

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

G. Campbell Morgan, D.D.

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CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

MATTHEW 17:1-13

THIS paragraph tells the story of the Transfiguration of our Lord. We need to give careful attention to the place of the Transfiguration in the scheme of our Lord's work as King. The question of first importance for us now is; What did this Transfiguration of the King mean to the three disciples who were permitted to witness it; and, subsequently, to those who, through them, heard the story?

It is hardly overstating the case to declare that the glory of the Mount of Transfiguration rests upon Peter's two Epistles. It was there, "**in the Holy Mount,**" as he termed it, that he heard the voice and saw the glory, the meanings of which to him at the moment, were hidden, but the value of which came to him in subsequent years, so that when he looked back through Resurrection, and the mystery of the Cross, to the mountain, he spoke of it as the "**Holy Mount,**" and constructed his first letter around the twofold impression which that Mount made upon him the impression which he describes as that of the Coming, and the Power, or more accurately, the Presence and Power of Jesus Christ.

In order to answer this question as to what the Transfiguration meant to these men, there are certain matters as to its setting which we must take time to notice.

First of all it is necessary to take the final verse of the previous chapter, which we have not yet considered, but which is intimately related to all that has preceded it. The King was talking to that group of men, so afraid of the Cross, of whom Peter had been the spokesman, when He said,

"Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom."

There are many interpretations of the meaning of these words.

There are those who believe that He meant to say that, in the age of Gospel preaching, and in the victories which should follow such preaching, man would live to see the vindication of His claim, and would live to see the coming of His Kingdom; and there is certainly an element of truth in that view. There are those who say His reference to His coming was a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem; and here again we certainly have part of the truth.

There is a sense in which there is no doubt He was present at that judgment of the city, as He is present, and presiding over, all the events of human history. It may be that there was some more special sense in which He came at that destruction, but surely none of us is prepared to say that He came into His Kingdom in the hour in which Jerusalem “**beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth,**” over which He had wept tears of sincere pity, even though He had pronounced its doom was swept away. As a matter of fact He had come into His Kingdom before then.

There is yet another interpretation of the meaning of these words.

It is that His reference was to that which immediately follows in the chronicle, the unveiling of the established Kingdom in microcosm in the Transfiguration scene upon the sacred Mount. While that is also true, I do not think it exhausts the meaning. When He said, “**There be some standing here,**” He was not distinguishing between certain of His disciples and others of them; but between His disciples and outsiders.

From Mark we learn that by this time He was speaking to the multitudes He had called, as well as to His disciples (Mark 8:34). His disciples saw Him come into His Kingdom, or as Mark puts it, “**the Kingdom of God come with power,**” through the Cross interpreted by the Resurrection. (See Romans 1:4).

Of this they had the final indisputable proof when power came to them at Pentecost. “**The Kingdom of His dear Son,**” began at the Ascension of our Lord. Since then He has been reigning. If this be recognized we may turn to the immediate revelation of His Kingship as found in the Transfiguration.

Let us observe the setting a little carefully.

Jesus took three representative men to the Mount, and was transfigured before them. They were dazed and overwhelmed. Peter said, “**It is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias.**” He was immediately rebuked by the encompassing quiet, and by the voice which said, “**This is My Beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased: hear ye Him.**” And the whole scene passed.

Now carefully notice these words:

“**And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead. And His disciples asked Him, saying, Why then say the scribes that Elias must first come?**”

There does not at first seem to be any connection whatever between His charge, “**Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of Man be risen from the dead,**” and their question. But there is a very intimate connection between their question and the promise He made to them at Caesarea Philippi, that they should see His Kingdom.

That question was their expression of the wonder that filled their hearts as they walked back down the mountain side, after all that they had seen.

The glory had all vanished. There He was, walking by their side, the same Jesus Who had taken them up to the Mount, and there broke upon them the consciousness of the fact that they had seen the Son of Man in His Kingdom.

Then they remembered the teaching of their own Scriptures, that before the Messianic Kingdom would be set up, there must come a Forerunner, and resuming the old conversation, they said, **“Why then say the scribes that Elias must first come?”**

If this strange glory upon the mountain that blinded us reveals the coming of the Son of Man in His Kingdom, how is it that Elijah has not come?

Mark His answer. **“Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things.”**

Then He added, **“Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed.”**

Then it was made clear to them that He was referring to John the Baptist.

Thus He declared that by the coming of John the Baptist the promise of Elijah had been fulfilled, and that what they had seen was the prophetic vision of the Son of Man in the Kingdom. No doubt when He said, **“Till they see the Son of Man coming in His Kingdom,”** He referred to what was about to take place not on the Mount when they should behold Him in His glory, but in all that was to follow His descent from the Mount.

Let us now consider:

- First, the natural place of the Transfiguration in the mission of Jesus;
- Secondly, the Transfiguration as an unveiling of the coming Kingdom;
- Finally, the message of the Transfiguration to us.

In considering the natural place of the Transfiguration in the mission of the King, we must see the place of the Transfiguration in the history of the Person of Jesus.

On that Transfiguration Mount the human life of Christ reached its crowning glory. This is very largely, and very often overlooked. We may state the process of the human life of Jesus in three words; innocence, holiness, perfected glory.

Innocence, the primal condition of human nature, not only not having sinned, but being without sin. There are no innocent children born to-day in the full sense in which the childhood of Jesus was innocent. He was absolutely sinless in nature; but it was necessary to the perfecting of that nature that He should face temptation. Human nature is never perfect until it has chosen for itself the right, as against the wrong which comes by allurements from without. A holy man is infinitely greater than an innocent man. A holy man is not merely a man in whose nature there is no sin. A holy man is a man who has looked into its face and said no. He **“was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.”**

He was victorious over every form of temptation that the enemy brought to bear upon Him.

When He came to the Mount of Transfiguration, what the disciples saw was not the glory of Deity, not the glory of heaven shining upon Him; it was the outshining of the glory of humanity which had passed from innocence, through holiness, to absolute and final perfection.

He was metamorphosed before them, and the glory they saw was the glory of perfected humanity. Just as there is a gulf that seems to be impassable between the newly born body of an infant child and the mature strength of a full-grown man, so there is an even more impassable gulf between that full-grown strength of a mature man and the complete realization in that man of the fuller meaning of his own spiritual life, as it masters the body, flames through it, and flashes into beauty, as matter and spirit merge into a common radiance of loveliness.

We know nothing of that because there is sin in us; but in Christ we see God's ideal Man, absolutely sinless, innocent, growing up to be holy; and at last, with all the temptations of life and of service overcome, there came a moment when, without death, He was metamorphosed, and ready for passing into a spiritual existence, carrying with Him His material body, changed, so that it was ready for life in the heaven of God.

The Transfiguration was not the proof of Deity; it was the proof of absolute, essential, and victorious humanity. It was a revelation of what He is going to restore to us, if we trust Him; but we shall never reach our transfiguration but through His death and life.

- That is what the second advent means,
- that is what the changing of the bodies of our humiliation that they may be conformed to the body of His glory means.

There is no hope for anything of that kind to any man who does not know Christ as his Saviour. This is the meaning of the Transfiguration in its relation to the Person of Jesus.

Now notice that the perfection of the Person was necessary for the perfect King.

We have seen the King, His Person, His propaganda, and now we are coming to His Passion. But before we come to the Passion we must have the perfection of the Person.

That final perfection of humanity was reached in the fact of Transfiguration.

But that perfection does not bring Him to the Throne. He cannot so come into His Kingdom. The Kingdom of God does not come with power so. Presently from that Mount of Transfiguration we shall go down the mountain side with the King, and along the rough and rugged road to the Cross. He descended out of heaven, the Son of God, and became incarnate, and in human life He won.

Now for the second time He set His face towards the ways of men; and He Who came at first to share their life, from the Transfiguration Mount passed down to share their death.

He talked in the glory of the mountain with Moses and Elijah, of His decease, His exodus; and presently He set His face towards it, and for the second time turned His back upon heaven, in order that, as perfected Man, He might share in the mystery of human death, and so perfect many sons for glory.

If that be the place occupied by the Transfiguration in the mission of Jesus, let us observe how in that glory those men had unveiled before them the order of the coming Kingdom.

The Kingdom had not yet come. It was coming, and these men saw its order. In the flashing glory of that night scene they saw what it would be like. The Kingdom was revealed to them in that hour upon the mountain. What they saw, corroborated all He had said to them in that Caesarea Philippi conversation eight days before.

They saw Him in the glory of His perfected humanity, and they heard His converse concerning the exodus He should accomplish. When, dazed and mystified, they suggested the perpetuation of the glory as there seen, the voice from heaven recalled them to obedience to what the Son said.

The last thing He had said to them was that He must go to the Cross. Thus, though they did not apprehend the meaning then, they came afterwards to the understanding of the fact that the Perfect Son could only bring the Kingdom with Power by the way of His Cross.

As the vision passed, **“they saw no Man save Jesus only.”** Then, mystified while yet illumined, they followed Him in His descent from the mountain humbling Himself and on to Death and through Death to Resurrection and through Resurrection to Ascension and Coronation and so they saw **“The Son of man coming in His Kingdom,” “The Kingdom of God come with Power.”**

~ end of chapter 49 ~

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