

Confusion on the Mount of Transfiguration

Luke 9:28-36

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Today we will be partaking of the Lord's Supper. The Apostle Paul reminds us:

"As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes."

We need the Lord's Supper because it serves as a sort of touchstone for our Sunday worship. The Lord's Supper is like that bright white line down the middle of a black asphalt road, especially on a dark and rainy night. It helps us keep on the road. It helps us keep out of the ditch. The Lord's Supper keeps us on the straight and narrow way by reminding us that the cross of Christ is at the very heart of our religion. You cannot remove the bloody atoning death of Christ from Christianity without tearing the heart out of Christianity and turning it into something else. By partaking of the bread and the wine, we are reminded that Jesus died. By doing so on the Lord's Day, we are reminded that Jesus rose again from the dead. The Lord's Supper on the Lord's Day -- that says it all.

We need these frequent reminders of our Lord's bloody death and glorious resurrection because so many today, even among those who call themselves Christians, deny their importance.

What is in vogue today among some who call themselves Christians is a Christianity where a God without wrath brings a people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through a Christ without a cross. That's the sort of so-called Christianity we get when we abandon our Bibles and conform our thinking to the spirit of the age. The salt loses its savor and is good for nothing and is cast out cast out and trampled underfoot by men.

In November 1993, a number of the mainline denominations funded a theological conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Here is what one of the speakers at that conference, a seminary professor from Union Theological Seminary in New York City, had to say about the atoning work of Jesus Christ:

"I don't think we need a theory of atonement at all. Atonement has so much to do with death. I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff. We do not need atonement, we just need to listen to the god within."

What that seminary professor said certainly is in stark contrast to what the Apostle Paul had to say on the same subject. Paul said,

"For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (2 Cor. 2:2).

Paul acknowledges that the cross of Christ is to the Greeks foolishness and to the Jews a stumbling block. It is only through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit that the message of the

cross becomes to us the very power of God and the very wisdom of God. Apart from God's saving grace, we too would be saying things such as,

"I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff. "

Apart from the saving grace of God, the cross of Christ would be to us foolishness and a stumblingblock.

In our last communion sermon, we saw that the cross of Jesus was at one point a stumbling block even to Simon Peter. Jesus had taken the twelve disciples to Caesarea Philippi, a city a good bit to the north of the sea of Galilee, a place far away from the Pharisees and the Sadducees who were so hardened in their opposition to Jesus. There, in relative isolation, Jesus revealed Himself more fully to the twelve. It was then that Peter gave His inspired confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." But then Peter stumbled over the cross. We read in Matthew 16:21-23:

- 21 From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.
- 22 Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!"
- 23 But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."

It was about a week after these events when Jesus took Peter, James and John, the three disciples in His innermost circle, up upon a nearby mountain, which was probably the snow capped Mt. Hermon. The New Testament does not tell us specifically what occupied their time that week between Peter's confession and their ascent of Mt. Hermon, but we can be reasonably sure that during that time, Jesus continued His explanations of the need for His atoning death. Then Jesus took Peter, James and John to the peace and isolation of a mountain for a time of prayer. It was probably at night because Jesus commonly prayed at night. Also, the three disciples would fall asleep, which happens more commonly at night. And when the four would descend from the mountain, we read in verse 37 that it was the next day.

Thus this night Jesus was on a mountain with His innermost circle of disciples, Peter, James and John, praying with them. We are not told specifically what Jesus prayed, but when we think about what had happened previously, I believe we are safe to conclude that as a part of His prayers, Jesus was praying for the disciples that God might strengthen their faith for the coming day of atonement.

I am reminded of the prayer of Elisha the prophet for his servant when that servant was filled with fear instead of faith:

II Kings 6:15-17

15 And when the servant of the man of God arose early and went out, there was an army, surrounding the city with

horses and chariots. And his servant said to [Elisha], "Alas, my master! What shall we do?"

16 So [Elisha] answered, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

17 And Elisha prayed, and said, "LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see." Then the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

Similarly, Jesus prayed for His disciples, and God answered His prayer by revealing to them there on that mountain something of the hidden world of the supernatural.

We read that Peter, James and John had fallen asleep, and when they awoke, they saw Jesus with two other individuals in a state of glory. And Jesus especially was glorious. Matthew says that Jesus was transfigured. The word there translated "transfigured" is the Greek word from which we get the English word "metamorphosis," a word we use to speak of the change of a caterpillar into a butterfly or the change of a tadpole into a frog. The word here indicates a striking change in Jesus' appearance. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And the two men talking with Jesus also appeared in glory.

What was the source of this glory? The Apostle Peter tells us when he comments on this event in 2 Peter 1:16-18:

16 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.

- 17 For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."
- 18 And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.

The glory there on the Mount of Transfiguration came from God the Father. At that time and place, Jesus received special honor and glory from God the Father, and Moses and Elijah were also engulfed in that glory and reflected it.

We know that God the Father was there on the Mount of Transfiguration in a special way because we read of the cloud that came and overshadowed them even while Peter was speaking. That cloud was no ordinary cloud. It was the glory cloud through which God both cloaks and reveals the radiance of His glory. This cloud had appeared in the desert at the time of Moses:

Exodus 16:10

- 10 Now it came to pass, as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the children of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud.

We meet this cloud at the inauguration of the temple in the days of King Solomon:

1 Kings 8:10-11

- 10 And it came to pass, when the priests came out of the holy place, that the cloud filled the house of the LORD,

11 so that the priests could not continue ministering because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.

And we meet it again at Christ's ascension up into heaven:

Acts 1:9

9 Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.

At this time when the disciples were weak in faith, God the Father clothed Jesus with glory to encourage Him with a bracing reaffirmation of the Father's continuing delight in the Son, that this might sustain the Son as His time of agony upon the cross grew nearer and nearer. And this glory affirmation also strengthened the faith of Peter, James and John, who would soon be scattered like sheep without a Shepherd.

With Jesus there on the Mount, in answer to His prayer, there appeared Moses, the giver of the Law, and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets of old. We read that they were discussing Jesus' departure with Him. The Greek word there is literally His exodus. It refers to His leaving this world and encompasses His death, resurrection and ascension. They were discussing Jesus' departure which Jesus would soon accomplish at Jerusalem.

After His resurrection, Jesus would explain to His disciples from the Scriptures, from the Law and the Prophets, that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day (Luke 24:44-46).

Only a week before, Peter had rebuked Jesus for telling them that it was necessary for Him to suffer and die, but here Peter, James and John see Jesus discussing the necessity of these events with Moses and Elijah themselves, representing the Law and the Prophets.

The transfiguration was an answer to prayer for the strengthening of the disciples faith near the end of the Galilean ministry as Jesus prepared to travel to Jerusalem for His encounter with Calvary.

We see first **Christ's prayer**, but then we see **Peter's confusion**. As Moses and Elijah were about to leave, Peter cries out his desire to continue this glorious experience indefinitely. He says, Let us build here three crude huts, one for Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah, that we may prolong this glorious experience.

We need to acknowledge the good in what Peter said that day. We see his love for the Savior, his desire that the Savior continue in this glorious estate and company. We see his willingness to serve, to search out the materials and to build the three huts he proposes. We see his selflessness in that he suggests only three huts and not one for himself. We see his spiritual intuition as he somehow recognizes Moses and Elijah for who they were.

Yet we learn from this that sincere zeal and love and selflessness and a degree of spiritual intuition are not enough, for Peter's proposal was also foolish and even sinful.

His proposal was foolish, for what substitute would crude earthly huts be for the heavenly mansions to which Moses and Elijah were accustomed?

His proposal was also sinful. Here on the Mount of Transfiguration we find representatives of both the Church Triumphant and the Church Militant. The Church Triumphant, freed from indwelling sin and made perfect in holiness, is in perfect harmony with the divine will. Moses and Elijah, representing the Church Triumphant, discuss with Jesus the necessity of his fast approaching departure from this world which will involve the painful and shameful death of the cross. Peter, representing the Church Militant, still has trouble accepting the need for Christ to suffer. He wants instead to prolong this mountain top experience of glory.

We have seen **Christ's prayer** and **Peter's confusion**. We lastly see **the Father's counsel**. Peter spoke sincerely but foolishly and sinfully. And even as He spoke, a cloud came and overshadowed them. This was no ordinary cloud but the glory cloud of God. And out of it, God the Father spoke:

"This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!"

Our sincere zeal and love and our inner intuition are not enough. We can be religious and spiritual and yet oh so mistaken. We can be religious and sincere and zealous and yet still make foolish statements such as,

"I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff."

To avoid such sin and folly, we need to listen to Jesus. He explains to us from the law and the prophets that it is necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise again on the third day. And He challenges us to take up our crosses and to follow Him.

Hear Him! Listen to Him! Heed Him! Follow Him!

Beloved, we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Corinthians 1:23-25)

Beloved, the suffering of Christ is at the heart of our religion. It is the basis for our forgiveness before God and our deliverance from a life of sin. It is the example of the life of selfless sacrifice which God calls us to live.

Indeed, we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together (Romans 8:17b).