

## THE TRANSFIGURATION

One of the extra-ordinary events that took place during the earthly ministry of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ was the transfiguration. The unique event proved indisputably that Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah and future King of God's Kingdom and gave his disciples a clearer insight into the plan of God in regard to the salvation of mankind.

According to the gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke, our Lord Jesus Christ on a certain occasion, took Peter, James, and John to a high mountain to pray. While they were in the mountain, he was transfigured. In other words, his appearance was transformed such that "his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light". (Matthew 17:2) Mark's account said "his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them". (Mark 9:3) According to the gospel accounts, the two ancient faithfuls, Moses and Elijah (Elias in Greek) "appeared in glory, and spake of his decease (death) which he should accomplish at Jerusalem". - Luke 9:31. *Parentheses ours.* See also Mark 9:4; Matthew 17:3.

The coming into the scene of Moses and Elijah, two highly regarded prophets of old, elicited a request from Peter for permission to build three tabernacles or temporary shelters, "one for thee, (Jesus), one for Moses, and one for Elias". (Matthew 17:4) While Peter was still talking, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and there came a voice out of the cloud, which said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him." - Verse 5.

On hearing the voice, the three disciples were struck with fear and they bowed their heads to the ground. At that point, Jesus came and touched them saying, "Arise, and be not afraid". On lifting up their faces "they saw no man, save Jesus only". To show that what they saw was not a literal event, Jesus charged them while they were coming down from the mountain saying, "Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead". (Verse 9) In keeping with the Lord's instruction, the apostles did not divulge what happened but "kept it close, and told no man in those days any of those things which they had seen." (Luke 9:36) Obviously, Christ wanted the matter

kept secret until he had fully accomplished his mission, by way of his death and resurrection.

The vision of Elijah talking with Jesus about his impending death moved the disciples to ask him the basis for the teaching by the Scribes that Elijah must come before the Messiah. To this our Lord declared: "Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things. But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them." (Matthew 17:11, 12) Apparently, it was not yet clear to the apostles at that time, that John the Baptist was the Elijah which was to come. That was why after the Lord's explanation, the Bible says, "It was then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist." – Matthew 17:13.

To show how strong and lasting was the impression they had of the transfiguration, St. Peter, several years later, made reference to it as an undeniable proof that Jesus Christ is the son of God. He stated: "For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were **eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received from God the Father honour and glory**, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount". - 2 Peter 1:16-18.

### **Misconceptions**

Some Bible scholars have wrong notions about the meaning of the transfiguration. They believe that on that day, Moses and Elijah "appeared from the heavenly world, as the representatives of the Old Testament" (See *Smith's Bible Dictionary [Transfiguration]*) In the opinion of Adam Clarke in his *Commentary*, the transfiguration was intended to prove "the reality of the world of spirits, and the immortality of the soul". He added that it showed that "Moses and Elijah are still existing, though the former had been gathered to his fathers upwards of 1400 years, and the latter (Elijah) had been transported to heaven nearly 900 years before". The authors of *Bible Knowledge Commentary* contend that Moses and Elijah "appeared from heaven in some visible

form and talked with Jesus (thus demonstrating that conscious existence follows death)". It is pertinent therefore to ask the following questions: Is it true that Moses and Elijah were in heaven from where they appeared at the transfiguration? Was the transfiguration a literal event? Is the soul immortal? We shall be examining these issues as we x-ray the significance of the transfiguration.

### **Vision**

It needs to be reiterated that the transfiguration was not a literal event but a vision. Jesus Christ himself told the disciples "**Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead.**" (Matthew 17:9) That the transfiguration was not a physical event but a vision knocks the bottom off the argument that Moses and Elijah were living at that time.

Besides, there is no record in the Bible that Moses was ever taken up to heaven. Rather it is stated that he died on Mountain Nebo, in the land of Moab, but his real burial-place was unknown to any man. (Deuteronomy 34: 1, 5, 6) The statement that "Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven" (2 Kings. 2: 9-11), does not mean that Elijah ascended to the heaven of heavens, the abode of God and His angels. Rather, he was taken up by a whirlwind to a certain height in the sky and was turned to nothing. What some people do not know is that the space where the clouds float and the birds fly is also called "heaven". In fact, the Bible says that there are three heavens and that God dwells in the farthest part of heaven, known as the heaven of heavens. See Genesis 1:20; Job 35:11; 2 Corinthians 12:2.

Just as God did not want any man to know where Moses was buried, so too he did not want Elijah to die and be buried in the way known to man but was translated by the power of God. (Deuteronomy 32:48-52; 34:5, 6; Hebrews 11:4) Moses and Elijah could not have gone to heaven before Jesus Christ who himself declared: "**And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.**" (John 3:13) This declaration by Jesus Christ proves conclusively that the two prophets are not in heaven. Certainly, if Moses and Elijah were in heaven, Christ would have said so.

It is because of the same wrong notions that the two ancient worthies are in heaven that some teach that David is in heaven, for which reason they ask him to pray for them. St. Peter made it clear that David is not in heaven but in the grave, awaiting his reward at the resurrection of the just, at the last day. St. Peter declared: "For David is not ascended into the heavens ..." - Acts 2:29, 34.

The truth is that none of the ancient faithfuls will go to heaven. Jesus Christ declared: "Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." (Matthew 11:11) If the least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist and he is not lower in status than any of those "that are born of women", it follows that none of the holy men of old is going to heaven.

By the grace of God, Moses, Elijah, David and other faithful men of old will be resurrected to be rulers in God's Kingdom here on earth. - Matthew 8:11; Luke 13:28, 29; Proverbs 11:31

### **The dead lifeless**

The doctrine of immortality, as defined by some theologians, teaches that the "human personality continues to exist after death, and that it is possible for living persons to communicate with those who have died". This teaching is without foundation in the Bible and should not be believed by true Christians. If the soul is a living being in man that continues to exist in heaven or elsewhere after death, then the man is not completely dead. Actually, this is what the devil implied when he, in the guise of a serpent, deceptively told Eve: "Ye shall not surely die". (Genesis 3: 2-5) **It is this devilish idea that is being subtly fostered by the teaching of the immortality of the soul.** God Almighty declared in Ezekiel 18:4, 20, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die". See also Acts 3:23; Matthew 10:28; etc.

Except for the saints, who at death are changed into spirits and taken to heaven in this age of the second presence of Christ, all the dead, no matter their status, are in the grave awaiting resurrection. Job, a prophet of God stated, " O that thou (God Almighty) wouldest hide me in the grave, that thou wouldest keep me secret, until thy wrath be

past, that thou wouldest appoint me a set time, and remember me!" (Job 14:13) In verses 14 and 15, Job asked, "If a man die, shall he live again?" He then answered, "All the days of my appointed time will I wait, (in the grave) till my change come. Thou shalt call and I will answer Thee: Thou wilt have desire to the work of Thine hands." (See also Job 19: 25-27) Besides, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ stated that all the dead, both good and bad are in the grave from where they would come at the resurrection at his command. He declared: "Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation." - John 5:28, 29. See also Revelation 11:18.

Also, it must be emphasized that those who are dead are silent and lifeless and cannot think or act as to communicate with those on earth. Scripture says: "For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun. Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest." (Ecclesiastes 9:5, 6, 10) Earlier, David the king had warned: "Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; **in that very day his thoughts perish.**"- Psalm 146: 3, 4. See also Psalm 6:5; Isaiah. 38: 18, 19; etc.

From the citations and explanations made, it could be seen how absurd is the teaching that Moses and Elijah, who had died long before Christ was born, were existing in heaven from where they appeared to speak with Jesus about his impending travails ! The truth which no one can gainsay is that when the breath of life leaves a man, he becomes lifeless, the next stage, according to God's promise, is RESURRECTION. It is then the dead will be raised to life and judged. Said St. Paul: "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment." - Hebrews 9: 27.

## Significance

The word "transfigure" means to change the appearance or form. It does not denote the change of the substance of a thing, but simply of its appearance. Before three of his disciples, the radiance of Christ's future glory or majesty was manifested in the change in his face and His garments that became as bright as the light.

To understand the essence of the transfiguration, one has to go back to the events that preceded it. It should be noted that while they were at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus Christ had questioned the disciples about whom people said he was. It was St. Peter who answered correctly for which Christ blessed him and conferred certain privileges on him. Then from that time Christ began to tell the apostles plainly that "he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day." - Matthew 16:21. *Compare* Mark 8:31.

The transfiguration was therefore meant to build on what Jesus Christ had told them earlier in regard to his Kingdom. It was a prophetic illustration of the immeasurable glories that awaited Christ after his sufferings, death and resurrection and it gave them foreknowledge of his future exaltation and majesty. The transfiguration demonstrated the harmony of the plan of God - that the old order pointed to the new and were fulfilled in Jesus Christ. See Daniel 7:13, 14; John 17:4, 5; Philippians 2:9-11; etc.

In the vision, Moses represents those who will die first before being raised to life to inherit God's Kingdom fully established here on earth. Elijah pictures those who will pass into the kingdom fully established without tasting death. (1 Corinthians 15:23, 35-43; Luke 14:14; Romans 2:6-9; John 11:25, 26; 8:51) Jesus Christ said in Mark 9:1 and Luke 9:27 that some of those living in this age of the end of the world, known as the last day, will not taste of death but will pass from life to life. On this score, the Bible says: "After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; And cried with a loud voice,

saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.” - Revelation 7:9,10.

Concerning the identity of this vast host and the reason for such an over flow of joyful feelings, the divine record states: “And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, what are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple..” - Revelation 7:13-15.

The fact is that as Noah passed from the first world into the second world without tasting death, so also some living in this age of the end of the world, known as the last days, will pass from this world into the third world without dying. As stated earlier, Jesus Christ himself asserted that some persons in the last day will not die but will pass from this present world into the Kingdom of God fully established. - Matthew 16:28. See also Mark 9:1; Luke 9:27.

From all that has been stated in this sermon, it is evident that the Transfiguration was a vision and so should not be interpreted as if it were a literal event. Moses and Elijah are not in heaven but in the grave awaiting resurrection. Their appearance in the vision was to highlight their significant roles in the work of God and the different modes God would use in bringing into fulfillment His divine promises. May God Almighty continue to give His children the understanding of His words through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.