

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 3 September 2000

No. T0126

Speaker: Mr. George Bell

Night Scenes of Scripture: A night with the King – Matthew 17:1-8

Many years ago, as a boy, I was taken by my father to Edinburgh. It was in the days when cheap excursions were available by train. This particular one was from Newcastle-upon-Tyne; they were quite an event in those days. I can't remember all the places we went to see, but one still stands out clearly. It was Holyrood Palace, which is the residence of the royal family in Edinburgh. As it happened, the royal family was there at the time, although we didn't know that. However, as we made our way to the Palace, crowds were gathering together, so it became very obvious that something out of the ordinary was to happen. Just as we arrived at the Palace, to our surprise, King George V and Queen Mary came out of the gates in a horse-drawn carriage. What a thrill it was! I saw the King. I never saw King George VI, so this was the one and only time that I saw a King.

Our subject today is another King, who is described in the book of Revelation as *"King of kings and Lord of lords"*. He is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. We are going to think of the incident on the Mount of Transfiguration as recorded in each of the first three Gospels. We will learn more about this King there. One of the three disciples with the Lord Jesus on that occasion was Peter; he never forgot it. Many years after, he wrote in his second letter, *"We were eye-witnesses of His majesty"* 2 Peter 1:16. The events leading up to this occasion will help us to understand its significance. On each of the three occasions when this scene is described, it follows a call to discipleship and a reference to the future appearing of the Lord Jesus and His kingdom. In Matthew's gospel, He is described as the Son of Man. There is a connection here with Daniel 7. Let's listen then to the Lord's words before the three disciples were taken up into the mountain. *"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"*.

We might have a little difficulty understanding the Lord's words here. What did He really mean? After all, the kingdom of the Son of man is in the future as to its fulfilment. How could they possibly see it before they died? The truth is that what they saw on the mount was a preview of that coming kingdom. Just think again of the words of Peter in his letter already referred to. *"For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty"* (2 Peter 1:16). As we consider the incident this will become clearer. Another question might arise in our minds here. Why did the Lord Jesus take these disciples up into the mount of transfiguration? We have already noted that this followed a call to discipleship. Listen to it, *"Then said Jesus unto His disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me"*. There is a cost connected with discipleship! The Lord Jesus encouraged His disciples by showing them this preview of the coming kingdom. If we are to take up His cross with its rejection and reproach there will be a reward in that day. We must remember that this particular incident took place not many days before the Lord Jesus was crucified. These three disciples later met with suffering or martyrdom at the hand of those who opposed them. The call to follow the Lord is just as costly for believers now, so let us take courage. The apostle Paul, seeking to encourage his son in the faith, Timothy, writes, *"If we suffer, we shall also reign with him"*.

Let's think of this transfiguration scene. The focus of our attention must be upon the Person of the Lord Jesus. The three disciples saw Him in a way they had never seen Him before. Listen to the opening verses of the account given in Matthew's gospel. *"Jesus taketh...them up into an high mountain apart, and was transfigured before them: and His face did shine as the sun, and His raiment was white as the light"*. In this account the Lord Jesus is seen as the King, connecting with the Old Testament prophecies. It is not surprising then that our attention is directed to His face shining as the sun. As the Old Testament draws to a close, in the book of Malachi, we read, *"But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of Righteousness arise with healing in His wings"*. This scripture points on to the future kingdom of Christ. Each of the three Gospels refer to His raiment being white. This is an answer in heaven to His perfect life on earth in which He loved righteousness and hated lawlessness. It will never be forgotten! Thinking of His life here, Luke tells us that He was praying when He was transfigured. It is the Gospel of Luke that shows us the Lord Jesus as the dependent Man. The word transfigured points to a complete change, not just external. That which was inherent in Him shone out. Again in Luke's account we read that the disciples *"saw His glory"*.

Two Old Testament characters now take up our attention. *"And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with Him"*. Moses was the mediator between God and the people when the law was given. The people were terrified by the thunderings and lightnings at Mount Sinai. They said to Moses, *"Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die"*. The law only keeps us at a distance from God because of our inability to

keep it. However, Moses had a most favoured place. Later on in the book of Exodus we read, *“And the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend”*. Elijah was the other Old Testament character on the mount of transfiguration. He was the prophet of restoration and occupied an outstanding place when God’s people had turned to fearful idolatry. Another Bible mountain comes to mind here. It was on Mount Carmel that Elijah came into prominence. There was a great test to be made as to who was God, was it the LORD or the false prophet Baal? An agreement was made that the prophets of Baal and Elijah would each build an altar and provide a bullock as a sacrifice. Elijah challenged the people saying, *“And call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the LORD: and the God that answereth with fire, let him be God”*. There was no answer to the cries of the false prophets. God did respond to the call of His servant, for the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice. We then read *“...the people saw it, and fell on their faces: and they said, The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God”*. So God stood by His servant and the prophets of Baal were killed. There was a temporary restoration.

The conversation between Moses and Elijah and the Lord Jesus is interesting. Luke gives us the subject of their conversation. Just listen to it, *“And, behold, there talked with Him two men, which were Moses and Elias: who appeared in glory, and spake of His decease which He should accomplish at Jerusalem”*. The word ‘decease’ is better given as ‘exodus’; this means His ‘going out’ by the way of death. He had set his face toward Jerusalem from the very outset, knowing well the cost. Isn’t it striking that these two Old Testament saints should have been in the secret of His impending death? Their earthly life was long passed and in heaven they understood the necessity of the cross. There can be no foundation for blessing in our day, nor could the coming Kingdom have any righteous basis, apart from the cross of Christ. Let’s take this to heart. Think again of Moses the Lawgiver. The law condemns; we often liken it to the builder’s plumb-line. It will not put the wall straight but will only show how crooked it is. Attempting to gain salvation by law-keeping is a dead end. Elijah stands for a call back from our wrong living. This call is very good in its way. But not good enough! Salvation comes by faith in the work of redemption carried out by the Lord Jesus through His death.

Let’s think now of Peter’s words on the ‘holy mount’. It is only Luke who tells us that *“Peter and they that were with him were heavy with sleep: and when they were awake, they saw His glory, and the two men that stood with Him”*. It is this piece of information that assures us that this incident took place at night. Peter couldn’t hold back. Just listen to what he said, *“Peter said unto Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias: not knowing what he said”*. Peter thought how good it would be to extend this glorious experience. His great mistake was to put the Lord Jesus on the same level as these two Old Testament saints, great as they were. Christ must have the first place because of who He is. When Peter said this, there came a cloud and overshadowed them. This is the cloud that we read of in Old Testament times. In the book of Exodus instructions were given to Moses for the setting up of the tabernacle. When it was completed, we are told that, *“a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle”*. This cloud was the visible sign of the presence of God. The three disciples on the mount feared as they entered the cloud.

Let’s think now of the voice out of the cloud. It must have been a frightening experience. They heard God’s voice. He said, *“This is my beloved Son: hear him”*. You may remember that similar words were said when the Lord Jesus was baptized in the river Jordan. This was at the beginning of His public ministry, looking back over thirty years of obscurity in Nazareth. How pleasing it had been to His Father, every step so perfect. Now towards the end of His ministry, His Father expresses His pleasure in Him, (see the account given in Matthew’s gospel). But there were the added words, *“hear Him”*. There can be little doubt that this was for Peter. It was saying; ‘Peter, you can’t compare Moses and Elijah with My Beloved Son.’ Christians in our day must also take this to heart; there is none so great as Jesus. God is jealous for the honour of His Son. When the voice was past, Jesus was found alone. This unforgettable experience was over.

We are going to think again about these two Old Testament characters. At the beginning of our talk, we said that the transfiguration was a preview of the future kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the book of Revelation, much is said about that kingdom. There is a heavenly part and an earthly part. The heavenly is described in chapter 21. In that chapter the apostle John is called upon, *“Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb’s wife”*. This is the way the Church is referred to in that coming day. The true place of Israel in that day will be upon earth; indeed it will be the head among the nations. This was promised in Old Testament times. The distinction between the Church and Israel must be kept in mind; otherwise we will not understand prophecy. At the present time, all believers in the Lord Jesus belong to the Church, often referred to as the body of Christ. What is our hope? We wait for the coming of the Lord when we will meet Him in the air. Now one outstanding fact about Elijah is that he went to heaven without dying. As to Moses, we are told that he was buried. God buried him! No one knows where. This is all very interesting.

In the letter to the Thessalonians, we learn about the rapture of the Church and the Old Testament believers. It is here that we read of believers in the Lord Jesus who have fallen asleep, that is, they have died. Also, there will be Christians on earth who will be alive when the Lord comes. Moses is a figure of those who have died. Elijah who was taken up by a whirlwind into heaven without dying is a figure of those still alive when the Lord comes. Let’s listen to Paul! *“For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout...and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we*

which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air..." Therefore these two Old Testament characters set out the heavenly side of the kingdom occupied by the Church.

We will now consider the three disciples, Peter, James and John. They were Jews, as were all the twelve called by the Lord Jesus. In the Gospels they are a Jewish remnant, separate from the nation who rejected Christ. They were sent out to preach the Gospel of the kingdom, as the Lord Jesus had done. Their message was, "*the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (Matthew 10:7). They did not go over all the cities of Israel then. But another godly remnant will carry on the preaching during the time of the great tribulation. This will be just prior to the setting up of the kingdom. Therefore, these three disciples are in a similar position to those in a coming day. Some of this future remnant will lose their lives. Others will be preserved to enjoy the blessings of that day under the rule of the King. If Moses and Elijah represent the heavenly side of the kingdom, the three disciples represent the earthly side.

On the next day, when they came down from the mountain, they were faced with a sad state of affairs. A father brought to the Lord Jesus his only son who had an unclean spirit saying, "*Master, I beseech thee, look upon my son: for he is mine only child*". He had already brought him to the other disciples to cast the spirit out but they were unable to do so. Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and healed the child. The Lord Jesus delivered him again to his father. This miracle completes the picture of the coming kingdom of Christ, the church in its place and Israel fulfilling its function. The whole creation, which at the moment groans under the terrible effects of sin and Satan, will enjoy the reign of the rightful King. As we close let us pray that, as we wait for the coming of the Lord and that glorious kingdom, we may be faithful disciples willing, for the moment, to share His rejection.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.