

JESUS' TRANSFIGURATION

Mark 9:2-13

Key Verses: 9:2b-3

“There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.”

Today's passage is closely related to the previous passage. After hearing Peter's confession, **“You are the Messiah,”** Jesus began to teach what the Messiah must do: suffer much, be rejected and killed and rise again (8:29-31). When Peter heard about the suffering Messiah, he strongly rejected Jesus' teaching. But Jesus never compromised. Jesus said very clearly, **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”** (8:34). Jesus challenged them to lose even their lives for him and the gospel because it was the only way to save their lives (8:35). When they heard this, they were scared, troubled and confused. They did not really know what he was talking about, and they were afraid to open their mouths. The atmosphere was tense and the relationship between Jesus and his disciples was strained. This is the background of today's passage. In brief, Jesus was transfigured to help his nervous disciples accept his suffering, death and resurrection and to follow him. Jesus teaches that suffering and death is not the ultimate destiny. After that true glory follows.

As Peter and the disciples did not like to hear about suffering and rejection, neither do we. In fact, no one likes to suffer and be rejected. We tend to seek glory without suffering. Sometimes we are fascinated by human glory which is temporal and fleeting. The Bible tells us that true glory comes from God. This glory never fades; it is eternal. True glory comes only through suffering: suffering first, then glory. When we seek this glory, suffering has great meaning. This is what Jesus really wants to help us understand. Let's go up the high mountain with Jesus and catch a glimpse of his glory so that we may participate in his sufferings joyfully.

First, Jesus was transfigured before them (2-4). Six days had passed since Jesus first taught his disciples about his suffering, death and resurrection (2). Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain. It may have been Mount Hermon, which is over 9,000 feet high. Here in Chicago, we cannot see mountains around us. The best we can do is go to the

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Willis Tower, or the John Hancock Building. But according to Dr. James Joung, who grew up in the high mountains, a view from the mountaintop is matchless. It is quiet and serene; one can see the big picture of God's creation and get a broader perspective on life. But Jesus' purpose in bringing his disciples up the mountain was not for sight-seeing. It was to help them to understand the meaning of suffering. It came out of his great shepherd's heart for them. Let's read verses 2b-3. **"There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them."** "Transfiguration" in Greek is "metamorphosis," which is used to describe a change on the outside that emanates from within, like that of a caterpillar into a butterfly. It is the opposite of the word "masquerade" which is an outward change that does not come from within. Jesus' appearance was temporarily changed from that of an ordinary human being to reflect his divine glory. He revealed his radiant glory as God (Heb 1:3). Before climbing up the mountain, the disciples' image of Jesus was of a poor, hardworking, sacrificial servant. He was the friend of sinners and tax collectors. Jesus was always surrounded by many kinds of needy people: the crippled, blind, sick and demon-possessed. Jesus never ignored them and always welcomed and served them wholeheartedly out of his great compassion. Matthew remembered that Jesus **"took up our infirmities and bore our diseases,"** and that he had no place to lay his head (Mt 8:17, 20). When we see Jesus in pictures surrounded by children and carrying lambs in his arms, he looks so handsome, healthy and attractive. Yet in reality, as Isaiah said: **"he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him; nothing in his appearance that we should desire him"** (Isa 53:2).

However, Jesus' original image was not like this. Jesus is the Creator God who is clothed with splendor and majesty. He wraps himself in light as with a garment (Ps 104:1-2). Jesus' dazzling white clothes symbolize his glory, majesty, purity, holiness and victory as God. This Jesus would be raised from the dead, defeating the power of death, and exalted to the right hand of God the Father Almighty. Apostle John saw this glorious Jesus in a vision while in prison on the island of Patmos. He described Jesus: **"dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged**

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sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance” (Rev 1:13-16). On seeing him, John fell at his feet as though dead (Rev 1:17).

Why did Jesus show Peter and his disciples his glorious image at this time? It was to help them realize that after suffering, glory comes. Actually, they had already suffered a lot to follow Jesus. They had left their careers behind and were often away from home. In the course of serving all kinds of people, they became hungry and tired. When they tried to take a short vacation, it was interrupted by a large crowd. They had to bear the constant criticism of the religious leaders. Sometimes they would have wondered, “Should I follow Jesus in this way? Is it worth it?” Yet in spite of all these hardships they continued to follow Jesus. It was in the hope that Jesus would establish a glorious earthly kingdom and they would reign with him. This hope was their driving force in following Jesus. So when they heard that Jesus would suffer and die, it was too hard to bear. It seemed to invalidate all of their sacrifice and labor. We can understand them. Many of us sacrificed a lot to follow Jesus. Some left their country, people and father’s household like Abraham. Some gave up very promising careers, took humble positions, and spent their prime years serving college students. God blessed this ministry and raised disciples of Jesus. But we cannot deny that in some cases the driving force was to see tangible fruit in ministry and to obtain God’s blessing upon our children. If these expectations are not met, we can be discouraged and lose motivation to engage in gospel ministry. Then we easily become complacent and habitual. We go through the motions of serving God without any real joy or spirit. So we need to examine what the driving force in our hearts is. “Am I genuinely seeking God’s glory or human glory? Have I genuinely put my hope in God, or in something tangible in the world?”

Jesus showed Peter his glory to change his driving force from earthly glory to heavenly glory. Jesus’ glorious image was imprinted on his heart. Later, Peter was indeed changed. He recalled this event as an eyewitness of Jesus’ majesty (2 Pe 1:16) and it motivated him. In the midst of hardship and suffering, Peter could praise God for giving us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Pe 1:3). Peter encouraged early Christians, who were scattered to foreign lands and persecuted for their faith, **“But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed”** (1 Pe 4:13). Apostle Paul was also full of joy and spirit even though he suffered much and

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was persecuted. It was because Christ, the hope of glory, was in his heart (Col 1:27). He said, **“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us”** (Ro 8:18). While being martyred, Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit, and looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God (Ac 7:55). I remember when the President of PUST, Jin Kyung Kim, shared his personal testimony here in Chicago. When he was imprisoned in North Korea and sentenced to death on a trumped up espionage charge, he saw the heavenly glory of Jesus and said it was beyond comparison to his sufferings. So he embraced his suffering and offered his life as a sacrifice for gospel ministry in North Korea. Since he was a U.S. citizen, he wrote a letter to the President asking not to respond harshly to his execution. Because of his genuine hope in heavenly glory, even the tyrant of North Korea was moved, and President Kim was trusted, released and empowered to establish the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST). Jesus wants us to have the hope of God's glory as our driving force, so that we may follow him and engage in gospel ministry joyfully. We may not experience exactly what the three disciples experienced. But Peter encourages us that as we accept the Apostolic witness and pay careful attention to the Scriptures, the day dawns for us and the morning star rises in our hearts (2 Pe 1:16-21). In times of confusion and trouble, we can meet glorious Jesus through deep Bible study.

The scene of Jesus' glorious transfiguration amazed his disciples. They were amazed even further when Moses and Elijah appeared before them (4). These giants in God's history were talking with Jesus. Luke's account tells us that they spoke about his departure, which was about to come to fulfillment at Jerusalem (Lk 9:31). In Greek, the word translated “departure” is actually “exodus,” and referred to Jesus' death. Moses and Elijah's appearance helps us understand the meaning of Jesus' death. It would not be an ordinary person's death as the disciples may have thought. People die because of their sins. People think that death is the end of everything and a shameful failure. For Jesus, to die at the hands of wicked religious leaders seemed to be abhorrent defeat. But Jesus' death was fundamentally different; it was the fulfillment of God's promise regarding the Messiah. Moses, representative of the Law, and Elijah, representing the Prophets, both pointed to the Messiah, and Jesus uniquely fulfilled what they foretold (Jn 5:39; Lk 24:44). Jesus' death is the good news of salvation for all mankind. Jesus bore all our sins in

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his body on the cross. Through Jesus' death we can make an exodus from the power of Satan, who holds the power of sin and death, and live a new life.

We can find still more meaning in the appearance of Moses and Elijah. Like Jesus, they suffered much to accomplish God's will and then entered his glory. Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, confronting Pharaoh, who held them in slavery, and bearing the complaints of his weak and broken people. Elijah turned the nation from Baal worship back to God fighting fiercely against idolatry. Their suffering just foreshadowed Jesus' suffering and death. And after suffering a great deal, they entered into God's glory. If suffering ruins people, Moses and Elijah would have looked grotesque. But they appeared in glorious splendor, showing us that after suffering, glory comes. For Jesus, this was just a preview of his ultimate glory. Jesus revealed his glory to his disciples so they might change their view of suffering and follow Jesus' footsteps.

Second, "Listen to him!" (5-13). When Peter saw transfigured Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah he must have wondered if it was real or a dream. It might be comparable to us seeing transfigured Jesus with St. Augustine and Martin Luther. Peter wanted to stay there in glory forever. He did not want to go down the mountain and struggle with many suffering people or confront the nasty criticism of the religious leaders. We may feel like this after a blessed Bible conference, and can call it the "post-conference syndrome." So Peter proposed to put up three shelters: one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah (5). Perhaps Peter planned on staying in Jesus' tent and would let James and John stay with Moses and Elijah respectively. In reality, Peter was frightened; he did not know what to say; he just blurted out what was on his heart (6). Even though the spirit of revelation came upon him through this amazing experience, Peter missed the real point of the transfiguration.

At this moment God intervened and awakened Peter and the disciples from their dream. A cloud appeared and covered them. In the Old Testament, clouds symbolized God's presence. A voice came from the cloud: **"This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"** (7) God challenged them to listen to Jesus. This means more than hearing the sound of his voice; it means accepting Jesus' teaching and obeying him. Why should they listen to him? It is because Jesus is the Son of God. In ancient times a king's order was absolute. People of the nation were compelled to listen to him. To us,

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listening to our employer's order or a judge's ruling is compelling. But Jesus is much more than a human ruler. Jesus is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Even though he is the Sovereign Ruler of heaven and earth, he came down into this world to serve us and die for our sins on the cross. In this way he won our hearts, and we listen to him.

In light of the teaching in this passage, what words of Jesus must we listen to? We tend to listen to what we like to hear. We like to hear words of blessing, encouragement, grace, prosperity, peace and forgiveness. But we don't like to hear words of suffering, self-denial, taking the cross, repentance, obedience and training. So we may try to ignore them. We call this "selective listening." It is not really listening at all. God told Peter to listen whether he liked it or not. Actually, to deny oneself, take up the cross and follow Jesus is really a great privilege and blessing. This is the way of true glory. So let's listen to Jesus from our hearts.

Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus (8). As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead (9). Now they seemed to take Jesus' words more seriously. They kept the matter to themselves and began to discuss what "**rising from the dead**" meant (10). They shared with Jesus a question that was bothering them: "**Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?**" (11) Many Jews of the time believed that Elijah would precede the Messiah to clear the way for him. Then the Messiah would come in glory and power to establish a kingdom like David's. This idea was spread in order to give hope to the people of Israel during times of foreign oppression. But it fostered only a partial understanding of the Messiah. It ignored the suffering of the Messiah, which was foretold in the Scriptures. It emphasized only the Messiah's glory. This idea was hindering the disciples from accepting Jesus' teaching. The same thing can happen to us when we listen only to Bible verses we like based on our experience. We need to really listen to what Scripture says.

In order to help his disciples, Jesus had a Bible study with them while coming down the mountain. He said, "**To be sure, Elijah does come first and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they**

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have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him” (12-13). Here Jesus refers to John the Baptist who came before him and carried out his mission with the spirit and power of Elijah (Lk 1:17). Evil men mistreated John and killed him. In the same way Jesus was despised and rejected and was killed by evil men. But in fact, Jesus died for our sins, sins of pride, spiritual ignorance and disobedience. Through his suffering and death Jesus obeyed the will of God and finished salvation work. In this way Jesus became the Lord of glory and the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Heb 5:9).

Today we have seen glorious Jesus with Moses and Elijah and we have heard the voice, **“Listen to him!”** May we all listen to Jesus from our hearts and, while suffering in this world, have the hope of glory.