

# Truth for Today

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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For reply: Email: [truthfortoday@aol.com](mailto:truthfortoday@aol.com)

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**Speaker:** Mr. Anthony Brett

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## Lessons from the mountains of Israel: The Mount of Transfiguration

Our Bible study today is the third in the series of the "Mountains of Israel". This talk is titled the "Mountain of Transfiguration" the incident is recorded by three of the writers of the Gospels and also by the Apostle Peter in his second Epistle, 2 Peter. We have already looked at Moses and Mount Sinai, and the glorious Mount Zion but take a little time to read and think about Balaam viewing the children of Israel from the top of a mountain. Or think about Elijah on the top of Mount Carmel, or even the Apostle John who was taken up onto a great and high mountain as described in Revelation 21.

I believe it is generally true that when God takes people up a mountain it is so that they can learn to see things from God's perspective. Things always look very different from the top of a mountain! People look so very tiny; buildings that seem so imposing when we stand beside them are suddenly insignificant. So often as well, the problems we face diminish in magnitude when we view them in God's presence.

Clearly, if God the Holy Spirit records an incident in the life of the Lord Jesus three times, it must be of particular importance. We can read the historical account of the transfiguration of the Lord Jesus in Matthew's, Mark's, or Luke's Gospel. We will read the account as recorded by Matthew.

"Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.' Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!' And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. But Jesus came and touched them and said, 'Arise, and do not be afraid.' When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, 'Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead.'" (Matthew 16:28 to 17:11)

Each of the three accounts in the Gospels is preceded by the Lord Jesus telling His disciples about His imminent death and the cost of discipleship. "He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31). The Lord Jesus constantly referred to Himself as "the Son of Man" and spoke of the fact that He would come with power and glory, but He also spoke of His rejection, suffering and death.

One of the great puzzles of the Old Testament that the Jewish people had difficulty explaining was the enigma of the suffering Messiah. The Old Testament is full of the most amazing prophecies regarding the glory and power of the coming King, and the majesty and extent of His kingdom. But alongside these are passages of Scripture, like Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 which speak of tremendous suffering. They wondered if in fact there would be two Messiahs: one who would suffer and die, and one who would reign in power and majesty.

The Lord provides the answer to this enigma, when He speaks after His resurrection to those two disciples on the road to Emmaus and says, "Ought not Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory" (Luke 24:26). It is clear that Peter had also learnt this lesson when, much later in his life, he writes in his epistle of the "sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow" (1 Peter 1:11).

It is very clear from other Scriptures that at this time the disciples fully expected the Lord to reign in majesty, and they wanted to share in His glory, but Jesus also spoke of the need for His followers "to deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." (Mark 8:34). Clearly, in the day in which they lived, the disciples would understand that anyone carrying a cross was under immediate sentence of death.

For faithful Israelites who were looking to the Lord to free them from the Romans and introduce a glorious kingdom this would be desperately discouraging. Like any occupied country, they longed for a deliverer, and genuinely believed

the Lord to be that person. The Lord Jesus on several occasions warns them that He would be parted from them by death, although He always added that He would rise again on the third day. It seems that the incident of the transfiguration is set as an effective antidote to any discouragement they might feel. There would be a glorious King with a glorious kingdom, just not yet!

Each of the three writers, Matthew, Mark and Luke introduces the record of the Transfiguration with a very similar statement. Mark writes that Jesus said "Truly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power" (Mark 9:1).

Luke writes that Jesus said, "I tell you truly, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:27). In speaking to His disciples the Lord indicates that something of great significance would happen within the lifetime of some of those then present.

Like a lot of sayings of the Lord Jesus this probably puzzled the disciples, but looking back, after Jesus had died and risen again, they would realise that yes, they had indeed witnessed the "Kingdom of God present with power" or as Matthew records it "the Son of Man coming in His Kingdom" (Matthew 16:28). These three disciples, James, John and Peter were incredibly privileged because they, for just a few moments, had a preview of the glorious King who will reign in the coming kingdom of God.

Why these three men? Why James, John and Peter? This is not the only time these three disciples are picked out; they were also chosen to go with the Lord when He went to raise the daughter of Jairus from the dead. They also went with the Lord Jesus when He was so distressed in the garden of Gethsemane. I don't really know why they were picked out in this way. It is clear that after the Lord rose from the dead and returned to heaven, that these three men took a prominent place in the early witness of the Christians.

Peter often takes the lead among the apostles, James was the first of the apostles to die as a martyr, and John was almost certainly the last of the apostles to die. These various incidents would seem to be part of the preparation for their very different later lives. We learn important lessons when we look at the Lord, each of which must shape and fashion our later lives and Christian witness.

Luke records that it was while the Lord was praying to His Father that this incident took place. Moses, centuries earlier, on Mount Sinai had spent time in God's presence and his face glowed. But this was different; very different. The word "transfigured" is the same word that is used by scientists to describe the transformation of a chrysalis into a butterfly. The word is "metamorphose". It is the revelation of what is there hidden from sight. The life, nature and character of the chrysalis must at the right time be transformed and revealed in the beauty of a butterfly.

So at the right and appropriate time the inherent glory and majesty of the Lord will be revealed. While He was here on earth, His kingly glory was hidden or veiled; but He was still the true King, and these three disciples had a glimpse of His majesty and it confirmed to them the truth of all the Old Testament prophecies. "His face shone as the sun, and His clothing became shining white as light, whiter than any man on earth could achieve." It is difficult for us to imagine a scene like this, but Saul, or Paul as he was renamed, had a similar experience on the Damascus road, and recalling the incident later, he speaks of a light brighter than the noonday sun!

They are now joined by two other people, Moses and Elijah who talked with the Lord Jesus. The disciples appear to have no doubt at all about who these two people were. Both were famous and honoured prophets, who had played a significant role in the nation's history. But how did they know who they were? There were clearly no photographs or statues of these two men. Was the identity of these prophets revealed to the disciples by God in a miraculous way, or did their identity become obvious to Peter, James and John as they listened to the conversation they were having with the Lord? I don't know for certain, but it is true that if you listen to friends talking together you quickly learn a lot about them, including their names.

What is of more interest is the question as to why Moses and Elijah, of all the Old Testament prophets, were chosen to meet with the Lord in this way, and also the subject matter of their conversation with the Lord. I believe Moses is the only man who had his funeral conducted by God! It is remarkable that probably the thing we remember most about the Egyptian civilisation is the pyramids, mummies and the grandeur of their burials. But none of the Pharaohs had a burial to compare with Moses, "the son of Pharaoh's daughter"! It is recorded in Deuteronomy 34:6 "[Jehovah] buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-Peor; and no man knows his sepulchre to this day".

Elijah on the other hand never had a funeral, he didn't need one! When Elijah had completed all that God had for him to do, he was taken to heaven in a whirlwind. The story is recorded for us in 2 Kings 2:11. To me then, the choice of Moses and Elijah to be found with the Lord on this glorious mountain is very significant. There are many believers who have died and are in God's care, and there are some who, when the Lord calls them to be with Him, at what is often

called the Rapture, as described in 1 Thessalonians 4 will never die but will be translated straight to heaven. Both will be reunited in the majestic presence of the Lord Jesus and be completely at home there!

We are not left to speculate about the subject that occupied them in conversation. We are told that Moses and Elijah talked together with Jesus about "His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem". Have you ever heard of anyone else's death described in this way, as something to accomplish? I don't think I have! But Jesus came into this world with a very definite purpose; He came to die. And in His death He paid the penalty that our sins had incurred and He brought eternal glory to His God and Father. It certainly was a death that accomplished great things!

The disciples are completely overwhelmed at what they are witnessing and, as so often, Peter speaks without thinking. The scene that they were witnessing was so marvellous that Peter wanted to prolong it for as long as possible. He suggests that they make three tabernacles or booths, "one for [Jesus], one for Moses, and one for Elijah".

Whilst Moses and Elijah were great men, they were not to be compared in any way with the greatness of the Lord Jesus. Matthew's account of this incident comments that Peter was afraid and didn't know what to say. Generally when we don't know what to say we are well advised to say nothing! "In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise." (Proverbs 10:19). The recurring theme of the New Testament is not just that Jesus is remarkable and special; He is unique and He must be pre-eminent, without a rival!

Immediately the Scriptures record that a bright cloud overshadowed them, and they entered the cloud. The phrase "bright cloud" used here suggests that it is the same cloud that guided the children of Israel in the wilderness and indicated the immediate presence of God. The Gospel writers record that Peter, James and John were all afraid! That is hardly surprising!

As the disciples enter the cloud they hear a voice speaking to them. "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased Hear Him!" In their day both Moses and Elijah had spoken for God often with dramatic and remarkable results. Now they must stand aside, in fact they disappear from sight! God's Beloved Son is here and we all must listen to Him and to Him alone! Although at the time Peter falls to the ground, he is so afraid, years later he writes, "For [Jesus] received from God the Father honour and glory, when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory" (2 Peter 1:17).

Moses and Elijah have disappeared from sight and "suddenly, when they had looked around, they saw no one anymore, but only Jesus with themselves". This can never be a bad thing! We don't know how long this incident on the mountain had lasted, but certainly the disciples had seen the glory of the Lord Jesus, had seen His clothes shine bright as the light and had entered a bright cloud where they had heard the voice of God speak. Now they were alone with the Lord Jesus, who reaches out His hand to touch and comfort them. All was mysterious to them, but all was perfectly understood by Him! Jesus says to them "Arise and do not be afraid".

The time had come for them to leave this wonderful place but, when they get down to the bottom of the mountain a very different scene awaits them. On the mountain top they heard from a Father who was delighted in the perfection of His Beloved Son. At the foot of the mountain they hear from a different father desperately distressed at the condition of his demon possessed son. The disciples couldn't help the man, but Jesus could and did!

There is a very instructive incident recorded in 1 Kings 20. The Syrian army was fighting against Israel and thought they could gain a tactical advantage by fighting in the plains rather than on the hills. They reasoned that Israel's God was a "God of the hills, but he is not God of the valleys" (1 Kings 20:28). The Syrians learnt to their great cost that He is the LORD, the God of both the mountains and the valleys! The same truth is demonstrated here, the Lord Jesus who is seen as the central glorious figure on the top of the mountain, comes down to the plains of everyday life with all its problems and horrors and is the only One who can help!

What can we learn from the Transfiguration? I believe one of the most important lessons is that we all in our busy lives need time alone with the Lord Jesus. Time like David could say in Psalm 27:4, "to behold the beauty of the LORD". Paul writing in 2 Corinthians 3 says, "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:18). The simple fact is that if we spend time quietly thinking about the glory of the Lord Jesus, we too will be transformed and become more like Him.

But spending time in this way will also recharge our batteries, and encourage and give purpose and focus for our lives. Certainly what the disciples witnessed had a lasting effect on them, Peter in particular. Let's read his record of this event, written years later when he is an old man. "For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honour and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved

Son, in whom I am well pleased.” And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Peter 1:16-19).

What Peter saw on the Mount of Transfiguration coloured and shaped the rest of his life. It confirmed to him the certainty of all the Old Testament prophecies, and having such a glorious prospect ahead of him, he was enabled to live his life with purpose and direction, and for the great blessing of those around him. The same can and should be true of us!

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