

Eyewitnesses of Christ's Majesty

Mark 9:2-13

In my study for this passage of Scripture, which speaks of Christ's transfiguration, I discovered that for hundreds of years now, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches have celebrated Christ's transfiguration on August the 6th. By God's providence we have come to this text on August 5th. And it is certainly an event in Christ's life that needs to be pondered and remembered.

As we approach this text, our first task is to consider the time indicator for Christ's transfiguration. Look with me at Mark 9:2, "After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were alone." The unavoidable question is what events took place "six days" before this hike up the mountain? From Bill Gabriel's sermon last week [Mark 8:27-9:1], we understand that Mark is referring to Peter's great confession that Jesus is the Christ, God's long awaited Messiah. Immediately after Peter spoke that truth, Jesus told the disciples that He must fulfill the Old Testament Scriptures – which speak of the Messiah's death and resurrection.

The problem is that the Jewish people did not understand – that passages such as Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53, which speak of great suffering and death, were referring to Christ. The confusion of the Jewish people is understandable because a number of other Old Testament passages such as Psalm 72; Isaiah 9:6-7; Micah 5:2-4, speak of God's Messiah as bringing great earthly blessings of prosperity and peace to Israel and to the nations

of the earth. That is the kind of Messiah that Jesus' disciples had firmly imprinted upon their minds. And so Peter took it upon himself to rebuke Jesus for speaking foolishly about dying.

Jesus then rebuked Peter and the other disciples for their misguided and shortsighted thinking. Friends, when Jesus gave that rebuke, He was revealing His commitment to being the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. From our vantage point today we understand that the Lord Jesus could never usher in peace and prosperity without dealing first with the wickedness in the hearts of fallen mankind. If people do not enter into genuine peace with God, through repentance and faith in Christ, then they can never enjoy genuine peace with each other. The self-centeredness of unrepentant sin will prevent that.

But there is something else that Jesus talked about six days before taking the disciples up the mountain. Let's read Mark 8:38 and 9:1. And please remember that chapter numbers and verse numbers are not in the original manuscripts of the Bible. They were added to make it easier for people to study the Bible together. And so six days before His transfiguration Jesus said,

“If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father’s glory [His Father’s power] with the holy angels. ^{9:1} I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power.”

In these verses Jesus is speaking about a coming of the Son of Man [a coming of Christ], which will be bad news for the wicked [people who are

ashamed of Christ]. When will this coming take place? Jesus says that some of His twelve disciples would live to see it, but most of them would be dead before that event took place. We were reminded last Sunday that there are various ways in which sincere Christians understand what Jesus is saying here. But I hope that all of us are committed to understanding this passage in a way that does not make the Bible contradict itself – which then casts doubt upon the inspiration of Scripture.

I believe it is best not to understand this coming of Christ as His Second Coming, because that event has still not taken place – two thousand years later. If Christ was actually saying that His Second Coming was going to take place while some of His twelve disciples were still alive, then He was wrong. None of us should be satisfied with that conclusion. Nor do I think that Christ is focusing on His transfiguration – which took place six days later. I say that because there was no judgment upon the wicked during Christ's transfiguration. And secondly because none of the disciples had died during the span of a week. Older commentaries such as Adam Clark or Matthew Henry are very clear about what Jesus is referring to in these verses. But let's put this discussion on hold until Jesus gives us more information later in this text.

Let's now consider Christ's transfiguration, which became a lifetime memory for Peter, James and John. Please follow as I read Mark 9:1-3,

"After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was **transfigured** before them [the Greek word Mark uses is where we get our word – metamorphosis – which today is used of a butterfly emerging from its

chrysalis form].³ His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them [the parallel text in Matthew 17, adds that Jesus' face shined like the sun].

Over thirty years later, Peter speaks about that glimpse of Christ's glory in II Peter 1:16-18.

"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.¹⁷ 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.'¹⁸ We ourselves [Peter, James and John] heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain."

God the Father abides in Majestic Glory. God the Son left that glory for awhile when He came to earth as God's Messiah. But after He finished the task the Father sent Him to earth to accomplish – He ascended back into Majestic Glory. A good case can be made that Peter, James and John got a glimpse of Christ's glorified body on that mountain. Christ's glorified body is perfectly suited to live in Majestic Glory. This brief glimpse was not forgotten – and yet the Apostle John got to see it again. Years later, when persecution of Christians was heavy, John was banished to the island of Patmos and there the curtains of heaven were opened and John found himself in heavenly company. He describes it in Revelation 1:12-16,

"I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw . . . someone "like a son of man" [that was Christ's favorite title for Himself] . . .¹⁴ His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire.¹⁵ His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace . . .¹⁶ His face was like the sun shining in all its

brilliance.”

This vision of the glorified Lord Jesus, assured the Apostle John that Christ is very capable of delivering the righteous from the hands of the wicked. Let’s continue reading Mark 9:4-8, and see what else the disciples saw on that mountain,

“And there appeared before them Elijah [the prophet] and Moses [the lawgiver], who were talking with Jesus [it is good to remember that Elijah and Moses had been in heaven with God the Son for hundreds of years before this event took place. But now God the Son is in a fully human body, with a human nature that can be tempted. Luke informs us that they were speaking with Christ about His departure, His coming death at Jerusalem. It would be the most difficult trial Jesus would ever face – so they may have been giving Him words of encouragement].⁵ Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.’⁶ (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) [Usually when people don’t know what to say, they don’t say anything. But Peter marched to a different drummer. He spoke even when He didn’t know what to say. Friends, if the Holy Spirit could mighty transform Peter – then He can mighty transform us as well. One commentator pointed out that three shelters were not necessary. Just one would do – because the law, the prophets and Christ are in perfect harmony].⁷ Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: ‘This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!’⁸ Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.”

A common question people ask about Moses and Elijah is what kind of bodies did they have? I don’t believe they were in their glorified bodies because that doesn’t happen until Christ returns to raise the dead. And so my answer is they had whatever kind of body God wanted them to have. In Genesis 18, God provided bodies for the angels who spoke and ate with

Abraham. In I Samuel 28, God provided a body for the departed Samuel, when he was sent back to earth by God to speak with King Saul. These are not difficult tasks for the Creator of the Universe.

Another common question is how did Peter, James and John know that it was Moses and Elijah who were speaking with Christ? Are you ready for my answer? A drum role would be nice. The disciples knew that it was Elijah and Moses because God revealed it to them. For God to reveal truths to people whom He had set apart for His service – wasn’t a new or strange activity. In Amos 3:7, written seven hundred years before Christ’s incarnation, we are told, “Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan [his secret] to his servants the prophets.” Similarly in Amos 4:13 we are told that God is the One, “. . . who forms the mountains, creates the wind, and reveals his thoughts to man . . .” The greatest revelation God has given to mankind is when God the Son became a man and lived among us.

Let’s continue reading at Mark 9:9-10,

“As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.¹⁰ They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what ‘rising from the dead’ meant.”

Remember, at this time Christ’s disciples believed the Messiah was going to be a political king who would immediately usher in great peace and prosperity – beginning with Israel. The reason Jesus did not want them to speak about His transfiguration is because it would have encouraged that thinking even more. From what we have been reading in

Mark's Gospel – we know that when Jesus and the disciples were walking down that mountain, Jesus was facing enormous opposition from the religious leaders of Israel. After getting a glimpse of Christ's glory, His death undoubtedly seemed more remote and unlikely than ever. Therefore, the disciples may have thought that Christ's "rising from the dead" was referring to Jesus making a comeback into the favor of the religious leaders. A literal death and resurrection of Christ was far from their thinking at that time.

But what **was** very much in their thinking was Elijah. They had just seen him on the mountain with Jesus. And since they had grown up being taught that Elijah was coming back to earth in connection with the Messiah, they wanted to speak with Jesus about that subject. Let's read verses 11-13,

"And they asked him, 'Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?' [before the Messiah] ¹² Jesus replied, 'To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things [but then Jesus asks them a question]. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? [Jesus didn't wait for a response] ¹³ But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him.'"

Matthew 17:13 explains that the disciples understood that Jesus was speaking about John the Baptist and his execution. Where in the Old Testament does it say that Elijah was coming back to earth? The answer is the book of Malachi, which is the last book in the Old Testament, just before Matthew's Gospel. I hope you will find Malachi 3:1-5 and follow as I read,

“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me [Mark 1 – has already revealed that John the Baptist was that messenger]. Then suddenly the Lord [the Messiah of God] you are seeking will come to his temple . . . ² But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap [Mark uses this language when describing Christ’s transfiguration]. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver . . . ⁵ So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me,” says the LORD Almighty.”

Mark 1 also revealed that John the Baptist came in the spirit of Elijah. He even wore the same kind of clothing that Elijah wore. But notice that Malachi speaks of the Messiah as a judge who would be like a refiners fire to purify Israel from the wicked who abused the weak. John the Baptist was very aware of this prophecy and it confused him as to why Jesus wasn’t already bringing down fire on the heads of the wicked Israelites. This is probably why John had his disciples ask Jesus if He really was the Messiah in Matthew 11:3.

Malachi 4, continues to press the truth that the Messiah would judge the wicked of Israel. Please follow as I read Malachi 4:1-6,

“Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the LORD Almighty [This is why in Matthew 3:7, John the Baptist told the Pharisees and Saducees, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?’] . . . ² But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. ³ Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on

the day when I do these things,” says the LORD Almighty.⁴ Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel [In Mark 7, Jesus strongly condemned the religious leaders of Israel for misusing God’s Law – which may be another reason why Moses was with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration].⁵ See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes [A day of the Lord is an outpouring of judgment upon the wicked].⁶ He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

In Mark 7, Jesus condemned the religious leaders for exalting their man-made traditions above God’s Law. Adult Jewish children were willfully denying help to their aged parents by declaring their wealth to be Corban – dedicated to the Lord. By following that tradition, the adult children could dishonor and curse their parents without repentance or reprisals from the teachers of the law. This contradicted God’s Law and there was no repentance by these lawbreakers. This would mean that the land of Israel would be struck with a curse.

But praise God that because of the ministry of John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus, there were many in Israel who repented and trusted in Christ. These Jewish believers suffered much under the hands of unbelieving Jews, until the horrible judgment foretold by Malachi, John the Baptist and Christ came upon the wicked of that generation. At the time unbelieving Israel was judged by Christ, using the armies of Rome, the believing Jews had already fled to Pella and other places of refuge. By doing so, they escaped that horrible judgment. Which means God enabled them to triumph over their enemies – as Malachi foretold.

A question I want to clarify is why would the fall of Jerusalem in A.D.

70, be referred to as a day of the Lord – a coming of Christ – a demonstration of the power of God’s Kingdom? The Old Testament helps us to understand this. First of all, we need to know that there were numerous days of the Lord recorded in the Old Testament. For example, in Ezekiel 30, wicked Egypt experienced a day of the Lord at the hands of the Babylonians. But not many years later, wicked Babylon experienced a day of the Lord at the hands of the Medes [foretold in Isaiah 13, and fulfilled in Daniel 5].

There were also a number of comings of the Lord recorded in the Old Testament. Let me give you two examples. By the way, a day of the Lord and a coming of the Lord are synonymous. In **Isaiah 19:1**, Egypt is warned by Isaiah about a soon coming judgment,

“See, the LORD rides on a swift cloud and is coming to Egypt. The idols of Egypt tremble before him, the hearts of the Egyptians melt within them.”

Another coming of the Lord – on the clouds – accompanied by angels appears in **II Samuel 22**. The context of this judgment was when God delivered David from the hand of wicked King Saul. Listen to how David describes God’s judgment upon King Saul,

“In my distress I [David] called to the LORD; I called out to my God. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came to his ears.⁸ The earth trembled and quaked, the foundations of the heavens shook; they trembled because he was angry . . .¹⁰ He parted the heavens and came down; dark clouds were under his feet.¹¹ He mounted the cherubim and flew [angels are always involved in God’s judgments upon the wicked] . . .¹⁶ The valleys of the sea were exposed and the foundations of the earth laid bare at the rebuke of the LORD, at the blast of breath from his nostrils [kind of

sounds like the end of the world. And it was for Saul and his kingly lineage. But what was judgment upon Saul, was deliverance for David].
¹⁷ He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters. ¹⁸ He rescued me from my powerful enemy.”

In the Old Testament it was God the Father who carried out **days of the Lord and comings of the Lord**. But in John 5:22-23, Jesus declares, “Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son,²³ that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father.” And so when the Lord Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to the right hand of the Father, and a people needed to be judged, who would carry it out? The Lord Jesus. This is why the fall the Jerusalem in A.D. 70 is spoken of as a day of the Lord and a coming of Christ on the clouds with His angels.

These are some of the reasons why I believe that Christ’s judgment upon Apostate Israel in A.D. 70, is the day of the Lord and the coming of Christ that was imminent when the New Testament was being written. Our ascended Lord Jesus is now the rightful judge of the nations. This is why Psalm 2 says,

“Therefore, you kings be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth . . . Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment.”

Some of Christ’s twelve disciples lived to see Christ’s judgment upon unbelieving Israel, but most did not – just as Jesus said in Mark 9:1. Let’s pray.

Heavenly Father, help us all to be like the Bereans, who eagerly receive Your Word and then search the Scriptures to see if what we have been taught – is really what the Scriptures say. The things we have looked at this morning are not salvation issues. But because we believe the Bible is

the inspired Word of God, we take everything it says seriously. To the best of our ability we want to speak accurately for the Bible when we gather together for worship and when we speak to unbelievers, who do not know what the Bible says. Thank You for sending Jesus the Messiah to earth. Thank You for telling us very clearly that He is Your much loved Son. And thank You that Your Son willingly became the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. May our lives be transformed by these truths. Please use this body of believers to help more people come to know the Christ of the Bible, who alone is the source of eternal life. We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen