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Faithful Sayings

BULLETIN OF
THE OL-
SEN PARK
CHURCH OF
CHRIST

Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM

9:30 AM

10:30 AM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Patrick Ledbetter

Brady McAlister

Jeff Nunn

Deacons:

Ben Hight

Blake McAlister

Walker McAnear

Sam Nunn

Lance Purcell

Justin Smiley

Trevor Yontz

Evangelist:

Kyle Pope

The Meaning of the Transfiguration

By Kyle Pope

The transfiguration of Jesus speaking with Moses and Elijah is one of the most wondrous events recorded in the life of Jesus upon earth (Matt. 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36). How are we to understand the significance of this beautiful event? It would not be until after the resurrection that those who witnessed it revealed what they had seen, yet the impact of this event on Peter was unmistakable. Explaining his teaching years later he wrote:

For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain (2 Pet. 1:16-18, NKJV).

Peter offers the transfiguration as a piece of evidence that confirmed the validity of his own faith. Of the other witnesses, James was martyred early in church history (Acts 12:1-2) and, John did not record this event in his gospel. John may, however, indirectly refer to it in the opening words of his gospel, declaring, **"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth"** (John 1:14).

The transfiguration demonstrated a number of fundamental truths upon which the gospel of Jesus Christ is established. H. Leo Boles summarizes, "Three great doctrines were taught in the transfiguration,

namely, the Divinity of Christ, the end of the Jewish covenant, and the resurrection" (*A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*. Nashville: The Gospel Advocate Co., 1952, p. 357). Let's explore this suggestion regarding what the transfiguration teaches about these three great doctrines.

1. The Divinity of Christ

Marvin Vincent argues that the transfiguration itself demonstrated a temporary unveiling of the underlying "essential" character of Jesus's "divine nature" (*Word Studies in the New Testament*. Vol. 1. Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, 1985, p. 100). If so, this event alone revealed that Jesus was more than just a man—He was God "**manifested in the flesh**" (cf. 1 Tim. 3:16, NKJV). Yet, beyond this fact we can also recognize what the heavenly proclamation revealed about the nature of Christ. The identification by God the Father of Jesus as "**My beloved Son**" was heaven's testimony to the divine nature of Jesus.

Occasionally Scripture identifies others as "sons of God." For example, angels are identified as "**sons of God**" (Job 1:6; 2:1), as well as those faithful to the Lord (Gen. 6:2,

4), those who obey the gospel (Gal. 3:26-27), and those who will be "**sons of the resurrection**" (Luke 20:36). It is a different thing, however, to be identified as "**the Son (singular) of God.**" This is seen in the demand of the High Priest at Jesus's trial, "**tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God!**" (Matt. 26:63). This distinction roughly equates to our use in English of the definite article—"the" in contrast to the use of an indefinite article—"a" or "an." The definite article indicates an exclusive status (i.e. "the *only* Son of God") while indefinite article indicates one of many (i.e., "a son of God"). Koine Greek had no indefinite article "a" or "an" and often did not use the definite article as we do in English. The context determined if the sense was definite or indefinite. For example, in the confession of the centurion at the cross and the apostles after Jesus calmed the storm, the sense is clearly definite, that Jesus is "**the Son of God (Theou huios)**" but there is no definite article in the Greek (Matt. 14:33; 27:54). On the other hand, when Paul declared that "**the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God (ton huion tou Theou)**"—with the definite article (Rom. 8:19). In Paul's words, while the meaning is definite in the sense of separation (i.e., those who are saved) it is not teaching that the saved will be Deity as is true of "the Son of God."

The divine declaration "**this is My beloved Son**" echoes the Messianic pronouncement of Psalm 2:1-12. This Psalm connects God's "Anointed," i.e., His Messiah or Christ (*Christou*—LXX), with His "Son." The Holy Spirit revealed, "**The LORD has said to Me, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten You'**" (Ps. 2:7). The Psalm ends with the command, "**Kiss the Son**" (Ps. 2:12). This clearly connects the promise of a Messiah with One who was the Son of God in a special and unique sense. A manuscript from Qumran, *4QFlorilegium* (4Q174), shows that Jews from the first century connected Psalm 2 with Messianic expectation. Herbert Bateman sums all of this up succinctly:

What then can we conclude from God's declaration of Jesus as "Son" at the baptism and again at the transfiguration? First, both include a divine declaration to or about Jesus from Psalm 2:7. In keeping with first-century Jewish expectations for an Anointed One, we can safely say "Son" in Psalm 2:7 was seen as another way to refer to "the Christ" or God's chosen king ("Defining the Titles 'Christ' and 'Son of God' in Mark's Narrative Presentation of Jesus." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50.3 (Sept. 2007): 537-559, p. 549).

2. The End of the Jewish Covenant

The appearance of Moses and Elijah, particularly in light of the declaration from heaven that would follow it, affirmed Jesus's superiority to the Law and the Prophets. Unlike modern divisions, the Jews grouped the Hebrew Scriptures into three parts: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (cf. Luke 24:44). We often see in Scripture, however, that the Old Testament revelation as a whole could be described with reference to only two of these sections—**“the Law and the Prophets”** (Matt. 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; Luke 16:16; John 1:45; Acts 13:15; 24:14; 28:23; Rom. 3:21). The early church commentator Origen explained this as a use of the figure of speech known as *synecdoche*, by which a part of something is used for the whole. He wrote that in the transfiguration there appeared, “Moses, the law and Elijah, in the way of synecdoche, not one prophet only, but all the prophets holding converse with Jesus” (*Commentary on Matthew* 12.38). Moses had declared in the law, **“The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear”** (Deut. 18:15). Moses was allowed to see the fulfillment of this as he talked with Jesus. Although Elijah did not write any books of prophecy, as one of the foremost Old Testament prophets he symbolized the work and purpose of the prophets in general. In addition to immediate temporal prophecies, the prophets had foretold the coming of the Messiah. How fitting that one of the prophets was allowed to see Jesus on the earth—the fulfillment of what had been revealed to them.

While the heavenly proclamation **“Hear Him”** constitutes a type of rebuke to Peter, it is also a powerful declaration of Christ's relationship to the Old Covenant. Boles writes, “The withdrawal of Moses and Elijah was suggestive; a greater than both of these remained” (356). David McClister suggests:

The transfiguration was a statement about the authority of Jesus. On that mountain was demonstrated that it is now Jesus alone who has authority over men. Moses and Elijah served only a temporary purpose in the plan of God (cf. Rom. 3:21) (“Understanding the Transfiguration.” *Guardian of Truth* 40.8 (Apr. 18, 1996): 20-22, p. 21).

The declaration on the mountain, followed by the visible absence of the representatives of *the Law and the Prophets*, declared to the entire world from that point onward that Christ alone is now the *only* way to a relationship with God. The Old Testament is no longer the binding standard of faith and conduct. Christ's doctrine, the New Testament, is now the standard by which all mankind will be judged.

3. The Resurrection.

The suggestion of Boles that the transfiguration testifies to the resurrection draws an inference about something that is not specifically addressed from the evidence of what is clearly demonstrated: the eternal nature of the soul. Jesus's discourse with Moses and Elijah settles once and for all any question about the existence of man's soul after death. These men who had lived centuries before His time on earth had not passed out of existence. Rather, they continued to live. Stephen Williams, echoing this argument, suggests that in this fact, the transfiguration teaches us about the resurrection:

Jesus forces people to consider as follows: Is it conceivable that God, having steered the patriarchs through so many ills and

sufferings by binding Himself to them in a covenant relationship, should, at their death, simply abandon them to eternal decay? The logic of God's relationship with them and His power on their behalf requires the resurrection ("The Transfiguration of Jesus Christ (Part 1)." *Themelios* 28.1 (Autumn 2002): 13-25 p. 20).

Alfred Edersheim draws the same conclusion seeing in the transfiguration a declaration of how Christ's true nature offered promise of deliverance from death. He notes, "It points us forward to that transformation of which that of Christ was the pledge, when 'this corruptible shall put on incorruption'" (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Vol. 2. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907, p. 101).

Many have struggled to understand the form of Moses and Elijah as they appeared to the disciples. Zerr supposed that Elijah (since he never died) was in an "eternal state" while Moses (having died) was in an "in-

termediate state" (*Bible Commentary: Matthew–Romans*. Vol. 5. Bowling Green: Guardian of Truth Foundation. 2006, p. 61). The text indicates no difference in the nature or appearance of either man. Meyer argues that, if the appearance of Moses and Elijah had not been "visionary" in light of Deuteronomy 34:5-6, a bodily resurrection on the part of Moses would "have to be presupposed" (*Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew*. Vol. 1. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1880, 1.439). That assumes that what the three disciples saw were material bodies. The text does not indicate that. When God allowed Samuel to come out of Sheol to rebuke Saul there was no indication that a bodily resurrection took place. Nonetheless, his appearance was similar to that of his former body (cf. 1 Sam. 28:7-25). The same is true of the rich man, Lazarus, and Abraham in Hades (cf. Luke 16:19-31). Hoyt Houchen, in his study, "Shall We Know One another in Heaven?" points out, "The body of Moses turned to dust and Elijah had been changed. These men were clothed with different bodies from what they had here on earth, but they appeared to the disciples and were talking with Jesus. They were both recognized" (*Guardian of Truth* 35.20 (Oct. 17, 1991) 623-624, p. 624). Paul, in speaking of the future resurrection, indicates that there are different types of "bodies" including "terrestrial" and "celestial" (1 Cor. 15:40). Franz Delitzsch may have it right discussing the relationship between the soul and the body, claiming, "It continues, . . . in the other world in that form which, as the living principle of the body, it had assumed. Its appearance remains a corporeal one, although immaterial" (*A System of Biblical Psychology*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1867, pp. 504-505). What is clear in all of this is the fact that the presence of these two Old Testament figures, conscious, living, and capable of thought and discourse foreshadows that time at the final judgment when there will be **"a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust"** (Acts 24:15).

