

Prelude To The Passion.

Text: Matt 17:1-9

Suggested Hymns:
155TLH, 37, 747 289, 368

- 1) The Transfiguration As Preparation
- 2) The Transfiguration Prepared The Disciples For Their Role Of Service And Suffering
- 3) The Transfiguration Is Our Orientation To Service And Suffering

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 17:1-9, *¹ Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; ² and He was transfigured before them.*

His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. ³ And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. ⁴ Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

⁵ While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" ⁶ And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them and said, "Arise, and do not be afraid."

⁸ When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. ⁹ Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead." (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Life certainly has its ups and downs. Any human being who hasn't personally experienced this hasn't really begun to live.

The disciples certainly had their ups and downs in the days and weeks that preceded the final journey to Jerusalem and the crucifixion of our Lord. They

were catapulted from one traumatic experience to another as the events preceding and following our text clearly indicate.

At Caesarea Philippi the training of the disciples reached a climax when Simon Peter made the majestic confession: ***“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,”***¹ and Jesus said to Peter: ***“On this rock I will build My church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.”***

Then after this high spiritual experience Jesus told them He must go to Jerusalem and suffer and be killed and on the third day be raised. Peter stumbled at the scandal of the cross. He rebuked Jesus, saying, ***“God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to You.”*** Jesus therefore had to put Peter down again with the stern rebuff: ***“Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.”***

While the disciples are still reeling from the announcement of His death, a few days later Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain, and they are privileged to witness His glorious transfiguration, to stand in the presence of what Peter later in his second epistle called the ***“Excellent Glory.”***²

Peter wanted to stay on the mountain because everything was so pleasant and so perfect there. But they had to come down again, and from the mountain move on toward Jerusalem and the cross.

Later they would understand that the Transfiguration of Jesus was merely a prelude to the Passion, which was the gateway to the greater glory of His resurrection and His triumphant ascension into heaven.

In its wider context, let us consider the transfiguration of Christ as a *Prelude to the Passion*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Transfiguration As Preparation

Today is “Transfiguration Sunday,” and in that position on the church calendar it serves well to manifest the glory of the Christ as God’s Son and the Saviour of all people.

Today we are invited to view this Gospel in an even wider context. We are invited to view its relation to the primary purpose for which Christ came into the world: to atone for mankind’s sin on Calvary’s cross.

The Transfiguration helped Christ for the coming ordeal on Calvary. It helped and prepared the three key disciples for what was to take place in Jerusalem and the role they were to play in the church.

We may also learn from this how our mountaintop experiences with Christ should strengthen and prepare us for the sufferings of life.

The Transfiguration prepared Jesus for the Passion. The Transfiguration had deep meaning for Jesus Himself. In the desert, after the great temptation, angels ministered to Jesus.

In Gethsemane an angel came to strengthen Him. On the Mount of Transfiguration Moses and Elijah along with God the Father offer Jesus strength and encouragement for the bitter struggle ahead.

The Father gave His unqualified approval of the perfect life of Christ by proclaiming at His baptism, *“This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”*³ This same solemn declaration of the Father now becomes even more significant as the time of His death draws near. The Father reassures the Son that He is not only well pleased with His life but also with His imminent humiliation, suffering, and death.

God’s great act of saving all men through the cross and Passion of His Son was to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but it was nonetheless a part of God’s gracious plan of salvation for all people.

Moses and Elijah were present as representatives of the Law and the Prophets. Here, then, were the representatives of the Old Covenant, honouring Jesus who was introducing the New Covenant, whose New Covenant would fulfil and supersede the previous one.

The transfiguration of Christ was His solemn installation to His sufferings. To complete the installation, the former mediators of the Old Covenant must resign their office, and the real Mediator must be definitely nominated. So the voice from the cloud says, *“This is My beloved Son ... Hear Him!”*

No longer just listen to Moses and the Prophets, but listen to Christ. Hear Him! With such verifications of His Messianic mission from His Father and from Moses and Elijah serving as the glorious prelude, the Son was ready for the way of sorrows and the cross.

2. The Transfiguration Prepared The Disciples For Their Role Of Service And Suffering

The transfiguration of Christ also had deep meaning for the disciples and fortified them for the role they were to play in the church. *“He was transfigured before them.”* Here God gave the disciples the most imposing, the most impressive, the most convincing proof possible that God was well pleased with His Son and that Jesus was indeed the Messiah of their hopes.

The full impact of this mountaintop experience came later. But it came. *“We beheld His glory,”* John calls out many years later.⁴ *“We were eyewitnesses of His majesty,”* Peter later tells his readers. *“We heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.”*⁵

Peter then affirms: *“We have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed.”*⁶ Hear Him! Listen to Him! There is salvation in no one else.

Blessed are those who hear Jesus, who hear His Word and keep it. The Transfiguration thus became a strengthening and inspiring prelude to the primary mission of the disciples—a mission which also included sacrifice and suffering.

As eyewitnesses to His glory, the completion of His redemptive work for their salvation, and the power of His resurrection, the disciples were now ready to carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth, counting it an honour to suffer persecution and even death for the sake of Christ and His Gospel.

We read in Acts 5:41–42, ⁴¹ *So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.* ⁴² *And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.*

3. The Transfiguration Is Our Orientation To Service And Suffering

On the Mount of Transfiguration Peter, James, and John received a preview of heavenly glory. They were privileged to see a display of Jesus’ divine glory, the glory that was His as the Son of God.

Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus. The three disciples recognised Moses and Elijah right away because God gave them that knowledge. Moses and Elijah discussed with Jesus His approaching suffering and death and

resurrection, which would also reassure the disciples that Jesus gave Himself into the hands of His enemies knowingly and deliberately.

As Jesus spoke of His approaching suffering and death, the disciples wondered whether this appearance of Elijah had anything to do with the common expectation of Elijah's reappearance before the Messiah would establish His kingdom. The Lord had promised through the prophet Malachi, "*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.*"⁷

So Jesus explained to them again that John the Baptist was the promised second Elijah, just as he had told them on a previous occasion.⁸

John the Baptist was recognised as a great prophet at first, but before long he was arrested, imprisoned, and beheaded by King Herod. In a similar way, many would recognise Jesus as a great prophet, but they did not accept Him as the Son of God and the promised Messiah.

Finally, they would also arrest Him and put Him to death. So, clearly Jesus spoke to His disciples about His impending suffering and death, but the disciples were also so caught up in the popular, false ideas about the Messiah's kingdom so that they did not believe that Jesus really meant what He so plainly said.

Later they would remember and be reassured that everything had taken place according to God's plans and that Jesus really was the Messiah, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

The effects of the Transfiguration have not diminished from that day to today. It is the same for His disciples today. By His grace we today are privileged to be eyewitnesses of His great glory revealed more fully to us in His Word. We are thus strengthened and inspired for our mission of service and suffering.

We spend much time with Jesus on the mountaintop. Each Lord's Day there are those "*sweet moments, rich in blessing, which before the Cross we spend.*"

The hymnist wrote, as we sang at the beginning of our Divine Worship Service this morning:⁹

Sweet the moments, rich in blessing,
Which before the cross we spend,
Life and health and peace possessing

From the sinner's dying Friend.

Here we find the dawn of heaven
While upon the cross we gaze,
See our trespasses forgiven,
And our songs of triumph raise.

There is that life-giving encounter with Jesus in the blessed Sacrament of the Altar. We too would like to remain on the mountaintop with Him, but we cannot.

This is the prelude to our primary task; it is a fitting-out period. Jesus bids us to leave the mount and come with Him to the plain.

The hymnist wrote,¹⁰

How good, Lord, to be here!
Your glory fills the night;
Your face and garments, like the sun,
Shine with unborrowed light.

2

How good, Lord, to be here,
Your beauty to behold,
Where Moses and Elijah stand,
Your messengers of old.

5

How good, Lord, to be here!
Yet we may not remain;
But, since You bid us leave the mount,
Come with us to the plain.

There is a world to be conquered. There is a Gospel to be preached. There are souls to be won. There is suffering to be endured. We are now ready. For we too are "*eyewitnesses of His majesty*" through His Word. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Matthew 16:16

² 2 Peter 1:17

³ Matthew 3:17

⁴ John 1:14

⁵ 2 Peter 1:16, 18

⁶ 2 Peter 1:19

⁷ Malachi 4:5

⁸ Matt 11:14

⁹ TLH 155

¹⁰ Hymn 747