter for such thinking, even to the point of saying to him, *"Get behind me, Satan. You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."*

Do you see why the Gospels that record the transfiguration all connect it with that event? It revealed how badly the disciples needed the transfiguration to shed light on the suffering and death that Jesus predicted.

As we hear so often in the Gospels, Jesus went up onto a mountain to pray. The exact content of the prayer is not revealed to us, but one could imagine the matters that he would bring to his Father.

Wouldn't there have been a prayer for strength to continue walking the path assigned to him, to live perfectly in place of sinners and then take their guilt and punishment on the cross? Wouldn't there also have been prayer for the disciples who still didn't grasp what he had come into the world to do, that the Father would grant them clarity?

Just as it would be in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter, James, and John (the inner circle of the disciples) were tired – they couldn't keep their eyes open to pray. Instead they drifted in and out of sleep while Jesus prayed. We hear these words in verse 29: *"As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning."* He was transfigured – one of the other gospels uses the word which we have taken into English as "metamorphosis." This was no humble Jesus, looking like anyone else, with nothing in his appearance that people should desire him. No, this was Jesus in his glory; this was Jesus revealing himself as true God who had in no way lost the power given from the divine nature to the human nature. True, he didn't make full use of that power he had; he almost always kept it hidden from the world. But not using it and not having it are two entirely different things. Jesus was always God, with all of the attributes of God and all the power of God.

What were Peter, James, and John to get from this demonstration of power? They were to learn something about Jesus' cross. They were to learn that Jesus would suffer and die, not as a victim of a treacherous plot, not as a martyr committed to a cause, not as a weakling unable to stop such a horrible thing from happening. He would suffer and die because he wanted to suffer and die. And that wasn't because he had grown sick and tired of living in this world with its sin and evil. No, this was because he had a greater goal in mind than simply to make this world a better place in which to live.

The glory in this situation wasn't just in Jesus' changed appearance. Look at verses 30 and 31: *"Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem."* Jesus' departure from this life, his exodus, wasn't something that he had plotted on his own. Nor was it a recently-decided-upon plan. Moses and Elijah knew about it. These two great prophets, representatives of the Old Testament writers, had long spoken about the Christ's suffering and death for sinners.

What were Peter, James, and John to get from Moses and Elijah's discussion with Jesus? They were to learn something about Jesus' cross. They were to learn that

Jesus would suffer and die in keeping with prophecy. He was going to be rejected by men and forsaken by the Father not as some hare-brained scheme that Jesus had just concocted, but in keeping with the plan revealed in Scripture.

There was still more glory revealed than the metamorphosis and the appearance of Moses and Elijah. Look at verse 34: *"While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. A voice came from the cloud, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.'"* Peter, James, and John had all heard about the voice that boomed from heaven when Jesus was baptized, saying, *"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."* Now they heard very clearly, with their own ears, God the Father's own testimony about his Son. Jesus' talk about suffering and dying was not his own plan; it wasn't just the plan recorded in Scripture. This was the plan that the Lord had already devised in eternity to rescue sinners.

Far from being defeatist and dismal in telling his disciples about what would happen in Jerusalem his address to his disciples was actually positive – Jesus was going to carry out the Father's plan for the redemption of a world of sinners.

On Wednesday the season of Lent begins. We will, in mid-week services, listen to the history of Jesus' suffering and death. We will hear how the tide of popular opinion turned against Jesus and how the people that he had helped sought his crucifixion. We will hear about the horrible agony he experienced in the Garden of Gethsemane and the pain he endured as Roman soldiers tore his skin apart with their whips. It will perhaps bring a tear to our eyes, to think that human beings could treat another human being in that way. It may make us sad to think that such a good and upright man could be so brutally abused.

That's why we so desperately need to keep in mind the transfiguration of our Lord. The transfiguration sheds light on Jesus' cross. It helps us understand why he suffered what he did. He suffered because he chose to renounce the full use of his power. He died because he decided to keep his power in his pocket and face the punishment of the world's sins. He suffered and died because of his love for you. When you see the Almighty God hanging on the cross, see there a willing servant. See there someone whose love for you surpasses any love ever shown!

The cross of Christ, then, is God's valentine to you. No one has ever loved you the way Jesus loved you. No one has ever endured for you what he has

endured for you – he experienced the very pain of hell in your place. No one has ever given you what he has given you – the forgiveness of all of your sins and everlasting life. And before you begin to say, “Well, who wouldn’t love me,” listen to what God says about what human beings are like by nature – what you are like on your own. He says that the inclination of your heart is evil from childhood. He says that there is no one who is good; there is no one who does right. For such unworthy people, Jesus went to the cross. That’s love. That’s really what Jesus’ transfiguration teaches us about Jesus’ cross: That he went to the cross because of his love for you.

You’ve probably experienced it somewhere along the line. Everything is going just the way you want it to go. Just as suddenly, it blows up in your face. That’s what happened to the disciples. Jesus had gone from town to town and village to village, impressing people with his preaching and amazing them with his miracles. Everything was going great for him and, therefore, everything was going great for them. They were riding his coattails to greatness. But then it began to blow up in their faces and the blow up came from an unlikely source: Jesus. He hadn’t just talked about the suffering he would have to experience. He talked about the trials that they would face simply because they had a relationship with him. If you have your Bible open, look back to verse 23 of this chapter. After talking about his cross, he said, *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”* They were hoping to achieve greatness by their connection to Jesus; instead they were going to suffer.

Peter, James, and John, from the Lord’s transfiguration, were to learn something about the cross they would be asked to carry – the suffering they would have to endure because of their connection to Jesus. Do you hear in this account some comfort and encouragement for them? Consider the ones that appeared with Jesus – Moses and Elijah in glorious splendor. Both Moses and Elijah endured much for the Lord’s sake. You remember how Elijah ran for his life because of Jezebel’s murderous threats, how Ahab referred to him as the “troubler of Israel,” when all Elijah had done was carry out the Lord’s directives. Those sufferings were just temporary and they were all in the past – now they were in glory.

That’s what the Lord wants you to remember as you take up your cross and follow him. Maybe you will end up losing your life because you confess faith in Jesus. Maybe you will have people make fun of you for your narrow-mindedness or suggest that you have been brainwashed to believe myths. Whatever you

have to endure, you need to know this: Jesus doesn’t promise that everyone in the world will respect and support you because you are a Christian. The exact opposite, in fact. He promises a cross. However, those who carry that cross and remain faithful will enjoy glorious splendor. The Apostle Paul, in Romans 8, says it this way: *“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us.”* The suffering you endure here will last only a short time; there you will know joy like you’ve never experienced forever.

When Peter opened his eyes and realized what he was seeing and hearing, he was overjoyed. This was good stuff! Seeing that Elijah and Moses were leaving, he had to act. This glory needed to continue. So he said the first thing that came to mind: *“Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”* He wanted this to continue and thought, perhaps, the reason that Elijah and Moses were leaving was because there was no place for them to stay, so they needed to get back home. (Cut him some slack – he just woke up. Probably all of us have said things that didn’t make complete sense when we just came to.) Can you blame him for what he said? Who wouldn’t want to spend some time on the top of mountain with Jesus in his glory, in the presence of some all-time Old Testament greats, with God himself providing a sound and light show?

What ultimately was behind his statement was his desire for glory, without the cross. He wanted it his way, instead of the way that the Lord had said it would go. First they would carry the cross. Then they would experience glory. In that order. There was no shortcut to glory.

That’s a lesson we need to keep in mind. First the cross, then the glory. The Apostle Paul said, while encouraging the Christians in Antioch, *“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”* Accept the fact that there is suffering and a cross. Labor on, knowing that the glory will come at the time of the Lord’s choosing.

At the end of this section we read that *“The disciples kept this to themselves, and told no one at that time what they had seen.”* We might wonder how they could keep that to themselves and why they would do it. One of the parallel accounts offers the answer. Jesus instructed them not to tell anyone about what they had seen. He didn’t want anyone to harbor faulty ideas about what he had been sent by the Father to do. He didn’t want to be made king to do the small work of providing prosperity for the people. He was focused on the cross, where he would create peace between a holy God and sinners.

The transfiguration sheds light on the cross you carry. Since the transfiguration demonstrates that Jesus is God in the flesh, and therefore the Savior of the world, your salvation does not depend on how well you carry your cross. He carried the cross of your salvation. When you stumble and fall and you recognize your horrible weakness, you need not focus on that. The price has been paid by Christ. The transfiguration also demonstrates that the Lord crowns with glory all who cling to him in faith. You

will suffer for the gospel, but the glory you enjoy at the end will make that suffering seem minor.

The transfiguration is a perfect precursor to the season of Lent, for the important truths it teaches. It teaches us not to feel sorry for Jesus as he suffers and dies, but rather rejoice that he willingly went to the cross for us. There can be no question at all about his love. And his transfiguration guarantees that the crosses we carry, big as they many seem to us now, will seem small in comparison to the glory we will have in his presence.