

Prayers

Opening prayer

Praise be to You Lord Jesus, for You fill my soul with joy and gladness. Joy because I know that You will be alongside me in all I do, and gladness because You bring the best out of every situation that comes my way. Your gifts enable me to stand above the strife, suffering and evil in this world, and when these troubles touch me, I know that Your love restores my soul and leads me back again to joy and gladness. Thank You Jesus; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas_ *(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

As you watch TV today, or listen to the radio or indeed any album track, listen for God's voice. Part of prayer is listening, so do your best to listen.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who lead worship in your church.** *Pray for the worship leaders whose job it is to lead the worship within a service or event and also co-ordinate the musical input. In Today's world, this is an increasingly important role within the church, alongside that of the preacher.*
- *Pray for medical advancement, and the need for scientists to continue to break through and discover new ways of curing disease*
- *Give thanks to God for the many blessings you have received at His hand in the last day. Name them before Him in your prayers*

Meditation

Give us space, Lord God, within this busy world,
To foster what is good, and encourage people around us.

May we:

Take time to speak to friends when they need our help;
Listen to what others say to us with care and attention;
Offer love and affection to all within our extended families;
Give attention to all who seek our help, whatever the need;
Present ourselves well, and speak nothing bad about others;
Take care to conclude our work properly, for we do it for You;
Bring our prayers to You, day or night, according to our need;
Tell other people that the Lord is our strength and our helper.

And in everything, may we give you honour and praise;
Giving glory to You, the source of our strength and happiness.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Matthew 17: 1-9

¹ Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them; his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

³ Just then, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with him. ⁴ Then Peter said to Jesus,

'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three shelters; one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.'

⁵ While he was still speaking, a bright cloud came over them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my Son, I love him, and with him I am well pleased; listen to him!'

⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, He said,

'Get up, don't be afraid.'

⁸ When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus, by himself.

⁹ As they came down from the mountain Jesus ordered them,

'Tell no one about this vision until the Son of man has been raised from the dead.'

Review

Together with the declaration of Peter at Caesarea Philippi (16:13-20), the Transfiguration of Jesus forms the centre piece of each of the three Gospels; Matthew (16:13-17:9), Mark (8:27-9:8), and Luke (9:18-37). In each Gospel, these stories mark the formal end of the first phase of Jesus' ministry in Galilee and the beginning of the second and last phase, in which He sets Himself towards Jerusalem and certain death at the hands of His enemies, the religious authorities.

For the three leading disciples who were present at the event, the Transfiguration was a remarkable glimpse of Jesus caught up in the Glory of God, seen by them even before the resurrection. After the extraordinary events surrounding Peter's declaration of Jesus as Messiah (16:16 etc), Jesus had talked sternly to the disciples about His coming death (16:21ff). It would have been hard for the disciples to hear all that Jesus had to say, and it is probable that only a fraction of what was said is recorded in the Gospels. As they struggled with the news of Jesus' impending death, it became clear to Jesus that they needed to know something more about God's glorious plans lying beyond His suffering. The transfiguration showed the disciples something positive about the future, beyond the dreadful death of Jesus, and it gave them hope for all that was to come.

The story is full of mystery. Jesus went up a mountain to meet Moses and Elijah, the two representatives of the 'law' and the 'prophets'. Both were great figures of Israel's past, yet Jesus fulfilled the work of both, and this was not a meeting of equals. Jesus alone shone with a dazzling brightness greater than could be described (see notes on text, below). Peter's response to this event was not as ludicrous as it sounds to us, and did not earn him a rebuke! The making of tents (or 'tabernacles') was part of the religious life of the Israelites, what Peter said was tantamount to accepting that what he saw deserved their worship. His words were surpassed by the very words of God, repeating (roughly) the words spoken to Jesus at His baptism (3:17). Jesus Himself described what had happened as a vision (17:9), but it clearly meant more than that to the disciples!

For us, the story of the Transfiguration is also one of hope and awe. It is inspiring for us to read about it, because it reminds us that God will sometimes show His Glory on earth in order to encourage His people and lead them on to greater things. Many Christians have experienced moments when God has given them extraordinary spiritual blessings, either in church or in the course of everyday life. As a young person I recall listening to a preacher at a poorly attended evening service in a country chapel. The preacher suddenly appeared to shine brightly, and I was transfixed, and listened to the words of the preacher as if they were the very words of God. This was not something that anyone else saw at the time, and God did this for me, but not for others present. However, I have since discovered that other people have experienced something similar, at different times and in different places. Such experiences invariably focus on Jesus, and they encourage faith. The revelation of the Glory of God, draws people into a holy presence, and has the effect of confirming faith and encouraging the believer.

This was the right time and the right moment for the disciples to receive such encouragement, and it gave them clues and signals that would confirm their faith. In the coming days as they journeyed towards Jerusalem with Jesus, and the Cross came closer day by day, the disciples all fell away at the critical moments of Jesus' trial and death. However, the unexpressed hope of resurrection planted in them by the experience of the Transfiguration may well have helped to hold them together despite the horrors of Good Friday. It remains a fact of history that they did indeed remain together as a group, praying and waiting through the following days and ready for the Lord to appear.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of this passage
- Where and when did the Transfiguration take place?
- What happened to Jesus during the Transfiguration?
- Why did Moses and Elijah appear?
- Why did the disciples describe what happened as like the Shekinah Glory?
- What were the consequences of this incident for the disciples?

Notes on the translation of this passage

V2 'became dazzling white'

This is the translation given by most versions. The Greek however is a little difficult to translate, because literally, it reads 'became shining (or brilliant) as the light'. To add to the difficulty, one or two of the ancient manuscripts add the words 'like snow'! It is also worth noting that the word for 'light' could also mean the brilliant light of a fire whilst burning, and it is possible that the word should be translated as 'blinding'.

V4 'I will make ...'

Peter is the one who volunteers for this task. A significant number of manuscripts however change the tense of the verb to say 'let us make' as if Peter was speaking for the other two disciples and himself. This would then agree with what is said in Luke (9:33) and Mark (9:5). In view of the emphasis on Peter in the previous texts, it is unlikely that this emphasis would change in Matthew, so I have kept to the text as it is usually translated, even though it means that what is said is different from the other Gospels.

V4 'three shelters'

The Greek word here is 'skenes', meaning a tent, but also used to translate the Old Testament Hebrew word 'Tabernacle'. Certainly, the passage implies Peter did not wish to raise a mere tent, but a place of worship.

Where and when did the Transfiguration take place?

Matthew is quite specific that this event happened six days after the incident at Caesarea Philippi (16:13ff). It is thought that this makes a link with the famous occasion in the Old Testament where Moses went to the Mountain of God and waited for six days before hearing God's voice (Ex 24:12-18). The parallel is further extended by the fact that Jesus took with him three of His closest disciples (Peter, James, John) and Moses took three elders (Aaron, Nadab, Abihu). This is only partially helpful, but it does illustrate a general principle of scripture that an experience of the Glory of God is something for which people have to wait; they happen at God's time and appointing. Further examples are of the people of Israel who had to wait for the Glory of God on Mount Sinai for three day (Exodus 19:15,16), and Elijah who had to wait on Mount Horeb through the storm and wind before hearing God's voice (1 Kings 19:11-13).

Jesus and the three disciples went up a mountain (17:1). Mountains played an important role in scripture, and God was very often associated with mountains. Moses received God's commandments on mount Sinai, Elijah went to 'the mountain of God' to retreat from King Ahab and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 19), Jerusalem was situated on the heights of a mountain (sometimes called Mount Zion), and Jesus 'went up a mountain' to deliver his famous 'Sermon on the Mount' (5:1-7:24). The traditional site of the Transfiguration is Mount Tabor, near Lake Galilee, but this is far from the region of Caesarea Philippi where Jesus had taken His disciples for retreat. This mountain had a Roman fort on it in Jesus' day, so it is an unlikely site. Many people now believe that the mount of Transfiguration was one of the peaks in the range associated with Mount Hermon, closer to Caesarea Philippi.

What happened to Jesus during the Transfiguration?

When they reached the top of the mountain, Jesus was changed in appearance before their eyes, and He shone 'like the sun'. The description of this is powerful in its simplicity. It reminds us again of Moses, whose 'face shone' as he came down from the mountain of God with the ten commandments (Exodus 34:29ff). It was expected that those who God blessed at the End Times would shine like this, and Jesus had already mentioned it in his explanation to the disciples of the parables of the sower; 'the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father' (13:43). The disciples who heard this would have realised that the sight of Jesus on the mount of Transfiguration was a foretaste of the harvest of the Kingdom, and an insight into the future of God's plans.

Although we are naturally fascinated by Jesus' change in appearance, the transfiguration itself is the most important part of the story. The word 'transfiguration' is used in only two other places in scripture. Firstly by Paul when he talks of the 'transforming' of our minds by the power of the Spirit 'so that we may discern the

will of God' (Rom 12:2); a clear reference to God's power to change minds of people by the power of the Holy Spirit. Secondly, in 2 Corinthians (3:18) Paul talks of how we may be 'transformed from one degree of glory to another', which describes a spiritual change that takes place in us as we live our lives by faith in Jesus Christ. These changes are partial glimpses of the power of God to change things, indeed, His power to change people, and also to change death into life. At 'the Transfiguration', Jesus was perfectly transformed, changed into His spiritual body, in a moment of awesome wonder for the disciples. For a few seconds they saw the difference between the earthly, human Jesus, and the heavenly, divine and spiritual Jesus.

There has been much debate about the appearance of Jesus, described as 'dazzling white', and shining 'like the sun'. Ultimately, we cannot every be sure about what these words mean, except that they indicate a supernatural phenomenon of God's presence, something at the very edges of human experience and the very interface between God's heaven and our earth. Those who have had experiences of God's presence today will know how hard it is to describe such things with any satisfactory accuracy, as I have of my own experiences (see above).

Why did Moses and Elijah appear?

The appearance of Moses and Elijah comes as no surprise to us as we read the account, as there have been hints about both of them within the events that have taken place. To the disciples, it was all a mystery and they struggled to make sense of what they saw. The most common explanation of their presence is that they represented the 'Law' (Moses) and the 'Prophets' (Elijah). Some have complained that Elijah was not a prophet like Isaiah or Hosea who 'wrote' biblical books. However, Elijah was the first great prophet who broke the mould of earlier prophets like Nathan, who acted in a subservient role as advisors to the Kings of Israel and Judah. Elijah laid the foundations for prophets such as Isaiah, who lived just a few generations later.

Also, Moses and Elijah were also well known as Old Testament characters whose death was a mystery. Moses' death is recorded (Deut 34:5) but scripture goes on to say that no-one knows where he was buried; and Elijah was famously taken up to be with God (2 Kings 2:11) in a whirlwind. However, both were expected by the people of Israel to return at the coming of the Messiah, and it is likely that the disciples would have seen this connection quite easily, confirming Peter's affirmation that Jesus was indeed 'the Messiah' (16:16).

Why did the disciples describe what happened as like the Shekinah Glory?

Peter's offer to mark the occasion by building 'booths' has also been a source of mystery over the years; what on earth was he doing? Was it incompetent blundering (as some suggest), or an attempt to mark the occasion by building some kind of testimonial structure for the great event; a common ancient practice? I favour the second explanation, but all speculation is surely overshadowed by what happened next.

Although the term does not appear in the Old Testament, there was a belief in the days of Jesus concerning the abiding presence of God as the 'Shekinah' Glory, which was understood as 'dwelling' at certain places or with some people. The word 'Shekinah' comes from the Hebrew 'to dwell'; and so it was that God's 'Shekinah Glory' was said to dwell in the Temple, for example. People understood many of the Old Testament references to the presence of God that we have already quoted in the study today as examples of the Shekinah Glory, and it was therefore likely that the disciples, including Matthew, described this event as they did with the Shekinah Glory in mind. It was thought of in terms of a cloud (as, for example, the cloud that had led the people of Israel through the desert in Ex 13:21; 14, 20,24) and also in terms of fire and light(see notes above).

Out of this Shekinah Glory God spoke the same words that were spoken at Jesus' baptism (3:17), but with an added command; 'listen to Him'. We who have read the Gospel know this to be God's voice, but this was all new to the disciples, and they were immediately terrified (17:6). This was natural, for a Jew would not expect God to speak to them through the Shekinah Glory! When God first said these words they were for Jesus alone, confirming His role and His ministry; but now these words were given for the benefit of the disciples. So, here was God's voice, confirming to Peter in particular, that despite his blunders and misunderstanding (16:21-23), he was indeed right in what he had said about Jesus. It was a powerful, affirming and supportive moment, from the very mouth of God!

What were the consequences of this incident for the disciples?

Jesus' response was typical of His actions when healing a person; he 'touched them' (17:7) and then sought to reassure them. The touch could also have helped the disciples realise that Jesus was back with them in His human form again! Then as they looked around, the whole event had come to an end and they were alone with Jesus, the real man they knew.

The disciple's experience was both inexplicable, and yet partially describable, a powerful mixture that typifies many a spiritual experience! We hear no more of the whole event from the disciples, and we are left to wonder what they made of it at the time. Nevertheless, this extraordinary event in Jesus' life and ministry was to prove so powerful and significant that it has become an important part of three Gospels, taking place at the same moment in all three, and forming a pivotal point in the story of Jesus' ministry. Before this event, a general ministry to all, and after, a ministry to the disciples; before this, a wandering ministry, and after, a route that would end in Jerusalem. It is because of this that Jesus told the disciples not to tell anyone else. If we read these words from verse 9 without understanding the place of the Transfiguration in the whole Gospel, they do not make sense. However, from now on, Jesus was focussing His effort on the disciples, and He was only interested in them and their response to what God was doing.

Discipleship

Application

This extraordinary story says a great deal about Jesus and His ministry. It reminds us that we are dealing with the divine work of God on earth through Jesus Christ, chosen by God from before the world was created to be its Saviour and Redeemer. It is sometimes too easy to read about Jesus' life and consider it all on the human level; indeed, some preachers select their scripture readings for preaching from Matthew, Mark or Luke, because of the human interest factor in the stories. They avoid the spiritual events such as the Transfiguration, or the more sophisticated Gospel of John because it can be hard to take a single point (or two) from the incredibly deep reflections we find there about spiritual things. Preachers wish to be able to explain everything and enable a congregation say 'ah yes, now I understand'. However, those who are spiritual know that spiritual things cannot be fully explained; they can be described, just as the Transfiguration can be described, but we can never pin down the meaning of divine things. In an age when people want to know things exactly, perhaps we need to rediscover the excitement of mystery, of knowing things partially and living with the suspense of having to accept that there is more!

The challenge of the Transfiguration lies partly in the supremely spiritual nature of the event, and partly in the fact that somehow, we relate to this strange experience. People do have these experiences of God, and people are changed by what happens. In an earlier part of the study, I gave an example of an event in my youth (above) in which I felt close to the glory of God in a special way, and I have heard many people tell stories of similar things that they cannot explain, yet they know inwardly that they have been in the presence of God. They would not wish to boast about their experience; indeed, most Christians would not wish to make themselves out to be more privileged in such things than others are, but we would benefit by a great desire to share what happens to us.

None of us can 'apply' the story of the Transfiguration. All we can do is read in awe of what the disciples experienced and know that people still find themselves in the presence of God in special ways, to this day. God always demonstrates Himself in glory for a reason; for Jesus, it was to encourage Him in His ministry, and for the disciples, it was to urge them to follow Jesus to Jerusalem. When God shows us His glory, it is because He wants us to receive something special from Him, and when such things happen, we will know what He means!

Questions for groups

1. Have you experienced anything like this 'transfiguration' in other people, seeing someone's face 'shine' in this way? What do you make of this?
2. Have you experienced anything like the 'Shekinah Glory' of the presence of God 'dwelling' with you or in you in some situation? What do you make of it?
3. In what ways has this study changed your understanding of the Transfiguration of our Lord?

Discipleship challenges

- *Have you had any special experiences of the presence of God, or something like His 'Shekinah' Glory? If so, then write it down, or share it with someone else. People will not be as sceptical about such things if they shared them more often!*

- *In the course of the next few days, expect the Lord to reveal Himself to you in whatever ways He chooses, and wait for Him. It may be some time before He reveals Himself, but is it not worth the wait?*
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Final Prayer

Jesus, Your presence is the greatest treasure we may possess. Banish the fears, troubles, woes and anxiety that clog up our lives, and graciously stay with us on the pathway of life. Your nature is love, and we praise you for showing this love despite the frailties of our humanity. Thank You Jesus. AMEN
