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The Unveiled Son

(Mark 9:1–8)

1

And Jesus was saying to them, “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.” Six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; and His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them. Elijah appeared to them along with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” For he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified. Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!” All at once they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, except Jesus alone. (9:1–8)

The high point of testimony in Mark's gospel came in the previous section when Peter, in response to Jesus' question, "But who do you say that I am?" declared, "You are the Christ (8:29)." Everything in Mark that came before Peter's declaration leads up to it; everything that followed afterward flows from it. To acknowledge that Jesus is "the Christ [the Messiah], the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16), is to make the correct judgment concerning Him. In this section, Peter's confession is confirmed. What he affirmed by faith would be verified by the transfiguration of the Lord so that His divine glory became visible.

No sooner had Peter made his confession than Jesus "began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (v.31). Aghast and dismayed, Peter, in his impudent ignorance, dared to rebuke the Lord (v.32), and in turn was sharply rebuked by Him. Jesus forcefully told him, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's" (v.33).

Like the rest of the Jewish people, the notion of a murdered Messiah was incomprehensible and unacceptable to the Twelve. Later in the ninth chapter, Mark noted that again Jesus "was teaching His disciples and telling them, 'The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later. But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him'" (vv.31-32). In Luke 18:31-34 Jesus again

took the twelve aside and said to them, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things which are written through the prophets about the Son of Man will be accomplished. For He will be handed over to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and mistreated and spit upon, and after they have scourged Him, they will kill Him; and the third day He will rise again." But the disciples understood none of these things, and the meaning of this statement was hidden from them, and they did not comprehend the things that were said.

Peter and the rest of the apostles eagerly anticipated the glory of the kingdom, but not the scandal of the cross, which Paul described as a stumbling block to the Jewish people (1 Cor. 1:23; cf. Gal. 5:11). After giving the apostles the crushing, disappointing news of His coming death, Jesus encouraged them by telling them that "the Son of Man" will one

day come “in the glory of His Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38). It was difficult for the disciples to accept that Jesus would die; it would be even more difficult for them when it happened. Thus, **Jesus was saying to them, “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death** (a Hebrew colloquial expression for dying) **until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.”** In promising a preview glimpse of the **kingdom** (the Greek word can be translated as “royal splendor”), Jesus was speaking of His transfiguration (cf. Matt. 16:28-17:8; Luke 9:27-36), which would be witnessed by Peter, James, and John, and would move their faith to sight. The Lord’s visible manifestation of His divine glory in the transfiguration was the most transcendent miracle recorded in the New Testament prior to the Lord’s resurrection. It bolstered the apostles’ confidence in His coming revelation of glory.

When God appeared visibly in the Old Testament, He always did so in some form of light, as at the initiation of the priestly service (Lev. 9:23), to Israel (Ex. 16:7, 10), to Moses (Ex. 24:15-18; 33:18-23), at the completion of the tabernacle (Ex. 29:43; 40:34-35), at Israel’s rebellion at Kadesh-barnea (Num. 14:10), at the exposure of the sins of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Num. 16:19) and the people’s subsequent rebellion against Moses and Aaron (v. 42), at Meribah (Num. 20:6), at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:11; 2 Chron. 7:1), and to Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:28; 3:23; 10:4, 18; 11:23). Habakkuk wrote of a future day when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2:14). In each of those instances, the purpose of God’s appearance was to strengthen the people’s faith.

But the Lord Jesus Christ, the God-Man, was the pure revelation of God’s glory. In 1 Corinthians 2:8 Paul referred to Him as the “Lord of glory,” while in 2 Corinthians 4:6 the apostle wrote “of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” The writer of Hebrews described Jesus as “the radiance of [God’s] glory” (1:3), and James referred to Him as “our glorious Lord Jesus Christ” (James 2:1). But with the exception of the transfiguration, that glory was veiled during His life and was revealed in His miraculous signs, not His visible appearance.

This experience, when they “saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father” (John 1:14), transformed these three men.

Nearing the end of his life, Peter recalled the manifestation of Christ's glory that they witnessed:

For 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 eye-witnesses of His majesty. For 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"—and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. (2 Peter 1:16-18)

Mark's account of Jesus' transfiguration may be divided into four sections: the Son's transformation, the saints' association, the sleeper's suggestion, and the sovereign's correction.

THE SON'S TRANSFORMATION

Six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; and His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them. (9:2-3)

Mark, along with Matthew (17:1), indicates that the transfiguration took place **six days** after the promise Jesus gave, recorded in verse 1. Luke, however, placed it "some eight days" **later** (9:28). There is no contradiction; Luke included the day the Lord made the promise and the day of the transfiguration, while Matthew and Mark referred to the six days between those two events.

Peter and James and John made up the inner circle of the apostles and were the Lord's most intimate friends. They alone witnessed Jesus' raising of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:37) and went with Him into Gethsemane (Mark 14:33). Jesus took them with Him in accord with the Law's requirement that truth be confirmed by two or three witnesses (Deut. 17:6; cf. Matt. 18:16; 2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Tim. 5:19; Heb. 10:28).

The Lord **brought them up on a high mountain by themselves** to pray (Luke 9:28). That **mountain** likely was Mt. Hermon (c. 9200

feet in elevation), the highest peak in the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi, where Peter's confession took place (Mark 8:27). Some have suggested Mt. Tabor, but it is too far south of the region of Caesarea Philippi and not a high mountain but rather a hill (it is less than 2000 feet in elevation). Mark, in an understated description of the most striking revelation of God up to that point, notes simply that Jesus **was transfigured before them**. It happened while the disciples were asleep (Luke 9:32), most likely from sorrow at the prospect of the Lord's death, as would later be the case again in Gethsemane (Luke 22:45).

Transfigured translates a form of the verb *metamorphoō*, from which the English word "metamorphosis" derives. It appears four times in the New Testament, always in reference to a radical transformation. Here and in Matthew 17:2 it describes the transfiguration, while in Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18, it refers to the transformation in the lives of believers brought about by salvation. Christ's nature, of course, could not change; only His appearance. The brilliant glory of His divine nature blazed forth through the veil of His humanity, and His face "became different" (Luke 9:29) and "shone like the sun" (Matt. 17:2; cf. Rev. 1:16). In addition to Jesus' face, **His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them**. Matthew notes that "His garments became as white as light" (17:2), while Luke says that they "became white and gleaming [lit. 'to flash or gleam like lightning']" (9:29). It was that blazing glory that Peter, James, and John saw when they awakened (Luke 9:32).

Jesus had possessed essential glory from all eternity (John 17:5) but veiled it until this moment. His glory will be fully revealed to the whole world in the future when "the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and . . . 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" (Matt. 24:30; cf. 25:31 and the description of that event in Rev. 19:11–16).

THE SAINTS' ASSOCIATION

Elijah appeared to them along with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus. (9:4–5)

Elijah and **Moses** existed as glorified spirits in heaven (Heb. 12:23), awaiting the resurrection of their bodies at the end of the future tribulation (Dan. 12:1-2), yet they appeared in visible, glorious (Luke 9:31) bodies. They evidently either received those bodies temporarily for this occasion, or God gave them their permanent resurrection bodies early. The apostles would not, of course, have recognized the two glorified men, so either they introduced themselves, or the Lord did.

As the disciples became fully awake (Luke 9:32), they realized that Elijah and Moses were **talking** with Jesus about His death (Luke 9:31). As noted earlier, Christ's death is the truth for which the transfiguration was intended to prepare the disciples. Jesus was to die, but that could not negate God's plan and the glory that was to come. The testimony of these two very important men confirmed the reality that the Lord Jesus would die.

Moses was the most honored leader in Israel's history, who led the exodus from Egypt when God rescued the nation from captivity. Although he had the authority of a king, he never had a throne. He functioned both as a prophet, proclaiming God's truth to the nation, and as a priest, interceding before God on behalf of His people. He was the human author of the Pentateuch, and the agent through whom God gave His holy Law.

While Moses gave the Law; Elijah was its foremost guardian and fought against every violation of it. He battled Israel's idolatry with courage and powerful warnings of judgment. His preaching was validated by miracles (1 Kings 17-19; 2 Kings 1-2), as Moses had done in Egypt and during Israel's forty years in the wilderness. There was no law-giver like Moses and no prophet comparable to Elijah. They are the most reliable possible witnesses to Christ's suffering and glory. Nothing could have brought the apostles more assurance and confidence that Jesus' death fulfilled God's purpose than hearing it from Moses and Elijah.

THE SLEEPER'S SUGGESTION

Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one

for Elijah.” For he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified. (9:5–6)

Never at a loss for words despite his recent rebuke (Mark 8:32–33), Peter interrupted the conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah and blurted out, **“Rabbi, it is good for us to be here.** Matthew records that Peter addressed Jesus as “Lord” (17:4); Luke that he addressed Him as “Master” (9:33). Peter’s use of all three titles reveals that he repeated his request and how overwhelmed and humbled he and the others were. Holy fear mingled with exhilarating wonder at this glorious and incomprehensible experience. His suggestion, **“let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah,”** reflects Peter’s tenacious desire that the suffering of the cross be avoided. He wanted the three to stay there permanently in their glorious state and establish the kingdom on the spot. According to Luke’s account, Peter spoke as Moses and Elijah began to leave. He saw his dream of seeing the kingdom established slipping away and made a last, desperate attempt to stop that from happening. But he **did not know what to answer; for they became terrified.** His fear caused him to express what was uppermost in his mind and, as Luke adds, not realizing what he was saying (Luke 9:33).

Several things prompted Peter’s suggestion. He had wanted all along to see the kingdom established, and Jesus’ promise in verse 1, “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power,” had intensified his hope that it soon would be established. That hope reached its peak when he awoke to see Jesus in a transfigured state with Moses and Elijah present in glorified form. Those two prophets could certainly lead the people of Israel into the kingdom, and Elijah was associated with the coming of the kingdom (Mal. 3:1; 4:5–6; see the discussion of 9:9–13 in chapter 2 of this volume). The timing of this event fueled Peter’s hopes. The transfiguration took place in the month of Tishri, six months before the Passover. At that time the Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths), which commemorated the exodus from Egypt, was being celebrated. What better time, Peter may have reasoned, for the Messiah to lead His people out of bondage to sin and into His righteous kingdom than during the Feast of Tabernacles (Zech. 14:16–19)?

THE SOVEREIGN'S CORRECTION

Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!" All at once they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, except Jesus alone. (9:7-8)

Interrupting Peter's interruption of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, God arrived. A bright **cloud**, signaling His glorious presence, **formed** and began **overshadowing them**. When **a voice came out of the cloud** and said, "**This is My beloved Son**, "My Chosen One" (Luke 9:35), "with whom I am well-pleased" (Matt. 17:5), **listen to Him!**", the disciples "fell face down to the ground and were terrified" (Matt. 17:6). The Father's command that they listen to the Son was a direct rebuke of Peter. He commanded Peter and the others to be silent and listen to what Jesus had to say about His death.

When the Father had finished speaking, "Jesus came to them and touched them and said, 'Get up, and do not be afraid'" (Matt. 17:7). **All at once they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, except Jesus alone.** The preview of the kingdom was over; it was not to be established at that time. What they had witnessed was not a vision in the mind but an experience of God's actual presence unprecedented since Adam and Eve experienced it in the garden before the fall. Though not without further misgivings and misunderstandings, the disciples would follow Jesus to the cross and then devote the rest of their lives to preaching "Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness" (1 Cor. 1:23; cf. 2:2; Gal. 3:1).

Like their Lord, Christians will suffer for the sake of the gospel before experiencing the glory of heaven; it is "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). "We suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him" (Rom. 8:17), because "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). Yet, we understand that "to the degree that [we] share the sufferings of Christ, [we] keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory [we] may rejoice with exultation" (1 Peter 4:13), knowing that "our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus

Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself” (Phil.3:20-21).