

The Transfiguration-“Second” Coming Glory of Christ (Mat 16.28-17.2)

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For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.²⁷ But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.”²⁸ Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray.²⁹ And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white.³⁰ And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah,³¹ who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.³² Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.³³ And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah”- not knowing what he said.³⁴ As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud.³⁵ And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!”³⁶ And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen (Lk 9.28-36).

Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light (Mat 16.28-17.2).

Introduction

Our text for today (Mat 16.28-17.2) is a straightforward narrative that is easy to follow, but difficult to understand. It is easy to follow what Jesus is saying in the prediction of 16.28. It is easy to conclude that a miracle, a transfiguring miracle, occurred on the mountain (17.2). It is easy to follow the talking that goes on here between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, between Jesus and the Father, between Jesus and Peter, and between Jesus and Peter, James, and John.

But what does it all mean? How do we get our arms around the narrative for good understanding and sound application? Some other probing questions are: how does verse 28 of chapter 16 connect with the verses before it on God-minded discipleship? How does verse 28 connect with the transfiguration that comes after it in 17.1-13?

The title of the message on this text speaks to the difficulty and its solution, at least it does so in a very brief, somewhat abrupt, and precise way. The title is “The Transfiguration-Second Coming Glory of Christ.” To tackle this subject, we would do well to cover the context of the transfiguration in three steps: 1) Immediate context, 2) prophetic context, and 3) the NT context. In this way, context will open the door of difficulty. Then, we can draw out some concluding applications.

1A. Immediate context

1) Connection of people and time

There is a close temporal connection between the previous events (chapter 16), and what happens next (chapter 17). A close connection exists between 16.28 and 17.1. Jesus predicted that some standing there under the sound of His voice would see His coming in glory during their lifetimes: **Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom** (16.28). Thus, he mentions two key things: a) some people will see His coming, and b) it will be during their lifetimes at some unspecified time in the future. Then the narrator draws our attention to a time in the future (after six days, 17.1; Luke has “about eight days after”, 9.28). Moreover, he draws attention to the notable fact that Jesus took *some* of the disciples with Him to a mountain; He took Peter, James, and John with Him.

2) Conclusion

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the transfiguration (on that mountain, 17.2) is the event predicted. It is difficult to avoid concluding that the particular people who are to experience the event (some standing here) are Peter, James, and John (Remarkably, however, many commentators take 16.28 to be referring to the resurrection of Christ, or His ascension, or the day of Pentecost, or the 70 AD fall of Jerusalem, and *not* the transfiguration. To do so, they ignore the close connection of time and people between 16.28 and 17.1; but these things apply to all the disciples not some).

Therefore, because of the close connection of time and people, we have to conclude that *Peter, James, and John* will not taste death until they see the coming of the Son of Man (16.28 with 17.1). This conclusion is the plain but difficult fact of the text.

3) Emphasis on death

To taste death means to drink of it and experience its bitterness (it is more than simply “to die”). Again, Jesus presents death as an enemy. It is the result of sin and it continues to overtake believers as sinner-saints (Rom 8.10). From 2 Corinthians 5, we know that it is something we do not desire in the time between our death and the resurrection. We do not desire it because it is unnatural to be somewhere without our body. Each of us is a body-soul, material-immaterial unit. The body, your body, is part of what makes you, you. Thus, to die is like tasting something bitter.

However, as Ridderbos points out, the emphasis here is not so much on “not dying,” but on what will happen *before* these disciples die. In a word, emphasis is on the great event of their lives (315). The great event of their lives is the privilege they will have to see the Son of man coming in His kingdom. (Consider how both Luke and Matthew speak of Christ’s coming in glory in Luke 9.26 and Matthew 16.27 as larger context for the prediction that confirms the same point, namely, that His coming at the end of the age in part of this picture).

This idea of the great event of a lifetime is part of the reason commentators skip over the transfiguration. How could the great event of the lives of Peter, James, and John be anything other than the resurrection or the ascension? How could the great event be the still future second coming of Christ?

4) Summary

Nevertheless, the transfiguration follows the prophecy of 16.28 in close succession and the comment about some in verse 28 can hardly fail to be a comment about Peter, James, and John. Therefore, we should try to understand the text by keeping the immediate context closely in view. As difficult as it may at first appear, we must begin our work here with the fact that Jesus predicted that Peter, James, and John would “see the Son of man coming in His kingdom” as a great event of their lives, even though we must affirm that His coming takes place at the end of history. We have to keep the coming to judge (16.27), coming in His kingdom (16.28), and His coming in glory (Lk 9.26) *together with the transfiguration* event in the lives of the three disciples. Keeping these things together brings us to the prophetic context of the transfiguration.

2A. Prophetic context

When we weigh the unity of the events that Christ predicts, then we have to conclude that Jesus is speaking in the language of prophecy, of prophetic perspective, prophetic foreshortening, and prophetic telescoping. In prophetic perspective, Jesus speaks about things that will come to pass at different times in the future, but He speaks about them in a concatenated way (or tightly packed way). He compresses separate future events into a single event without indicating time lines or historical process. It is as if history will jump from event to event without time in between (i.e., after six days you will see my transfiguration and my second coming; He is referring to the transfiguration-second coming). This is the way prophets see the future and talk

about it (cf. John's proclamation that Messiah will come baptizing with the fire of judgment, Mat. 3, and the apostles' preaching in the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes, Mat 10).

1) Consider the seventy Sabbaths example

True to prophecy (prophetic method, prophetic proclamation), the way Jesus compresses future events together is comparable to how the seventy years of captivity became seventy Sabbath's for the land of Israel. The land was supposed to rest every seventh year, but Israel broke the Sabbath in summary of how they broke covenant with the Lord (breaking all Ten Words):

He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia,²¹ to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years (2Ch 36.20-21).

In seven years, the land would normally enjoy one Sabbath year, but under judgment on the covenant people, it enjoys seven Sabbath years in seven years (with every day a Sabbath Day for the land). Moreover, it does this ten times or for seventy years. What we have here is a ten-fold judgment on Israel in which prophetic time skips from Sabbath to Sabbath seventy times. It is as if the six intervening years are skipped in order to have a concatenation of Sabbaths. This is rich prophetic telescoping. It is as if seventy units of six years and one Sabbath year only have the Sabbath years; thus, 490 years become 70 years of judgment. Then, from one side, it is a ten-fold judgment, and from the other side the ten-fold judgment is merciful in the reduction of years from 490 to 70 years. The lesson is the repeated refrain of mercy in judgment for the covenant people. They keep breaking covenant and God judges them, but the covenant Lord keeps fulfilling His covenant to them despite the judgment, even in and through it.

2) Lessons there and here

Thus, prophetic time teaches many lessons. Not all prophetic time is the same. The telescoping of Matthew 16.28-17.2 has its own features and its own lessons. Here, the time between the future events is compressed in a way that unites transfiguration and the second coming. So they are a unity of events that reveals who Christ is in the time between His suffering of humiliation on earth, and His glory at the end of the age. He is now the glorious exalted Sabbath king coming in His kingdom!

3) Perspective of Daniel

A good way to capture what is going on here is to consider the perspective of Daniel in his prophecy about the Son of Man coming to the Ancient of Days (Dan 7.13-14). **I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him.¹⁴ And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.** In other words, Jesus is speaking about His coming to receive glory from the Ancient of Days. He does so in the following ways: He comes to the Father in prayer on the mount of transfiguration and as judge at the end of the age. In a bigger picture, we can add some other things to this unit and say it like this, His *coming in glory* is:

Anticipated in prayer at the transfiguration

Inaugurated at the resurrection-ascension

Exercised via the Great Commission, Pentecost, apostolic preaching then and now

Consummated at His second coming

These "events" are a single event; they define His coming. Jesus only mentions the transfiguration and His return as judge in our text, but the resurrection and Pentecost are His coming as well.

4) Think of it like this

Jesus-Messiah, the Son of Man, comes to the Ancient of Days in prayer on the mount and the answer is the transfiguration. He comes in glory at the resurrection-ascension, He comes in

glory to His people in the time between (cf. I will come to you, Jn 14.18 and be with you to the end of the age, Mat 28.20), and He comes as final judge at the end of history (Mat 16.27). All of these events are His coming in glory that we tend to separate in our minds when we speak of His first coming and His second coming. This is partly because we read from this side of the resurrection.

At the transfiguration, the three disciples actually tasted His coming in glory. They experienced it right there and then, ahead of time chronologically speaking. In fact, in terms of its reality, it was *on time*. If we use the language of the second coming, we might say that the transfiguration is His second coming in glory anticipated, and the resurrection is His second coming in glory in its inaugural form.

Thus, we have to try to find ways to preserve the unity of the events in order to think about the events in the way our Lord presents them to us. Then we must affirm that some disciples actually saw His coming in glory on the mountain; later, they saw His coming in glory at the resurrection.

Now, let us see how this comes to expression elsewhere in the NT.

3A. NT context

Let us collect our thoughts so far. Because of 16.27-28, we can conclude that Jesus said, “You will see the second coming.” This is prophetic concatenation. However, He does not call it the *second* coming. Calling it His second coming makes sense in many ways; it is a theological model that we use a lot. It is not all bad that we use it, but does Scripture ever speak of the “second” coming? Well, we know that He came, He is now absent, and He is coming...and we say, “Again.” The closest we get to “second coming” is in Hebrews 9.28 that tells us that Jesus will appear a second time (so, second coming terminology has warrant).

Nevertheless, Jesus refers to His coming as Son of Man receiving the kingdom from the Ancient of Days. OT promise unfolds in the coming of Christ now and not yet, anticipated, inaugurated, exercised, and consummated (cf. how the now and not yet of the kingdom surfaces in The Sermon on the Mount). This is precisely what Peter tells us when he looks back to what he saw on the mountain: ¹⁶ For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” ¹⁸ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain (2 Pet 1.16-18). Peter is saying that he and the others were eyewitnesses of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He says in effect, “we do not preach myths about the coming of Christ, “but,” by contrast, we saw His coming with our own eyes.” They saw His second appearing ahead of time on the mount of transfiguration.

Concluding implications

1) Down payment

This compression of events is foundational for the teachings of the NT on down payment and first fruits. Both are here in latent form, both come to explicit expression in Paul. A down payment guarantees the final payment.

A key in the message of the prophetic gospel is the point that prophecy stresses certainty not chronology. The events connect unbreakably. To experience one brings you into contact with the others. Now we have this account. Now we have the Spirit of Pentecost. Now we have the resurrection-ascension enthronement of Christ as Sabbath king. All these “events” are a single event as a down payment. This event of His coming in glory (transfiguration, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost) guarantees the final payment. Thus, His coming in glory is a certainty (it *is* already and it *is still coming* day by day *toward the end*).

2) First fruits

First fruits promise the full fruits like a down payment, but there is more. We actually partake of the coming heavenly feast in glory now ahead of time. By absorbing this text into our hearts, we taste the coming glory. Communion, in all its simplicity, is the heavenly feast already begun. Likewise, the Sabbath Day furnishes us with the privilege and experience now of anticipating and experiencing the eternal Sabbath rest that God promised from the beginning of time. To delight in His day is to delight in Him in His coming glory!

3) God-mindedness

We get more insight into God-mindedness. One way to have a biblical mindset, to be God-minded in our outlook, is to think about the coming of Christ in His glory.

If we apply the transfiguration-“second” coming in glory to what preceded 16.28, we can now see that this event gives us the motivation and driving force that we need for God-minded discipleship. I should ask myself, “How can I orient my thinking to the things of God and not man as a disciple-sinner with other disciple sinners in the church?” I should ask myself, “How can I function in the church of sinners who need correction, self-discipline, and church discipline?” “How can I find the motivation to do these things?” Then, the answer is that I must focus not only on the suffering of Christ, but also on His glory. I must fix my mind on His coming now and not yet, anticipated, inaugurated, exercised, and consummated. From our place now in the church after transfiguration and resurrection, I am to experience His coming by means of this Gospel account of the transfiguration. In this way, I experience the future coming now ahead of time. I may look back to the Gospel accounts, but I live in the present by fixing my mind on the future. I live, find life now, by fixing my mind on the not yet.

4) Self-denial

We noted last time that self-denial is the cost of God-minded discipleship, but it is something “easier said than done.” However, we can deny ourselves when we fix our minds on the glory of Christ’s coming. When we focus on His glory and acknowledge it, then the way we live life will take on the posture of acknowledging, confessing, and praising Him. We will turn away from selfishness, and self-seeking. We will deny ourselves in order to glorify Him, whether we live or die, in whatever we eat or drink or whatever we do...for His glory.

May we bow down before the majesty of the great God and our Savior, Jesus Christ, acknowledging our sins and praying for true hearts of repentance that we may despair of ourselves. Moreover, may it please the Lord to give us the blessing of the Holy Spirit that we may forsake man-mindedness, may He enable us to make every effort to glorify His name by the practice of true self-denial, and may we battle with sin so that we become filled with the fruits of righteousness to the praise of His glory, amen.