

God with Us

CHRIST IN ALL THE GOSPELS

The Crises of Christ: Transfiguration

by Desmond Ford

Christ revealed his glory at the transfiguration to help his followers through the gruesomeness of Calvary. Moses and Elijah are symbols of all the faithful—living and dead—united on the day of Christ's glory. We can understand Moses (the law) and Elijah (the prophets) only through Jesus.



A

ll the biographers of Christ write about his seven crises: 1) Birth, 2) Baptism, 3) Temptation, 4) Transfiguration, 5) Gethsemane, 6) Calvary, and 7) Resurrection.

We have already covered the first three crises.

These seven crises cast light on the three great centralities that we need to understand: 1) The nature of sin and righteousness. 2) The na-

ture of Christ. 3) The nature of the Atonement.

Today we are looking at Christ's Transfiguration.

Jesus' Summer School

We begin with Jesus' summer school of Matthew 16:

When Jesus and his disciples were near the town of Caesarea Philippi, he asked them, "What do people say about the Son of Man?"

The disciples answered, "Some people say you are John the Baptist or maybe Elijah or Jeremiah or some other prophet."

Then Jesus asked them, "But who do you say I am?"

Simon Peter spoke up, "You are the Messiah [Christ], the Son of the living God."

Jesus told him:

Simon, son of Jonah,

you are blessed! You didn't discover this on your own. It was shown to you by my Father in heaven. (Matthew 16:13-17 CEV)

It's the last section of our Lord's ministry. He has withdrawn from the crisis in Galilee to teach his twelve disciples.

Jesus thinks it more important to teach a few closely than many superficially. He takes the small group apart from the crowd to instruct them deeply. He conducts a three-month summer school.

The group spends time in the heathen regions. This is because Jesus wants to instruct them that they have a message for the heathen lands. They approach the border of Palestine near Caesarea Philippi, which was a place of great temples.

1C—Christ's Identity

Here, Jesus asks his disciples what people are saying about him. He climaxes the discussion by asking, "Who do **you** say I am?" Peter answers, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus says, "Simon, son of Jonah, you are blessed! You didn't discover this on your own. It was shown to you by my Father in heaven."

The foundational truth of Christianity is **who Christ is**—the nature of Christ.

Christ is the Son of the living God. He is divine and human. Christ is the God-man, and never did a hyphen mean so much.

Please notice you can't get to this point by reason. You can't come to this conclusion by human power. "You didn't discover this on your own. It was shown to you by my Father in heaven."

The deepest truths, dear friends, are not so much taught as caught. Caught by the soul that is open to God:

If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself. (John 7:17 KJV)

The heart, and not the head, "to the highest doth attain." The Spirit whispers his mysteries to the meek and lowly, not to the proud and uplifted in spirit.

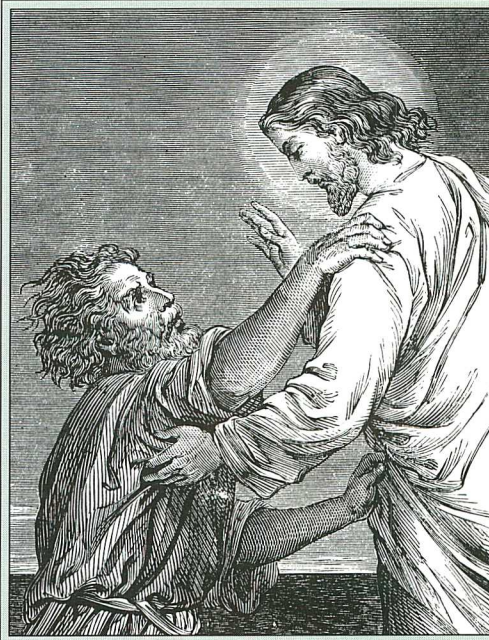
It is much better to have a B.A. (Born Again) than a Ph.D. "Flesh and

blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 16:17 KJV).

2C—Christ's Church

Jesus, having talked about the Christ, talks about the church:

"I will call you Peter, which means 'a rock.' On this rock I will build my



church, and death itself will not have any power over it." (Matthew 16:18 CEV)

Jesus is saying:

"You're Peter. Your name means rock. The truth you've confessed about me, the Rock of Ages, is the rock foundation of Christianity. Upon this truth, upon Myself (concerning whom the truth is about), I build my church."

This means that all who believe in Christ, the divine-human Savior, are members of his church. This is very important.

The New Testament knows nothing of denominations. It doesn't bless them or curse them. It just ignores them.

Whoever knows Christ, the divine-human Savior, whoever confesses him, that person is built upon the Rock, and is a member of Christ's church.

3C—Christ's Cross

Now follows a terrible anticlimax, an awful reaction.

Jesus explains that he must suffer

and die.

Peter took Jesus aside and told him to stop talking like that. He said, "Lord, surely God won't let this happen to you!" (Matthew 16:22)

After Peter's great declaration that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus did not begin to teach his disciples about how well things would now go. About how he would receive the red-carpet treatment, be crowned, and draped in royal purple robes to receive the adulation of the crowd. No! He began to tell them about the cross. Yes, God is going to be crucified.

From then on, Jesus began telling his disciples what would happen to him. He said, "I must go to Jerusalem. There the nation's leaders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the Law of Moses will make me suffer terribly. I will be killed, but three days later I will rise to life." (Matthew 16:21)

The moral influence theory—which is the theory held by many liberal theologians—says Jesus is just a teacher come to tell us about the love of God. The cross of Christ is only a **display** of the love of God. It was not really necessary.

That theory is contradicted by this passage. "I must go to Jerusalem.... I will be killed." He **must**!

"Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22 NIV). None whatever.

We Shrink from the Cross

Human nature does not like the cross. We all shrink from it. Whatever is contrary to ease and comfort and pride and vanity and gain—we hate.

Peter hated the cross. So Jesus speaks to him very strongly:

"Satan, get away from me!

You're in my way because you think like everyone else and not like God." (Matthew 16:23 CEV)

What an abrupt transition! From, "Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona.... I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven," to "Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men" (Matthew 16:17, 19, 23 KJV).

We are creatures of contrariness. None of us are very consistent. The

people you like best are those who are most consistent. The people you find the hardest to be with are those who are least consistent. But, truth is, none of us are very consistent.

"I've more news for you, Peter," says Jesus. "I'm not the only one who is going to be crucified. If you follow me, there's a cross for you, too."

"If any of you want to be my followers, you must forget about yourself. You must take up your cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24)

4C—Christ's Coming

Jesus has talked about the Christ, the Church, and the Cross. He has one more 'C' to talk about. The 'C' of his Coming:

"The Son of man will soon come in the glory of his Father and with his angels to reward all people for what they have done. I promise you that some of those standing here will not die before they see the Son of Man coming with his kingdom." (Matthew 16:27-28)

Transfiguration of Christ

The next event that follows is the Transfiguration. (In each of the Gospels that tell of the transfiguration—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—it is linked with the story of Jesus and Peter and the cross.)

The transfiguration is a miniature of what Jesus has just been speaking of—Christ's second coming. Peter can say:

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. (2 Peter 1:16-18 NIV)

Peter links Christ's transfiguration with the second advent because the transfiguration was a prefiguring, a preliminary, a forecast, a prediction, an enactment, a parable, of Christ's sec-

ond coming:

Six days later Jesus took Peter and the brothers James and John with him. They went up on a very high mountain where they could be alone. (Matthew 17:1 CEV)

Gruesome Calvary and Glory

There is a very good reason why Jesus



took the three disciples with him. He had told them about his suffering and agony to come. The only way they could endure is if they could be encouraged to believe in his glory. The only way they could survive the gruesome events at Calvary is if they could be assured of Jesus' divinity.

There in front of the disciples Jesus was completely changed. His face was shining like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. (Matthew 17:2)

They had confessed Christ's glory, but now they must see it. They must see it enacted out in transfiguration radiance into which God, the Father, enters and speaks.

"All at once Moses and Elijah were there talking with Jesus" (Matthew 17:3). Jesus had just been teaching about the church. Now the disciples witness a prophetic enactment of the consummation, the great day when all the church is gathered together unto God.

All of those faithful who lived unto the time of Moses will be gathered. All

of those faithful who lived unto the time of Elijah and the prophets will be gathered. All of those faithful who have lived since Jesus was on earth.

Christ, Moses, and Elijah represent the whole church. The transfiguration symbolizes how the church is going to be gathered home—the dead and the living.

Moses represents the dead. He was raised (see Jude 9). All the righteous dead will be raised. Moses symbolizes them all.

Elijah was translated without seeing death (see 2 Kings 2:11). He represents the living saints.

Here we see the great future gathering of the church. The dead and the living saints are united at the second coming of Christ.

We Don't Yet Live in Glory

When Peter sees the glory, he is quick to speak. He's never behind with suggestions, always the first to speak and the last to hold his tongue.

"Lord, it is good for us to be here! Let us make three shelters, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (Matthew 17:4).

Peter is saying, "Lord, this is wonderful! I don't want this to be temporary, Lord. I like to live in glory. Can't we set up a few buildings here?"

There's no such thing in this life as permanent glory. Fame is very much passing. Fame is a breath.

In the Christian life, you can't be on the mountainpeak all the time. They hadn't been there long and Jesus says, "Let's go down."

There's someone down there that needs help. The Christian has ups and then goes down to serve.

The Christian lives between the mountain and the multitude. You need time away from people. The only person who is any good to people is the one who is often away from people.

The person who hopes to build a tabernacle and stay up there in glory—well, that never works.

There are certain popular religions today—with many wonderful people among them—that teach you can live in an aura of complete and continuous joy. Followers are taught to expect a miracle behind every bush and think ecstasy is the perennial path of the

Christian.

Dear friends, it was not so with Jesus. It was not so for the twelve disciples. It has never been so for any Christian throughout the ages.

The Christian life is mountain and multitude. It's the valley of Gethsemane and the cross of Calvary as well as the resurrection morning.

If we are entirely pessimistic we are liars. If we are entirely optimistic we are liars. It is better to be realistic. Ups and downs are part of reality. If we deny either we are in trouble.

All these things are part of the rainbow. The rainbow does not only have very sharp, bright colors. It has darker hues also. It accurately symbolizes life.

Law and the Gospel

The shadow of a bright cloud passed over them. From the cloud a voice said, "This is my own dear Son, and I am pleased with him. Listen to what he says!" When the disciples heard the voice they were so afraid that they fell flat on the ground. But Jesus came over and touched them. He said, "Get up and don't be afraid!" When they opened their eyes, they saw only Jesus. (Matthew 17:5-8)

"They saw only Jesus." Moses, who represents the law, and Elijah, who represents the prophets, must only ever be read through Jesus.

The law is never adequate, or sufficient, in and of itself. Too many people, when they read the Bible, read the commandments only. Naturally, they get depressed.

We must learn, when we read the Bible to read the promises as well as the commandments. Don't see the commandments in big print and the promises in little print. Let's recognize they are both there.

A person who reads Moses and the law without Jesus reads, "Thou shalt **not** kill," "Thou shalt **not** commit adultery," "Thou shalt **not** steal," "Thou shalt **not** bear false witness," "Thou shalt **not** covet" (see Exodus 20:13-17 KJV).

But when you read that same law through Jesus, you see, "I am Jesus, the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the house of bondage, brought thee out of sin. Therefore, I promise

you, '**Thou** shalt not kill,' '**Thou** shalt not commit adultery,' '**Thou** shalt not steal,' '**Thou** shalt not bear false witness,' '**Thou** shalt not covet.' It is not necessary to live that way anymore. I will keep you. You have been delivered from those idols of Egypt: hatred, lust, and covetousness. I've delivered you from all that by the blood of the Lamb" (see Exodus 20:1-2).

Seen through Jesus, God's commandments become God's promises.

Prophecy and the Gospel

Elijah represents the prophets. Prophecy viewed apart from Jesus is a travesty—a horrible, horrible travesty.

I remember reading the Book of Revelation through one night when I was about ten. It scared me so much I had nightmares.

I saw the beasts and the whores, the satanic power chasing the pregnant lady through the heavens. I saw the sea of blood.

What I did not see was the Lamb, and he's there 28 times! Isn't human nature strange? I missed the 28 references to the Lamb. I never heard when Revelation shouted, "Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood" (Revelation 1:5). All I saw was the terrifying symbols.

A few years later I read a great old book called, *Daniel and the Revelation*, by Uriah Smith. I forgot that the full title says *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Books of Daniel and the Revelation*. I forgot it was Uriah's **thoughts**. I was inclined to take the book too seriously.

There are some very good things in that book. There are other things not so good. It was written at a time when the study of apocalyptic literature was little understood.

It was very wholesome in that it drew attention to the study of the Book of Revelation. It was very wholesome in that it emphasized the second coming of Jesus.

But it is very short in genuine exegesis. You see, the study of eschatology (the study of last things) was neglected until the middle of the nineteenth century. All that had been written on the topic could go on a postcard. Only in recent times has the church turned its attention to the study of last things and events.

Many of today's books on prophecy aren't worth the paper they're printed on. You can always spot the inferior ones. If they don't mention Jesus and the gospel, they've missed the point of prophecy.

Elijah disappears before the disciples' eyes, and gives way to Jesus only. That's because the prophets can only be understood through Jesus.

The first public meeting of Jesus' ministry illustrates this.

Prophecy Is About Jesus

Jesus went back to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and as usual he went to the meeting place on the Sabbath. When he stood up to read from the Scriptures, he was given the book of Isaiah the prophet. He opened it and read:

The Lord's Spirit has come to me,
because he has chosen me....

Everyone in the meeting place
looked straight at Jesus.

Then Jesus said to them,

"What you have just heard me
read has come true today.

(Luke 4:16-21 CEV)

Whenever prophecy is read, the eyes of all who read it should be fastened on Christ.

"The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Revelation 19:10 KJV). The testimony of Jesus is the heart of prophecy. The testimony of Jesus is the substance of prophecy. Prophecy is about Jesus.

Moses and Elijah were God's servants. But Jesus is God's Son. "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5 NIV). Listen to Moses and Elijah only when heard through Jesus. ❖

God with Us

Dr. Ford's articles are taken
from his lectures at the

**"God with Us:
Christ in all the Gospels"**
Bible School.

This was held in Auburn,
California, May 7-9, 1993.

Audio cassettes are
available from GNU.