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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE FOUR GOSPELS

UNIT 11: THE TRANSFIGURATION

The word “transfiguration” comes from the Latin roots *trans-* (“across”) and *figura* (“form”) – signifying the change of appearance of something or someone. The term is used of the miraculous event recorded in all of the Synoptic Gospels in which Jesus was transfigured before three of his disciples who saw him in radiant, divine glory (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; and Luke 9:28-36). These accounts tell us that Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him up an unnamed “high mountain” where the transfiguration occurred and give us important clues to the meaning of this powerful event.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

Before looking at the transfiguration itself, it is important that we look at what happened immediately before it – as can be seen in Luke's Gospel. After talking to the twelve disciples, Jesus added, somewhat enigmatically: “Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:27).

This saying has sometimes been taken as a prophecy that the end of the world would occur before the first generation of Christians died out. But the simple explanation of this statement is that Jesus was referring to the transfiguration, in which he would appear in divine form to only some of the disciples. This is because, in addition to being a physical kingdom in which he will eventually rule over all the earth, the kingdom of God can be said to be embodied in Christ himself (see Note 1).

In fact, in the very next verse, all three gospel accounts specifically note that the transfiguration occurred about a week (see Note 2) “after Jesus had said these things” when “he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray” (Luke 9:28 BSB) – indicating that this was the fulfillment of Jesus’ saying that some of them would see the kingdom of God.

Which mountain the transfiguration occurred on is not stated in the gospels. We are only told that it was a “high mountain” (Mark 9:2); but there are two major traditions in this regard. An early tradition identifies the “Mount of the Transfiguration” with Mount Tabor (1,886 ft.) in Lower Galilee. This is the location of the so-called Church of the Transfiguration which was built over the ruins of an earlier church dating to the fourth century, but the mountain is not particularly high. Another tradition places the transfiguration on the site of the much higher Mount Hermon (9,232 ft.) on what is today the border between Israel and Syria. This mountain is closer to Caesarea Philippi where the events described as occurring before the transfiguration took place (Matthew 16:13–16), but Mount Hermon is too remote to have been accessible to the crowds that met Jesus immediately on his descent from the mountain (Matthew 17:14; Luke 9:37). Ultimately, of course, which mountain the transfiguration occurred on does not matter or it would have been more precisely identified.

More important by far than *which* mountain the transfiguration occurred on is *what* the mountain symbolized. Most biblical scholars agree that the mountain setting of the transfiguration was clearly meant to link the event with the meeting of Moses and the leaders of Israel with God on Mount Sinai as recorded in the book of Exodus:

Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank. (Exodus 24:9–10)

Note that in the Exodus account, only a number of elders from among the Israelites were allowed to partially see God (probably the fact that they were prostrate on the ground in great fear accounted for the fact that they are said to have seen only God’s “feet” and the shining pavement beneath them!). In a similar way, only Peter, James, and John were selected from among the disciples to see Jesus “as God.” The details of the New Testament event are, of course, different, but the overall concept of a few selected leaders being invited up onto a mountain and being given the opportunity to see God/Jesus in divine form is essentially the same. We will see further connections between the transfiguration of Jesus and this Old Testament event in the next section.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

Many have wondered why Jesus selected only three of the disciples to witness his transfiguration, and it is usually thought that this was to have three witnesses of the event according to Jewish law (Deuteronomy 19:15). But the law indicated *at least* two or three witnesses were necessary to confirm important things, so we might still ask why did Jesus not include more, or even all, of his disciples. The Old Testament story of Moses and the elders of Israel in Exodus 24 helps us understand this situation.

Although some seventy elders ascended Mount Sinai with Moses, only three other people are named in the account.

Notice that although some seventy elders ascended Mount Sinai with Moses, only three people are named in the account (Aaron, Nabab, and Abihu). In the transfiguration event, Jesus takes three of his disciples up the mountain to mirror this situation. Just as Moses’ face shone after meeting with God on Sinai, we are told that Jesus’ face and clothes shone after praying on the mountain of the transfiguration (Luke 9:29). The basic circumstances of the New Testament event mirror those of the Old Testament event and show Jesus to be not only like Moses, but also far greater than Moses.

We are told that during the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appeared and were talking with Jesus. This was, of course, because these two individuals were the most revered servants of God among all the Old Testament figures. While Moses, the great lawgiver, personified the Law, Elijah, the archetypal prophet, personified the Prophets. But it is significant that they appear with Jesus not as equals, but as assisting him in preparation for his departure from earth. We see this in Luke’s words: “They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31). In this verse, the word “departure” is the Greek word *exodos* (“exodus”), showing that Moses, who led the exodus of Israel from Egypt, and Elijah, who also experienced his own departure or exodus in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11), were uniquely qualified to assist Jesus in discussing his own soon-coming departure.

Luke's account of the transfiguration mentions several details that the other gospels do not – including the fact that Peter made the suggestion to put up shelters or “booths” just as Moses and Elijah were departing: “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” (Luke 9:33). It is difficult to understand what the purpose of the shelters Peter suggested would have been. Although it is often suggested that they were perhaps related to the small temporary booths the Jews erected each year for the Feast of Tabernacles – commemorating when the Israelites dwelt in temporary dwellings in the wilderness (Leviticus 23:34–42) – such booths hardly fit the circumstances of the transfiguration; and it is most likely, as Mark and Luke observe, that as a result of being overwhelmed by what he saw, Peter simply “did not know what he was saying” (Mark 9:6; Luke 9:33). Peter was, in fact, cut short:

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. (Matthew 17:5–8)

It is interesting that the heavenly voice focused the disciples away from Peter's understandable confusion and onto the purpose of what they were seeing and hearing – the true nature of Jesus which was being revealed, and the admonition that they should listen to him.

Over the centuries there has been much theological debate regarding whether Moses and Elijah were resurrected from the dead to meet and talk with Jesus, but the gospels make it clear that such was not the case, and that what Peter, James, and John saw was a vision of these individuals rather than Moses and Elijah themselves. This was confirmed in the words of Jesus to the disciples directly after the event: “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead” (Matthew 17:9 ESV; and see Note 3). The disciples evidently obeyed this command (Luke 9:36), but the fact that Jesus had only invited three of his disciples to witness the transfiguration may have sparked the unfortunate discussion that apparently soon followed regarding which of the disciples was the greatest (Luke 9:46) and may provide some background context for the request of James and John to sit at Christ's right and left hand in the kingdom of God (Mark 10: 35–45).

CONCEPTS AND APPLICATIONS:

As has become clear in this unit, the transfiguration of Jesus was vitally significant in three important ways: 1) it revealed the true nature of Jesus; 2) it showed the superiority of Jesus' words to all earlier revelation; and 3) it prefigured the glorious return of Christ.

The True Nature of Jesus

The Greek word translated “transfigured” in our Bibles is *metamorphoó* (like the English word metamorphosis) which means “to be changed or transformed.” But it does not suggest a change from the outside, rather a change on the outside that comes from the inside. Paul uses the same word in Romans 12:2 to tell us “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” – an outer change in our behavior that comes through being changed within. In the transfiguration on the mountain, Jesus' outer appearance was likewise changed so that Peter, James, and John were given a glimpse of his true glory. The event doubtless gave these disciples a better realization of the divine nature of Christ, though they probably did not fully understand it until later, after the resurrection. But experiencing Christ's divine appearance – even in what was doubtless a subdued form – was something they never forgot.

Years later, the apostle John was remembering the experience when he wrote in his gospel, “We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only” (John 1:14). The apostle Peter also spoke of the event when he wrote: “We were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Peter 1:16).

As we saw in the previous unit of this course, the miracles of Jesus identified him as the one like Moses, the Elijah to come, and the promised Messiah. In an even more overt manner, the transfiguration identified Jesus with these three prophesied figures, and, of course, as the actual Son of God (Luke 9:35).

The Superiority of Jesus to Earlier Revelation

Just as important as the last point – and perhaps even more important – is the fact that the transfiguration also showed that the words of Jesus were greater than those of even the greatest Old Testament figures. We may take this for granted, but for the Jews of the first century this was a revolutionary fact that required divine demonstration. So the heavenly voice that spoke regarding Jesus in this event said “This is my Son whom I have chosen; listen to him” (Luke 9:35). And “listen” clearly meant more than simply to listen at that moment, but in the wider sense of listening to Jesus even more than they might listen to what was said by Moses and Elijah and the books of the Law and the Prophets that they personified.

This was not only because Jesus was the Son of God and obviously of far greater importance than Moses or Elijah, but also because Jesus was the One to whom they pointed – the One who fulfilled both the laws and the prophecies of the Old Testament. So the transfiguration stressed the superiority of Jesus’ words to all earlier revelation from God. In that sense, the transfiguration also pointed to a new era in redemption history. God was making it clear to the disciples who witnessed the event that his way of life is based on his word as personified in Jesus Christ, rather than the traditional beliefs and teachings of the Jewish religious leaders (see Note 4). As has been wisely said, the transfiguration ultimately showed that whatever Jesus says is far more important to our salvation than the minutiae of Moses’ law or the vagaries of prophecy. We must certainly respect and look to the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures, but even above them we must “hear him!”

Prefiguring the Return of Christ

In addition to showing the three disciples who witnessed the transfiguration a glimpse of the glory Jesus had with the Father before his incarnation (John 1:17:5), the event also prefigured Jesus’ glorious return at his second coming. Years later, Peter tied the two events together when he wrote:

For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. (2 Peter 1:16–18)

Even at the ascension Jesus was not said to appear in his glory, so the transfiguration event allowed the three disciples to witness and understand something of what that would be like. Peter uses the words majesty, honor, and glory to describe that coming event, not just theoretically, but based on his own experience.

The story of the transfiguration is a relatively short one in the gospels in which it is found, but that should not prevent us from seeing the profound importance of the event. The transfiguration was unquestionably a unique event in which God allowed three disciples to experience more of Jesus’ true nature and identity than anyone had previously. There is no question that the experience would have strengthened their faith in preparation for the work they were later given to do, and the challenges they would soon endure.

* Note 1: For example, although Luke 17:21 is translated “The kingdom of God is within you” in the King James Version and some other translations, the Greek is better translated “in your midst” or “among you,” and this was clearly Jesus’ meaning in the context of his statement in that and other passages in the gospels.

* Note 2: The Gospels of Matthew and Mark state that it was “after six days” (Matthew 17:1; Mark 9:2) that the transfiguration occurred, but their accounts and that of Luke are all simply saying that it occurred “about a week” later.

* Note 3: Although a few Bibles translate this as simply “what you have seen,” the Greek word found in the gospels for what the disciples had witnessed is used in the Septuagint Greek translation of the Old Testament with reference to whatever is seen in *vision* by a prophet. Thus, the great majority of English versions translate the word “vision.”

* Note 4: This is not to say, of course – as was discussed in the previous units of this course – that Jesus was somehow bringing in a different law to the one God had revealed to Israel, but that the words of Jesus regarding the interpretation of the law superseded the human interpretations of many of the Jewish teachers.

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

Write one or two paragraphs summarizing the significance of the presence of Moses and Elijah in the transfiguration.

Beneath the Surface:

The Greek word *metamorphoo*, meaning “changed in form” or “transformed” in the story of the transfiguration, is also used in Romans 12:2, “be *transformed* by the renewing of your mind.” In what way does the transfiguration story help illuminate what Paul had in mind by being “transformed”?

Everyday Applications:

In what way do some of the disciple’s interactions following the transfiguration suggest that the human response of pride can occur even regarding things that God generously helps us to see or understand? How might that problem possibly affect us and how can we guard against it?

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