

Luke 9:27-36

The Transfiguration

The “glory of the LORD” is a common theme in Scripture. Beginning with the Old Testament, the glory of God has been revealed. A few occasions include . . .

to Moses when the Israelites complained of food, “it came about as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the sons of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud” (Exodus 16:10).

when Aaron and his sons were ordained, “Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting. When they came out and blessed the people, the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people” (Leviticus 9:23).

on Mount Sinai when God gave the Israelites the Law, “¹⁵then Moses went up to the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶The glory of the Lord rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; and on the seventh day He called to Moses from the midst of the cloud” (Exodus 24:15-16).

when the tabernacle was finished, “then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Exodus 40:34).

when Korath and others rebelled, “it came about, however, when the congregation had assembled against Moses and Aaron, that they turned toward the tent of meeting, and behold, the cloud covered it and the glory of the Lord appeared” (Numbers 16:42)

when the temple was finished, “¹⁰it happened that when the priests came from the holy place, the cloud filled the house of the Lord, ¹¹so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord” (1 Kings 8:10-11).

Of course the most wonderful manifestation of the glory of God was the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. As the writer of Hebrews stated, “¹God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, ²in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. ³And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power” (Hebrews 1:1-3).

One day, of course, Jesus will return in His full glory. His declaration of this is recorded by Matthew, “²⁹But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ³⁰And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory” (Matthew 24:29-30).

The Context

After the disciples had returned from being sent out by Jesus, he had counseled and taught them. Then, surrounded by thousands, He performed a great miracle of creation by feeding them all from a very insignificant portion of food. After that, Jesus was able to get them alone for a period of time, and He began to question them as to Who they thought He really was? Upon their confession that they truly believed Him to be the Messiah (though they did not yet fully understand all the ramifications of the fact), Jesus exhorted them as to the deep and profound commitment involved in discipleship. Then, to not leave them too overwhelmed with the expectations of what was demanded, He promised, “but I say to you truthfully, there are some of those standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of

God” (v. 27). The “some of those standing here” will soon be understood to be “Peter and John and James” (v. 28), and the “until” was a week later.

Jesus did not delay in keeping His promise, for “some eight days after these sayings, He took along Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray “ (v. 28). Some have seen a discrepancy between Luke’s narrative and that of Matthew and Mark, who both seem to indicate that the interval of time was six days, not eight - “six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves” (Matthew 17:1), “six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves” (Mark 9:2). The accounts can be easily reconciled by considering that Luke is adding in the day Jesus made the announcement and the day of the Transfiguration itself to achieve his total of eight days.

The particular mountain is not known for certain. Church tradition suggests Mount Tabor, but at the time of Jesus it had a fortress atop it that probably would not have allowed Jesus and His disciples the privacy needed for the event. Mount Hermon is suggested by others, but it is farther to the north in largely Gentile territory, and Mark’s parallel account says that “when they came back to the disciples, they saw a large crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them” (Mark 9:14) indicating this was in an area of largely Jewish population. A third option is Jebel Jermak (Jermuk) in Galilee. It is the highest elevation in the area (4,000 feet) and near Capernaum where Jesus went next.

Peter, John, and James were the closest of Jesus’ disciples. Ever the rabbi, Jesus had come to fulfill the Law not abolish it, so He followed the requirements of the Law regarding testimony, “on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed” (Deuteronomy 19:15). This was a tool for accountability that Jesus also affirmed to His disciples, “but if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed” (Matthew 18:16). Jesus knew that what these men were about to experience would be more unbelievable than anything they had seen so far. This was a greater miracle than feeding thousands, driving out demons, healing the sick, or even raising the dead. These men were to get a glimpse of the “kingdom of God” in all its glory.

The Moment

It happened while Jesus was praying. We have no indication that it was expected, or foreknown, by Him. In either case, “while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and His clothing became white and gleaming” (v. 29). Matthew wrote that Jesus was “transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun” (Matthew 17:2). A more literal translation would be that his “external appearance” was changed into “something other.” In fact, even “His clothing became white and gleaming” (v. 29). That it flashed like lightning would be another, more literal way, to put it. It must have hurt the eyes. It was a vivid foreshadowing of the second coming of Christ, “when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne.” (Matthew 25:31).

And Jesus was not alone, for Luke records that “two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah” (v. 30). They also were “appearing in glory” (v. 31). That is, like Jesus, they had glorified bodies that were clearly recognizable. This does not mean that they looked exactly the same as they did

on earth. After all, there was no reason to expect that Peter, John, or James would have known what Moses and Elijah looked like (as opposed to say David and Isaiah, or Ezekiel and Joseph). But still they had personal identities. They were not spirits or ethereal entities. Anyone who had known them would have recognized them for who they were.

That they had bodies is worth noting, since Daniel 12:1-2 says that glorified bodies are given after the tribulation. Therefore, either these bodies were temporarily given by God for the occasion, or Moses and Elijah received their glorified bodies early.

That there were two men was again in accordance with the Law's requirements that there be witnesses. And their conversation was recorded as well. They "were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (v. 31). That is, they were speaking of the upcoming passion of Jesus. That Jesus spoke openly of His death with the ancient prophets informs us of the planned, premeditated nature of the atonement. It was a fact clearly known in heaven before it was performed on earth. It was a divine plan. It had been prepared in eternity past. Even these Old Testament heroes, now in the presence of God, had come to understand God's plan of redemption. How wonderful it must have been for them to have learned of it.

Why Moses and Elijah? Why did these two men merit such a privilege? Commentators suggest that there were three reasons. First, each of these men departed from this world in an unusual way. First, Moses died and was buried by God, Himself, "so Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord. ⁶And He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor; but no man knows his burial place to this day" (Deuteronomy 34:4-5). Later his body was fought over by the Archangel Michael and Satan, "but Michael the archangel, when he disputed with the devil and argued about the body of Moses" (Jude 9). Also, Elijah had not died, but rather he had been swept up in a chariot of fire while his servant Elisha watched, "as they were going along and talking, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire which separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven" (2 Kings 2:11).

Second, these men were two witnesses who could be thoroughly trusted by Jews. Moses was the great leader who had brought the chosen people through the wilderness and been given the Law by God, Himself. Elijah was one of the most respected of the prophets.

Finally, they each represented significant aspects of the Hebrew nation - the Law and the Prophets. Moses was ever identified with the Law, so much so that it was often referred to as the Law of Moses in Scripture (Joshua 8:13, 1 Kings, 2:3, etc.). Elijah had perhaps the most famous battle over the veracity of the Law, and what it implied about the true God, with the false prophets of Baal. That story remained one of the most riveting moments in Hebrew history.

The Disciples Awaken

While this was taking place, "Peter and his companions had been overcome with sleep" (v. 32). A preview of Gethsemane, it seems, although the wording suggests that they were neither disinterested, nor distracted, but that they fell asleep out of sheer weariness. But "when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him" (v. 32). How did they know it was Moses and Elijah?

Were they introduced? Was it intuition? Did they infer from the context of the conversation? Did the two men look like Moses and Elijah were supposed to look (carrying the Law, for example)? They must have been told so at some point either during the conversation or after.

There is no indication how long the interview lasted. But eventually, Moses and Elijah appeared to go, so Peter suggested “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles: one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah” (v. 33). Peter, ever eager to offer a suggestion or insight, asserted himself. First, he recognized that what he was seeing was invaluable. It was good for them to be there, because they could now give testimony to the kingdom of God that no other living being could. They could verify that the experience was real.

Second, Peter wanted to build a tabernacle for each of the holy participants. Why? Perhaps he wanted to commemorate the moment, but it seems as if there is more to it than that. Church tradition has the event taking place during the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast of Tabernacles was described in Leviticus. ⁴¹“You shall thus celebrate it as a feast to the Lord for seven days in the year. It shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations; you shall celebrate it in the seventh month. ⁴²You shall live in booths for seven days; all the native-born in Israel shall live in booths, ⁴³so that your generations may know that I had the sons of Israel live in booths when I brought them out from the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 14:41-43). This feast, celebrated in the fall, coincided with the harvest. It commemorated the salvation of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. It was seen by the Jews as a foretaste of a better future, when the Messiah would come and “My people will live in a peaceful habitation, and in secure dwellings and in undisturbed resting places” (Isaiah 32:18).

Like all Jews, Peter had been waiting for these times. He had recently acknowledged Jesus to be the Messiah. He knew the Feast of Tabernacles was to continue to be celebrated during the millennial kingdom, “then it will come about that any who are left of all the nations that went against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of Hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Booths.” (Zechariah 14:16). And, of course, as Malachi 4:5-6 states, the coming of Elijah was to inaugurate this kingdom, ⁴⁵“Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. ⁴⁶He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.” Putting all of this together, Peter came to the wrong conclusion. He believed the millennial kingdom was beginning now.

Perhaps a bit groggy because he had just been awakened to the shock of seeing Jesus, Moses, and Elijah in transfigured glory, Peter was “not realizing what he was saying” (v. 33). The kingdom was not to begin in this fashion. There was not to be some shortcut, bypassing the atonement. Sin could not be excused, it had to be paid for. There had to be the cross.

Jesus had to be the Messiah of Isaiah 53:3-8,

³He was despised and forsaken of men,
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
And like one from whom men hide their face
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.
⁴Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;

Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.
⁵But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.
⁶All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him.
⁷He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth.
⁸By oppression and judgment He was taken away;
And as for His generation, who considered
That He was cut off out of the land of the living
For the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due?"

Peter eventually learned, through the experience of Calvary, what kind of Messiah Jesus had come to be. He wrote later, "¹⁶For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. ¹⁷For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, 'This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased' - ¹⁸and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain." (2 Peter 1:16-18).

The Voice of God

Peter heard the voice of God. Luke writes that while Peter was offering his ideas, "a cloud formed and began to overshadow them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud" (v. 34). The cloud was a frequently used vehicle by which God manifested His glory.

Exodus 13:21, "The Lord was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night."

1 Kings 8:10-11, "¹⁰It happened that when the priests came from the holy place, the cloud filled the house of the Lord, ¹¹so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord."

Naturally the disciples were afraid. That is the invariable reaction to encountering the presence of God, even in veiled form. Matthew gives more detail writing, "they fell face down to the ground and were terrified" (Matthew 17:6). No doubt they were. No doubt we would be as well. "Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!" (v. 35). An echo of the words heard at the baptism of Jesus, these added the command to listen to Him. Jesus had important things to say about His upcoming death, and the disciples needed to pay close attention.

The wording was yet another confirmation of Jesus as the Messiah. For example,

“I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord:
He said to Me, ‘You are My Son,
Today I have begotten You’” (Psalm 2:7).

“Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold;
My chosen one in whom My soul delights.
I have put My Spirit upon Him;
He will bring forth justice to the nations (Isaiah 42:1).

“the Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him” (Deuteronomy 18:15).

The Command

“When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone” (v. 36). Suddenly all was quiet and normal. Jesus was there looking like Jesus. Moses and Elijah were gone. The cloud was gone. One must have expected Peter, James, and John to come running down the mountain shouting to the others about what they had seen. Surely all must know of this indisputable proof that the kingdom of God was at hand. Instead, “they kept silent, and reported to no one in those days any of the things which they had seen.” (v. 36).

Why? The gospel of Matthew supplies the answer, “as they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, ‘tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.’” (Matthew 17:9). This comment no doubt raised more questions than it answered, but that was the command nonetheless.

What they had seen would have been difficult for anyone not there to grasp, let alone believe. Also, it might have prompted the Romans, or even the Jewish leaders to accelerate their attacks of Jesus. There would come a time when the story could be told, and Peter (2 Peter 1:16-18), John (John 1:14) and James all did.

Take Aways

Let us appreciate this is an act of grace. The disciples were trying to absorb the costs of discipleship laid out by Jesus in His recent teachings. To encourage them, God chose to give them a sneak preview of coming attractions. God always knows when we need encouragement. Let us be grateful for that.