

Jesus took Peter, James and John Up a High Mountain where He was Transfigured

Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36a

DIG: It had been six days since Peter declared that Yeshua was the Meshiach, the Son of the living God. Why is that context important for what happens next? What does it mean transfigured? What is the significance of Moses' and Elijah's presence? Of the Voice? Why would this be important for Jesus at this stage in His ministry?

REFLECT: How did you come to realize that the Lord was the one above all our Savior and was the one above all others that you should listen to? What spot for you is most like the Mount of Transfiguration - where you grasped a bit of Christ's glory in a special way? What happened? How has God said to you: This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased?

This is the high point of Christ's teaching His talmidim, and offers an encouragement for the true followers of the Meshiach. It offers a glimpse of the future glory that will follow the suffering of His coming appointment with death in Jerusalem.

It is no coincidence that Chapter 17 begins with the contextual statement **after six days**, therefore, tying the two chapters together. The promise of the revealed Kingdom to the inner circle of the **Twelve** would indeed be fulfilled in the following **six days**. At that time Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James with Him, and led them up a high mountain to pray, where they were all alone (Mattityahu 17:1; Mark 9:2a). Luke says it was about eight days (Luke 9:28). There is no contradiction here, because Matthew and Mark were counting the days in between Peter's confession and the transfiguration, while Luke was counting from the first day Kefa's confession was made and the eighth day on which the transfiguration took place. Based on the geography, and the proximity to Caesarea Philippi, that high mountain could be none other than the gigantic, snowy Mount Hermon.

If you go to Isra'el today, they will take you to another mountain called Mount Tabor, south of Mount Hermon, where the Church of the Transfiguration has been built. This is the Catholic sight of the transfiguration. But it is off by about 45 miles. And furthermore, Mount Tabor was not such a secluded place. It was always well fortified because it was one of the seven key entrances into the Valley of Jezreel.

As **the four** ascended up **the mountain** the little group stopped to rest at intervals. Wrapped in **their** own thoughts, **they** could look down upon the province of Galilee, dotted with its many towns and villages. **Each one** probably recalled **his** experiences of the busy weeks of the Galilean Campaign and the sad hour of withdrawal, when **they** were persecuted and driven away by **their** enemies. Or **they** might look far into the distance and see the City of David, where **Jesus** had said **He** must soon suffer and die.⁸⁷²

After **their** ascent up the mountain that day, the Sabbath-sun had begun to set and a pleasant cool hung in the summer air as **the Lord** and the three **apostles** finished **their** ascent. From all parts of the Land, as far as Jerusalem and Tyre, the one great object in view was the snow-clad Mount Hermon. The Sea of Galilee was lit up with a subtle greenish-yellow hue between the nearby hills. The clear died out in a few minutes, and a pale, steel-colored shade was pulled down before **them**. It was like the shadow of a long pyramid that slid down to the eastern foot of Mount Hermon and crept across the great plain. Damascus was swallowed up by it. Finally, the pointed end of the shadow stood out distinctly against the sky - a dusky cone of dull color against the redness of the sunset. It was the shadow of **the mountain** itself, stretching for seventy miles across the plain.

The sun underwent strange changes of shape in the thick clouds, until at last it slid into the sea and was extinguished like a red spark. And overhead, **the starry host** came out **one by one** as a witness in the sky (see my commentary on **Genesis Lw - The Witness of the Stars**). We don't know exactly what route **they** took, but as **they** reached the summit on that cool Sabbath evening, the scent of snow - for which the parched tongue would long for in the summer's heat - must have refreshed **them**. And now the moon stood out in dazzling splendor. It cast long shadows over **the mountain** and lit up the broad patches of snow, reflecting their brilliance.⁸⁷³

And **He** was praying (Luke 9:29a). Without knowing the details, **Jesus** had much to pray about. No doubt **He** prayed *with His apostles* and **He** prayed *for them*, just as **Elisha** prayed for **his servant** when Syrian horsemen surrounded the city of Dothan - that **his eyes** might be **opened** so that **he** could see **the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around them, far more with them than those against them (Second Kings 6:8-23)**. Thus **Christ** prayed for **His** three **talmidim** that **they** could see with **their** spiritual eyes and comprehend the reality of who **He** really was.

But **Peter** and his companions were very sleepy, and just like in the garden of Gethsemane (**Mattityahu 26:40-45**), the three **apostles** started to pray but could not stay awake, despite the enormity of the lesson to be learned. The ascent of 9,000 feet above sea level had been rigorous, and the mountain air was thin. Once **they** stopped, exhaustion must have set in and, consequently, **they** dozed off.

As Jesus was praying the appearance of His face changed and shone like the sun. This is very similar to the experience of Moshe on Mount Sinai (see my commentary on Exodus - **Hd The Radiant Face of Moses**). The difference was that the shining of the face of Moses was a reflection, like the shining of the moon is a reflection of the sun. In this case **Messiah** is the Shechinah glory (see my commentary on **Isaiah Ju - The Glory of the LORD Rises Upon You**). As a result, the shining of His face was much greater than Moses' face. Christ's veiled glory was unveiled. And when the three apostles became fully awake, they saw His glory (Matthew 17:2b; Luke 9:29b-32a). **In the following events, there were three powerful proofs that Yeshua was indeed the promised Meshiach.**

First, there was the transformation of the Son. There He was transfigured before them (Mattityahu 17:2a; Mark 9:2b). The word transfigured means that a metamorphosis took place. It gave an outward expression to Christ that truly reflected His inner character. Jesus had been living for over thirty years in ordinary human form, but was now partially seen in the blazing splendor of ADONAI (Hebrews 1:1-3). From within Himself, in a way that defies full description, much less full explanation, Yeshua's divine glory was seen before Peter, James, and John.

What they were seeing was the glory that the Lord will have in the messianic Kingdom promised in the last section (**Ga - If Anyone is Ashamed of the son of Man, He Will Be Ashamed of Them When He Comes**). It was a striking preview and guarantee of His future coming glory. In his vision on Patmos, Yochanan saw the returning Messiah as someone like a Son of man, 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 sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance (Revelation 1:13-16).

And his clothes became as dazzling white as bright as a flash of lightening, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them (Matthew 17:2c; Mark 9:3; Luke 9:29c). Here was the greatest confirmation of Christ's deity. More than on any other occasion, here, Jesus revealed His true identity, the Son of God. As with the Shechinah glory of the TaNaKh, God here portrayed Himself to human eyes in the form of light so dazzling and overwhelming that it could barely be withstood. The contrast of the light in the darkness of the night must have been virtually blinding.

Second, there was the testimony of the prophets. Just then there appeared before the apostles two men in glorious splendor standing with the Lord. They suddenly realized that **Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus (Mattityahu 17:3; Mark 9:4; Luke 9:30 and 9:32b)**. To the average Jew, these two leaders of Isra'el would represent the whole history of the TaNaKh. **Moses** represented the Torah and **Elijah** represented Prophets. As no others, **they** could give human testimony to **Messiah's** divine majesty and **glory**. By **their** presence together, it was as if **they** were saying, "This is **the One** of whom **we** testified, **the One** in whose power **we** ministered, and **the One** in whom everything **we** said and did was meaning. Everything **we** spoke, accomplished, and hoped for is fulfilled in **Him**, and not only that, but **His** divine plan is on schedule."⁸⁷⁴

Because **Elijah** never did taste death but was caught up to heaven on the chariot of fire, **he** holds a special place in Jewish tradition. One example is found in the rabbinic literature where there is often an unresolved theological problem. In such cases, the term *Teku* is invoked, meaning that it is unresolved. According to some, the *Teku* is derived from an acronym in Hebrew that translates: *The Tishbi will solve all difficulties and questions. The Tishbi* comes from **Elijah the Tishbite (First Kings 17:1)**. **There is a parenthetical note by Rashi in his Judges 20:45 midrash that after the civil war described there, in which most of the tribe of Benjamin was wiped out, some one hundred members of the tribe fled to the lands of Rome and Germany. Those who remained behind, including Elijah (or his ancestors) came to be called the toshavim, or residents of the Land.** Thus, when the unresolved problems of Judaism are discussed, it is maintained that *the Tishbi, or those who remain in the Land, will solve all difficulties and questions.* Also tradition speaks of a special hope that **Elijah** will reappear to announce the arrival of King **Messiah** (see my commentary on **Revelation Bw - See, I Will Send You the Prophet Elijah Before the LORD Comes**).

These promises are remembered at the Passover Seder, as the cup of **Elijah** is set aside with the hope that he will reappear to announce the coming of **the Meshiach**. The combining of these two special prophets are well known in rabbinic thought: **Moses, I swear to you, as you devoted your life to their service in this world, so too in the time to come when I bring Elijah, the prophet, unto them, the two of you shall come together (Devarim Raba 3:17)**. The appearance of **Moses** and **Elijah** with **Jesus** up a high mountain was certainly a conformation of the central message of the Renewed Covenant - **the Messiah** is the fulfillment of all the promises to the fathers as seen in the Torah and the Prophets.⁸⁷⁵

It is **Luke** alone who identifies the topic of **Christ's** coming death and ascension, literally **His departure or exodus** that **Moses** and **Elijah** were discussing with **Him**. **They spoke about His departure. They were not merely standing there reflecting on Yeshua's glory, but were talking to Him as a Friend about His imminent death and resurrection, which was about to be fulfilled in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31)**. This was an inescapable part of **His**

ministry, without which redemption from sin would have been impossible (see my commentary on **Exodus Bz - Redemption**).

With this **tradition**, and Jewish history in mind, it was no wonder the Twelve had such a strong reaction. **As the men were leaving Jesus, Kefa said to Him, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three booths - one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."** Other than that, he did not know what to say because they were all so frightened (**Matthew 17:4; Mark 9:5-6; Luke 9:33a**). Peter takes a lot of heat for this. He is either accused of demoting Jesus to the level of **Moses and Elijah**, or elevating the two to the level of **Christ**. But, his offer would have been a most natural response for any traditional Jew. But his timing was off a bit because of what was hidden from him by **God**. He clearly knows that **Jesus is the Messiah**, but he does not know about the Church Age or the program of two comings because it was a **mystery** to the righteous of the TaNaKh (**Ephesians 3:2-11**).

Peter saw the glory that **Christ** will have in the messianic Kingdom. Being an observant Jew and a student of the Scriptures, **Peter** knew that the messianic Kingdom was the fulfillment of the Feast of Tabernacles (**Zechariah 14:16-21**). So putting two and two together, **He** makes an assumption the Kingdom was about to be set up! So **he** wanted to **put up three booths** to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. But his timing is off because the Feast of the Passover comes before the Feast of Tabernacles. The Passover is fulfilled by the death of **the Messiah**. In other words, **Jesus** must die first!⁸⁷⁶

Luke editorially inserted that **Peter did not know what he was saying** at that time (**Luke 9:33b**). The thought was not that **Peter** misunderstood the significance of the coming messianic Kingdom - **he** was right on that account. The problem was that **he** must have got caught up in the excitement of the moment and forgot, or did not fully understand, that **Jesus** had predicted that **He** would suffer and die (**Luke 9:23-24**).⁸⁷⁷ But later in his life **Kefa** would declare: **For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty (Second Peter 1:16)**.

Third, there was the terror of the Father. While Peter was still speaking the Shechinah glory, in the form of a bright cloud, appeared and covered the three of them. The same cloud that enveloped Mount Sinai, enveloped them and they were afraid as they were surrounded by it (**Luke 9:34**). For a second time, *the bat-kol*, or *the voice* of **God** the Father spoke audibly out of heaven. The first time was at **Christ's** baptism. Here **He** repeated what **He** said back then: **This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased.** But then **God** added a sense of urgency when **He** said: **Listen to Him (Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35)**! The idea of **God** speaking periodically from heaven was not

unknown among the rabbis. **The rabbis teach that after the death of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the last of the prophets, the Ruach HaKodesh departed from Isra'el; nevertheless they received communications from God through the medium of the bat-kol (Tosefta Sotah 13:2).** Since it was too intense to consider hearing *the voice* of ADONAI directly, it was believed that *the bat-kol* was an echoed deflection as God commanded His people.⁸⁷⁸ **The talmidim heard the Torah (Moses), and the Prophets (Elijah), now they needed to hear Him! Hebrews tells us that God the Son is the final revelation of God the Father (Hebrews 1:1-3).**

When the three apostles heard this, they knew they were in the presence of El Shaddai and fell facedown to the ground, terrified (Matthew 17:6). The combined awareness of **Messiah's** splendor, His love and His justice, and His lordship should cause a kind of spiritual tension in every believer. On the one hand we can rejoice in **Jesus'** loving friendship, grace and mercy, but on the other hand we need to always hold a reverential **fear** as we reflect on **the Lord's** overwhelming holiness and righteousness. This is seen in the difference of the names **ADONAI** and **HaShem**; the first is like saying "Daddy," and the second "Sir." **ADONAI** says: **Come now, let's talk this over together (Isaiah 1:18 CJB),** while **HaShem** says: **The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom (Psalm 111:10a).**

But Jesus' first actions and words after His powerful exhibition of brilliance were those of gentle, loving care. Knowing what great fear His three friends were in, **Yeshua came and touched them. Get up, He said. Don't be afraid (Matthew 17:7).** And as if to drive the point home, as the cloud lifted and **they suddenly looked up, they** must have been relieved to **no longer see anyone with them except Jesus (Matthew 17:8; Mark 9:8; Luke 9:36a).** **Moses and Elijah** were gone, **their work** had been done and **Christ** superseded them. **He** was then **God's** authorized **Ruler** and **Spokesman**. Yet, **they** would have to continue waiting (as we do today) for the ultimate Second Coming of **Meshiach** ben David (see **Mv - The Jewish Concept of Two Messiah's**).

There are five theological implications of the transfiguration. First, it authenticated that **Jesus was the Messiah. He** was rejected by men but accepted by **the Father**. Secondly, it anticipated the coming of the messianic Kingdom. Thirdly, it guaranteed the fulfillment of the Torah and the prophets (**2 Peter 1:19-21**). It was a pledge of an afterlife. **Moses** died and he represents the righteous of the TaNaKh who will be resurrected from the dead; and **Elijah** did not die and he represents the righteous of the TaNaKh who will be translated alive at the Rapture. Fifthly, it was a measure of **God's** love for us. **Jesus** veiled His glory twice. The first time was at the time of the incarnation, and second time was when **He** came down off of Mount Hermon. Only after His ascension would His glory be revealed forever (**Revelation 1:12-16**). **John** sees Him in the fullness of His Shechinah **glory**, no longer veiled. When **He** comes back at His Second Coming it will be with His unveiled **glory**.⁸⁷⁹

In 1915 Pastor William Barton started to publish a series articles. Using the archaic language of an ancient storyteller, he wrote his parables under the pen name of Safed the Sage. And for the next fifteen years he shared the wisdom of Safed and his enduring spouse Keturah. It was a genre he enjoyed. By the early 1920s, Safed was said to have a following of at least three million. Turning an ordinary event into an illustration of a spiritual truth was always a keynote of Barton's ministry.

Now it came to pass in the Summer that I journeyed by the side of a Little Lake that lay to the westward of my habitation. And there was an evening when I watched the Sun as it was going down, and behold it was Glorious. And as I turned away from it and entered my dwelling, behold mine own Shadow went before me, and climbed upon the inner wall of the Room as I entered. And as I went forward, lo, another Shadow rose upon the wall, and it was like unto the first, even mine own Shadow. And I marveled much that one man should cast Two Shadows. And the Thing Seemed Passing Strange.

But the reason was this, as the Sun was going down, it shone on the water and was like another Sun, and cast a Shadow even brighter and taller than the Sun in the heavens. For the Sun in the heavens was partly obscured by the trees; but the Sun off the lake cast its reflected rays under the branches and shown clearly. And so it was that in my sight the *reflected* Sun was brighter than the real Sun, and cast the greater and taller **Shadow**.

And I thought within my soul how to men and women the vision of **the Most High God** is likewise often obscured; and how there are those who must see the exceeding brightness of **His Person** by *reflected* light. And I prayed to my **God** that as I *reflect* **His** light, such as these may see the true **glory of the Son of Righteousness**.⁸⁸⁰

If you have given your life to **Christ**, **God** lives in you. And because **God** lives in you, *you* need to be **transformed**: **Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - His good, pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:2). And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18). The life of a believer is the process of God's glory being revealed in you.**