

THE TRANSFIGURATION - LUKE 9:28-36

Interviews of Jesus #8

Nature has many fascinations. One of the most interesting is the development of the butterfly. Perhaps you have been to the butterfly exhibit at Meijer's Gardens. Sandy and I once visited a butterfly farm in England and saw these breathtakingly beautiful creatures at every stage of development - some even eating their way out of the cocoon. It was fascinating.

The butterfly's life begins in an inconspicuous way. From a tiny egg laid on a leaf or stem a small, wormlike creature called a caterpillar hatches. That sometimes hairy, small, often pesky creature with 6 eyes and an equal number of legs is not that unusual in itself. But then after just several weeks of a meager, plant eating existence, the caterpillar encases itself in a tough skinned home called a chrysalis where a metamorphosis begins. During this pupa or resting stage, the caterpillar actually becomes a soft, damp, seeming lifeless mass. It doesn't have any eyes, ears, wings, legs - it doesn't seem to have anything. It is just a seemingly lifeless blob. But after a period ranging from a few weeks to a few months, a new creature is formed and the chrysalis begins to break apart. The newly formed butterfly begins to eat its way to freedom. And it is actually this process of eating and struggling its way out of the chrysalis that trims it down. Shortly, out of the damp prison grave of the chrysalis comes one of the most beautiful creatures known to this earth - the delicately colored butterfly.

The word *metamorphosis* that is used to describe the development of the butterfly is an interesting one. It actually comes from the word that is used to describe the interview that we are going to look at this morning. Metamorphosis literally means a complete change in form. It comes from the Greek word *metamorphomai* that both Matthew and Mark choose to describe the Transfiguration of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We have spent the past 7 Sunday Mornings looking at some interviews that Jesus conducted while he walked here upon this earth. As we come to the final 2 that we will be studying as we approach the Easter season, we want to look at a couple of interviews that introduce the theme of this special season to us.

The interview that took place during Christ's transfiguration is one of the most fascinating in the entire life of our Lord. In this interview, Jesus actually spoke with 2 men who had been dead for hundreds of years - Moses who died about 1400 B.C. and Elijah who was taken up to heaven in the mid 9th century B.C. I wish that we were given many more details of the conversation that took place between the Lord Jesus Christ and these Old Testament legends - but the 3 disciples slept through most the interview so they didn't hear what was being said. This often overlooked event that is recorded by all 3 of the synoptic gospels is critical in understanding those final days as the Lord Jesus Christ walked the path to Calvary to give his life as atonement for our sins.

There are 3 times when it is recorded that the Lord Jesus Christ took only 3 disciples with him for a special event.

a. the first time that Jesus took Peter, James and John alone with him was when he went into the room of the 12 year old daughter of Jairus who had just died. These 3 disciples along with the parents were the only ones who actually witnessed Jesus raising Jairus' daughter from the dead.

b. the final time when Jesus took Peter, James and John away with him was in the Garden of Gethsemane on the eve of his death. It was at this time that the Lord was preparing himself for that ultimate sacrifice that was coming up. He took the 3 away from the other disciples and urged them to pray with him. Christ then went a little ways further and prayed until he sweat great drops of blood.

c. The transfiguration is sandwiched in between those other two occasions. It was at this time that the Lord Jesus took Peter, James and John up onto a mountain with him. Like the time in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus took them with him to pray. And just as they would do in the Garden, the 3 disciples fell asleep during the prayer meeting. Because they slept, they missed the metamorphosis of Jesus and most of his conversation with Moses and Elijah.

The theme that ties all 3 of these special occasions together is death.

*In the first scene, Jesus demonstrated himself to be the Lord over death as he raised the daughter of Jairus back to life. In an apparently hopeless situation, he quietly and calmly takes charge and brings new breath and warmth back into the cold, lifeless body of this young lady. He certainly proves himself to be the master of death.

*In the Garden scene, the Lord Jesus Christ demonstrates himself to be willing to die. He pled with His Father to take the cup of death from him. But finally, he bowed himself to the will of the Godhead and yielded himself to death. *Nevertheless, your will be done.* There is no question after the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane that the Lord Jesus Christ willingly gave up his life for us. So He was the Lord of death, but he was willing to die.

*Now this theme of death ties the mount of Transfiguration scene with the other 2. For there are 2 great lessons concerning Jesus Christ and his death that are seen here. And we want to look at those briefly this morning.

*The first lesson is that the Lord Jesus Christ didn't have to die - this is seen clearly from his metamorphosis.

*The second lesson is that the Lord Jesus Christ did have to die - this is seen clearly from the appearances of Moses and Elijah. Let's look at these seemingly contradictory lessons together this morning.

1. When Peter, James and John woke from their sleep, they were shocked by an amazing sight. It is

interesting to compare the 3 gospel accounts of Christ's metamorphosis.

*Matthew describes the change that came over Jesus Christ using the analogy of light. Matthew 17:2 says, *There he was transfigured before them (there's our word metamorphomai). His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.*

*Mark describes the change that came over Jesus Christ using the illustration of a dry cleaner or a launderer - someone who cleans clothing. Mark 9:2b-3 says, *There he was transfigured before them (the word metamorphomai again). His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.*

*In the account in Luke that we read earlier, he describes the change using the analogy of lightening. *his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning (Luke 9:29).*

As we put all of these accounts together, we just begin to be able to imagine the impression that was made on these 3 disciples as they suddenly woke up out of their deep sleep. They had gone to sleep under the thick cloak of darkness that would have enveloped that Palestinian mountain. They woke up to this blinding light.

One thing was crystal clear. Something had happened to the Lord Jesus Christ. He was not the same. He was different. It was as if he were in a different realm altogether. His appearance was completely different - he shone like a bright light. And he was talking with 2 people who had been dead for hundreds of years.

It was clear that the Lord Jesus Christ had the ability to transcend this life into the next one. It was clear that he didn't need to die. He could just walk from this earthly existence into the eternal realm. He could move from this earthly body with all of its limitations to an eternal body that could transcend time and space. He could converse with people who had been dead for hundreds of years.

Now it is very important that we remember this Transfiguration scene when we move to the Garden of Gethsemane scene. In just a couple of weeks, we will be having our community Good Friday Evening service and we will commemorate that time when the Lord Jesus Christ agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was there that he finally submitted himself to the death of a criminal - execution by crucifixion. But he didn't have to die. He was the Lord over death as he had proved when he gave new life of the daughter of Jairus. And he had the ability to just walk from this earthly realm into his heavenly state. He did not have the curse of sin upon him until he hung upon the cross of Calvary and God the Father placed it there. Christ didn't have to suffer the wages of sin that we all must endure. The wages of sin is death. We all have sinned. So we all must die. We don't have a choice. But he did have a choice. He was the spotless lamb of God. He was born of a virgin without a sin nature. He never committed a sin in his entire life. His body

knew no sin until it was nailed to the cross of Calvary and God made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin.

So one of the very important lessons of the Transfiguration was the simple fact that the Lord Jesus Christ did not have to die.

2. But now let's move to the second lesson - and that involves the interview that occurs on that mount - the interview that we never hear. All we are told concerning this interview is found in Luke 9:31 when it simply says *they spoke about his departure*. The conversation that Jesus, Moses and Elijah had was about the upcoming departure of the Lord Jesus Christ from this earthly realm. In other words, the 3 were talking about Jesus upcoming death.

One of the questions that comes into our minds as we study this scene is why did God the Father send Moses and Elijah to talk about this subject with Jesus. Why did Christ have this interview with 2 men who had been dead for hundreds of years? I think the answer to these questions comes both from the background of these 2 men and the context that this transfiguration scene has in the life of Christ.

It is clear from the gospel accounts that this mount of Transfiguration was a turning point for the Lord Jesus Christ. I want you to notice a little phrase that occurs after this scene later on in Luke 9. It is found in verse 51. It simply says, *Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem*. The KJV renders this, *Jesus steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem*. Now what was going to happen to Jesus this last time when he went to Jerusalem? He was going to die. But something happened to him after he met with Elijah and Moses. After he met with these 2 men, Christ became very focused. Before he had journeyed about from town to town, teaching, performing miracles, talking with people. But now, he set his course towards Jerusalem to accomplish the atonement for which he had come.

Realizing this change in Christ's demeanor, the purpose for the mount of Transfiguration becomes much clearer. Moses had been the great law-giver. He was the one who had received the ceremonial regulations from God himself on Mt. Sinai. He was the one who instructed the priests concerning the regulations for all of the different kinds of sacrifices - the burnt offerings, the grain offerings, the peace offerings, the sin offerings, the guilt offerings. He was the one to whom God had communicated all of the differing regulations concerning the holy days, including the Day of Atonement - that 1 day each year when the High Priest would put on his special clothing and sacrifice the 2 goats on behalf of the nations of Israel. The one goat would be a living sacrifice, having all of the sins of the nation confessed over it and then being sent away from the camp into the wilderness as the scape-goat. The other goat would be killed and its blood would be taken into the holy of holies to be sprinkled on the mercy seat that sat on top of the ark of the covenant.

Moses would have known these regulations better than any other person who had ever lived for God

had personally told him these things and Moses had internalized them so well that he had written them down and personally instructed his brother Aaron as to how to carry every detail out. So now God sends Moses as his representative to speak with the lamb of God who was about to become the sin offering for the world on this last great day of Atonement.

Elijah was the lionhearted prophet of God. He lived much later than Moses did during a time of spiritual and national decadence. The people, by and large, had refused to follow God's law by the time Elijah was born. So Elijah had been commissioned to call the people back to the observance of God's commandments. He, like all of the other prophets who would follow him, was commissioned to invoke repentance from the people, and then to direct their attention towards the future to the time when the Messiah would come. He was the leader among the prophets who had predicted the coming of the Messiah. The prophets had given hundreds of details concerning how the Messiah was to live and die, what he would do and not do, what he would say and what special miracles he would perform. It was critical that all of these prophecies be fulfilled in every detail so that the very Word of God would be authenticated.

So the one who had received the law and had given it to the people and the one who was the leader among the prophets who had predicted the coming of the Messiah were both sent by God the Father at this critical time in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. And after meeting with them, the Lord Jesus Christ walked down from that mount of Transfiguration and resolutely set his face towards Jerusalem to go to the cross.

It appears clear to me that the mount of transfiguration was a time of briefing for the Lord Jesus Christ. It was the time when the battle plan was drawn up for the greatest conflict in all of human history. Remember, Christ was not only fully God, but he was also fully man. He learned and grew in knowledge and wisdom the Bible says. So it is likely that this scene was really the beginning of the whole Passion scene - for it was at this time that Moses and Elijah and the Lord Jesus Christ talked about his upcoming death, how it was to be accomplished, what had to be fulfilled through it - and the 3 disciples who had been privileged to be called up on that mount with Christ to be a part of this greatest of all historic events, missed the interview because they were sleeping.

That's the reason for Simon Peter completely misinterpreting the whole purpose and sticking his foot in his mouth when he requested for 3 tents to be made - one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah - so that they could all stay there a while. Luke puts it kindly when he says Peter just didn't know what he was saying. Isn't Peter a comfort to us? He often said the wrong things. And even when he didn't know what to say, he would say something. And God even used Peter in a wonderful way to build his kingdom. But on this occasion, God the Father had to rebuke Peter from heaven in an audible voice. God's purpose was not for them to settle down there on the mount of transfiguration. If Peter wouldn't have been sleeping, he

would have known that. God's purpose was for Christ to begin his journey towards Jerusalem to make the sacrifice for sin that man had longed for since Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. And God's purpose in having Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus was not to put all 3 men on the same level. No, Moses and Elijah were there to talk with the unique Son of God about his unique role in providing the sin sacrifice for the human race. That's why God thundered from heaven, *this is my son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.*

So in a sense, while the Lord Jesus Christ didn't have to die - because he was sinless, he had the freedom to move from the earthly realm right into the glorious realm of heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ really did have to die - he had to die if the sacrificial system of the Old Testament were to be completed, he had to die if the divine words that the prophets had spoken were to be fulfilled, he had to die if the sins of the human race were to be paid for.

One day, early in the 18th century, a German artist by the name of Stenberg was walking through the marketplace of his home town when the face of a Gypsy girl attracted him. He invited her to come to his studio where he painted his famous *Dancing Gypsy Girl* painting. While she was modeling for his painting, the girl noticed another painting in corner of the studio that he was also working on. It was a painting of Christ's crucifixion. She remarked to the artist, *He must have been a very bad man to have been nailed to a cross like that.*

No, the artist replied, he was actually a very good man. In fact, he was the best man who ever lived. He died for all men.

The gypsy girl looked surprised. *Did he die for you?* she asked.

That question by this humble peasant girl led the artist to write at the bottom of his finished painting of the crucifixion these words, *this I did for thee; what hast thou done for me?*

When Stenberg's painting of the crucifixion was finished, it was hung in the gallery of Dusseldorf. Many years later, a young German count paused before the crucifixion painting as he was meandering through the gallery. The painting moved him greatly. But the words at the bottom struck straight to his heart. *This I did for thee; what hast thou done for me?* This young German aristocrat whose name was Nicholas Zinzendorf gave his heart to the Lord Jesus Christ. He then went on to start a missionary minded group who called themselves the Moravians. It was a Moravian who witnessed to John Wesley leading him to the Lord Jesus Christ. And Wesley, of course, started the Methodist denomination.

As we approach this Easter season, it is very important that we realize clearly that Jesus Christ was not just a helpless martyr. He was not a well-meaning person who got caught in a series of circumstances that just got out of control. No, Jesus Christ didn't have to die. He could have walked right from this earth back into heaven if he would have wanted to. When the crowds taunted, *if you are the son of God, come down off*

of the cross and save yourself, Jesus could have done it. In fact, he claimed that he could have called legions of angels to come and deliver him if that had been his choice. Jesus Christ didn't have to die on Calvary's cross. But Jesus Christ did have to die if we were to have any hope for our futures. For it is only through His death that we can have forgiveness from our sins. So the Lord Jesus Christ was willing to die, even though he didn't have to, so that we might have forgiveness of sins and life everlasting.