

22. The Transfiguration

[This study includes frequent use of the term “Son of God.” If this disturbs you to the point that you do not want to continue reading or listening to this series, we would ask you to first read the series of articles entitled “[Could God have a son?](#)” before hopefully resuming this study of the life of Jesus.]

In Matthew 16, Jesus asked his apostles what men thought of him. “He asked His disciples, saying, ‘Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?’ So they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets’” (Matthew 16:13,14). We see by this response that the people had a favorable opinion of Jesus. He was associated with certain men of God who preceded him, men who were respected for their courage and faithfulness... men who were without doubt sent by God. Most Jews had respect for Jesus but they were ignorant of his true greatness. Simon Peter, on the other hand, had a better understanding of Jesus’ identity. When Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he was, Peter told him, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16).

What Peter said was true. But as we will see in this study, Peter does not seem to have understood the implications of his confession. He did not yet understand the extent of Jesus’ greatness. Afterward, the Lord gave him an experience that must have made it clearer.

In Matthew 17:1-8, we have the story of the transfiguration of Jesus:

“Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. 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.’

“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!’ And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. But Jesus came and touched them and said, ‘Arise, and do not be afraid.’ When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.”

THE GREATNESS OF JESUS WAS NOT RECOGNIZED BY MEN, NOT EVEN BY HIS APOSTLES

The adversaries of Jesus, that is to say the religious leaders, were not willing to put Jesus on the same level as Moses, the one who had given them the law at Mount Sinai about 15 centuries earlier. In John 9:28,29, they said to a man whom Jesus had healed, “You are His disciple, but we are Moses’ disciples. We know that God spoke to Moses; as for this fellow, we do not know where He is from.” In the same way, others did not see the extent to which Jesus was special, either. In Luke 10:31,32, Jesus said to them:

“The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.”

Peter and the apostles certainly had more respect for Jesus, but even they had difficulty exalting Jesus to the point that he deserved. When they saw Jesus on the mountain with Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest people in all of the Old Testament, Peter said, “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” (Matthew 17:4). Peter surely thought he was giving honor to his master by placing him on a level with the great Moses and Elijah. He would prepare a tabernacle for each of them. This would perhaps be a sacred tent to honor them or to commemorate this great

event. But if Jesus was, as Peter had confessed, the Christ, was it truly fitting to give to two mere men, faithful to God though they might have been, the same honor as to Jesus? Had the disciples truly grasped the greatness of Jesus?

THE GREATNESS OF JESUS SURPASSED THAT OF OTHER MESSENGERS OF GOD

Here is why the voice of God Himself was heard to emphasize that this vision was not to honor Moses or Elijah, but Jesus, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased. Hear him!” And when the bright cloud lifted, the disciples saw only Jesus. There was no doubt about the one of whom the voice spoke.

Remember that God spoke to Moses face to face, in a very direct manner, more intimately than he had done with any other prophet. When Moses died, it was God Himself who buried him. Elijah was one of only two men in the Bible who did not experience physical death. When Elijah finished his task on earth, God caused him to go up to heaven in a whirlwind, with a chariot and horses of fire. But Moses and Elijah did not have as great a rank as Jesus did. The author of the book of Hebrews made the contrast in Hebrews 3:5,6: “And Moses indeed was faithful in all His house as a servant... but Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.” In the first chapter of his epistle, he made the contrast between all the other prophets and the Son of God:

“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.”

In speaking of their scriptures, the Jews often referred to the law and the prophets. Moses, the great legislator, represented the law. Elijah, the courageous prophet who had defied the evil king Ahab

and his queen Jezebel, represented all the prophets who had called Israel to obedience to the law of God. The law and the prophets (in other words, the Old Testament) were the authority for the Jews. But in the transfiguration, which revealed briefly the true glory of Jesus, God made it known that it was not Moses or the prophets who had authority, but Jesus the Son.

It is absolutely necessary that people understand that it is the new covenant, the New Testament, the word of Christ and his apostles, that is in full vigor today. The Old Testament is still very important, and it must be studied, but it was temporary. It served its purpose. It is the New Testament that must direct us as Christians. Paul made the contrast between the two covenants in 2 Corinthians 3:6-11. He called the Old Testament “the letter,” and he called the Gospel of Christ “the spirit.”

“[God] also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious.”

The message of the transfiguration of Jesus is that his glory and his authority exceed that of messengers of God who preceded him, all those of the Old Testament.

THE GREATNESS OF JESUS DEMANDS THAT WE OBEY HIM

The voice from Heaven said, “Hear him.” In this context, to hear implies “to obey.” There is no point in confessing “Jesus is the Christ; the Son of the living God,” if one is not ready to respect his authority in all things. Jesus himself said in Luke 6:46, “But why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the

things which I say?" He also said in John 12:48, "He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day."

The Hebrews epistle reminds us in the strongest of terms that disobedience to the law of Moses resulted in a condemnation to death. Refusing to submit to Christ deserves a worse fate than death, in view not only of his death but of the supreme sacrifice that he made for us sinners. It says:

"Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?" (Hebrews 10:28,29)

CONCLUSION

During his ministry on earth, Jesus led a very humble life. He didn't have rich clothing. He didn't live in a palace. He didn't command an army. As Isaiah 53:2 predicted, "For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him." It was not easy, even for Peter and the other apostles,

to fully grasp his glory. Soon they would see Jesus completely humiliated on the cross of Golgotha. To see Jesus shining in his celestial glory, if only for a few minutes, must have strengthened their faith and made them understand more deeply what the words "the Son of the living God" really mean.

This experience left a memory with Peter that he kept to the end of his days, as he said in his second epistle (1:16-18):

"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."

The voice of God had said, "This is my beloved Son... hear him." Even if we have not personally seen Jesus glorified on the mountain of his transfiguration, he is the one we have to listen to today, through the New Testament. To repeat the words of Hebrews 1:1,2, "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son."