

Encountering the Glory of Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration ***Going Beyond Initial Revelation of Christ into Fullness of the Beauty of God (Mt. 16:21; 17:1-5)***

A Challenge for the Western Church to Embrace the Theology of the Cross

¹⁶Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Mt. 16:16)

¹Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; ²and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. ³And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. ⁴Then 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." ⁵While 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!" (Mt. 17:1-5, NKJV)

Introduction of the Context

This passage is very crucial as it touches on several key thematic revelations about Jesus Christ that have profound implication to our pathway to spiritual maturity. Jesus used the events surrounding these two chapters to call His disciples out of carnality into spiritual vibrancy; from earthly to heavenly and eternal mindedness. The context of Matthew 16-17 is set in the geographical location around Bethsaida, Capernaum, Sea of Galilee, then 25 miles northeast in the region of Caesarea Philippi, and then toward Mount Hermon. Jesus had just fed more than 5000 people, with 12 baskets of bread left over, and then 4000 people, with seven baskets of bread left over. Based on the account in John 6, we know that Jesus taught about the Bread of life that came down from heaven after feeding the 5000. His teaching on the Bread of life was deemed too difficult for His followers, and they left Him. Jesus turned around to the twelve and asked whether they too would forsake Him. Peter answered in John 6:68, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." In Matthew 16, even after the two miracles of multiplication of food, the disciples were still very worried about their daily bread while crossing the Sea by boat. The parallel passages for Matthew 16-17 are found in Mark 8-9 and Luke 9. After crossing the Sea of Galilee eastward, Jesus journeyed with His disciples northeast 25 miles to a region known as Caesarea Philippi. From the evidence of the synoptic Gospels, Jesus may have been on His way to Mount Hermon for a prayer retreat after a season of public ministry.

Along their journey, while they were at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" Caesarea Philippi has been a significant religious place since antiquity. There were at least 14 sites of Baal worship, and then during the Hellenistic period, worship in a temple dedicated to a Greek god named Pan proliferated in the region. According to pagan belief there is a cave known as the Cave of Baniyas located on that site below a 50-foot-high rock. While Jesus walked through this site, He asked the disciples such that crucial question. Initially, the disciples responded with what they had heard from the popular masses pertaining to the speculation of Jesus' identity either as Jeremiah, John the Baptist, Elijah or even another prophet. The masses speculated on these identities due to the various facets of Jesus' public ministry that resembled the characteristics of these former prophets.

At that point Peter said, but "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." What a confession from the mouth of a Jewish man! In one confession, Peter proclaimed Christ's fullness in Humanity and Divinity. In John 6, Peter's confession touched Jesus' life-giving teaching and prophetic ministry, and in Matthew 16:16, Peter's

confession encapsulated who Jesus is, was and is to come as the Son of man and Son of God. Jesus immediately affirmed Peter's confession as from a Divine origin (revelation from the Father). Later in Matthew 17:5, once again, the revelation of the Father came: "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased, Hear Him!" On the Mount of Transfiguration, the revelation of the Father came to Moses (Law), Elijah (Prophet) and the apostles; the essential witnesses for Jesus (the testimony of two or three is established, John 8:17). Moses (Exodus 3:1, 19:1) and Elijah (1 Kings 19:8,13) both encountered the voice of God and the glory of God on Mount Horeb, the Mountain of the Lord. Moses and Elijah both finished their earthly journey on the east side of the river of Jordan; Moses on Mount Nebo and Elijah crossed over at the direction of the Lord and was taken by the chariots of fire. Moses died and his body was fought over by the archangel Michael and the Devil (Jude 9). Elijah was taken by the Lord alive and his body was never found (the Scripture implied Elijah did not taste physical death, just like Enoch). They were both sent to bear witness to the voice of the Father, to affirm the voice of the Son, and proclaim Jesus' glorious works in Jerusalem that would climax in His atoning death and eventual resurrection (Luke 9:31). The apostles Peter, James and John were invited as witnesses of this glorious vision.

The Confession of Peter: The Foundation of the Church and the Bedrock of our Spiritual Life

Jesus used the three elements in His immediate surroundings in Matthew 16:16 to initiate a crucial conversation toward spiritual fullness and maturity. First, Jesus used the etymology of Peter's name in Greek that is related to a rock, a cliff and rocky ground. Secondly, Jesus used the intensely paganistic background of Caesarea Philippi. Finally, Jesus used the issue of death as focal point to lead them into deeper things of God. Jesus used this immediate context to release the keys of the kingdom of God to His disciples; He revealed to them the spiritual authority accessible to the church built upon the revelation of His identity as the Son of God and the Christ.

Jesus Built a Church that Prevails against the Gates of Hades

After the confession of Peter and proclamation of Jesus about the nature of His church, Jesus began to elaborate on His coming suffering, death and resurrection. He began to openly teach His disciples about the glory of His death in light of His identity and calling as the Messiah (Christ). Jesus was not ready to proclaim this truth to the masses, but only privately to His disciples. Peter, one of Jesus' close disciples, was sorrowful about the announcement of their Messiah Jesus' suffering and death. Peter pulled Jesus aside privately and rebuked Jesus for elaborating on His death. Peter probably felt Jesus' brought disappointment to their Messianic expectation and Messianic hope. Jesus turned and said firmly to Peter, "Get behind me Satan! You are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." Jesus refuted Peter's sentiment by attributing it to satanic and fleshly origin. It was earthly and demonic and not from heaven. Jesus had been consistent in His effort to lift the heart and mind of His disciples toward eternal and heavenly perspective.

As Jesus focused on the concept of the gates of Hades, Jesus boldly proclaimed His victory of death and Hades. He then spoke on several other crucial aspects about the right perspective about life and death.

1. Jesus would face sufferings, death and resurrection (on the third day).
2. Jesus corrected Peter of his earthly mindedness and the satanic influence that would derail Him from the narrow path to life, i.e. through the way of the cross.

3. Jesus invited His disciples to walk with Him by the same way of the cross. Jesus boldly challenged His disciples to entrust their lives into the hand of God; to adopt an eternal mindset rather than just holding on to the wellbeing of their temporal life.
4. Jesus talked about some disciples remaining alive until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.
5. Jesus was joined by two witnesses on the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah. Moses tasted death but Elijah was taken alive. Both of them returned as ancient saints to bear witness to the person of Jesus and His ministry (the glory of His death on the cross). The apostles had heard the teaching of Jesus about suffering, death and resurrection, and now they saw with their own eyes the “glory of the transfigured Christ” and the glory of ancient saints.

The Way of the Cross is a Key Bridge between the Great Commandments and the Great Commission

1. Jesus said in John 14:15-21, he who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. Therefore, one of the most tangible expressions of loving Jesus with all of our heart, our mind and our strength is through passionate pursuit of Jesus through Matthew 16:24 principles, i.e., deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow Him.
2. Embracing the cross represents humility, suffering and death to our carnal self and entrusting of our earthly life and possessions to Christ. Allowing the power of God to work through our weaknesses.
3. We cannot embrace the love of God and pursue God in love apart from this prescribed way of the cross. Jesus descended as the Son of God and ascended to His Father as the Son of Man through the very same path.
4. Jesus did not want us just to stay safe from the gates of Hades, but move on to dwell in the realm of the transfigured Christ. We began our journey with a victory from the gates of Hades upon repentance and confession of faith in Christ, but it is not Christ’s will for us to stay at that level.
5. We have been invited to ascend the Mount of Transfiguration with Christ to behold His glory among the great cloud of witnesses, and the pathway to ascend this Mount of Transfiguration is the path of the cross.
6. There can be no true glory without the revelation of the glory of the cross.
7. Only a disciple who carries his/her cross daily can walk with Christ in the fellowship of His sufferings and allow the power of His resurrection to work in and through him/her. Just as Jesus manifested His glory within Him when Jesus returned in the glory of His Father and His angels, we shall also appear in glory with Him. This life of the indwelling glory of Christ is sustained by consistent prayer and fasting. While Jesus was praying on the mountain, the apostles were heavy in sleep. When they descended the mountain, they could not cast out a mute spirit in a boy. Jesus cast the demon out and proclaimed that “this kind only comes out by prayer and fasting.”