

I. Introduction

When my kids were little we found a monarch caterpillar and brought it home. I made a net cage for it, and we gave the caterpillar lots of milkweed leaves and a long twig to climb. After a while, the caterpillar turned into a chrysalis, and eventually it changed into a Monarch Butterfly! The word for that is **metamorphosis**. To be transformed. To be changed from one form into another.

The disciples, Peter, James and John witnessed the most miraculous metamorphosis that ever occurred, as Jesus of Nazareth was transfigured from his earthly human form to his dazzling, glorified heavenly form, and back, right before their eyes.

This morning we are going to look in detail at two passages in the Bible that talk about the transfiguration – the event itself in the Gospel of Matthew, and a letter written many years later by the apostle Peter.

II. Peter's Letter

Peter wrote this letter to some Christians who were being threatened and led astray by false teaching from within their own group. Peter accused the false teachers of secretly bringing in destructive heresies, even denying the Lordship of Christ by teaching and practicing immorality. The false teachers combined ideas from Greek philosophy, oriental mysticism, and Christianity, and emphasized salvation through intuitive, esoteric knowledge rather than through faith in Christ.¹ It appears that the false teachers claimed that the Incarnation, the Resurrection, and coming Kingdom of God that the Apostles spoke about were only myths and stories.

In this letter, Peter wrote that he and the other apostles were not making up myths or 'fake news' or 'alternative facts' or cleverly devised stories. What they preached was the Truth of the Gospel, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who was born on earth, lived and taught and performed miracles, who was crucified, died and rose again. In agreement with the other apostles and with Paul, Peter upheld the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ in glory, when Christ would return in power to bring an end to history and to judge the world. Those Christians who died before then will be raised back to life. The Second Coming marks the end of life as we know it, and the beginning of life in the Kingdom of God, in unbroken relationship with God.

Peter asserts that he is able to speak with authority about these things, because he, along with James and John, were "eye witnesses of His majesty." Peter was *there* at Christ's Transfiguration. He saw what happened and heard what was said. Therefore, Peter's message is true.

In the letter, Peter continues, “*He (Jesus Christ) 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.’*” Peter declared, “*We ourselves heard that voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.*”

“Majestic Glory” is a typical way for Jews of that time to speak indirectly about God, in order to avoid any possible misuse of the sacred Name of God, because doing so would break the Third Commandment.

What *did* happen while they were on the mountain? To answer that question, we need to turn back to Matthew.

III. Context

Chapter 17 begins with the words, “*After six days.*” Since the Bible never has unnecessary words, it must be important to know what happened in the preceding week. Chapter 15 tells how Jesus fed 4,000 people on the side of a mountain near the Sea of Galilee. Later, the Pharisees and the Sadducees demanded to see a sign. Apparently, miraculous healings and suddenly having enough food to feed 4000 people was not enough to convince them.

A day or two later, Jesus and his followers reached the region of Caesarea Philippi. There Jesus asked the disciples, “*Who do you say that I am?*” Simon Peter answered, “*You are the Christ, the anointed One, the Son of the Living God.*”

Jesus replied, “*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.*”ⁱⁱⁱ

From that time on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things... and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Jesus also talked to them about the “*Parousia*” – the Second Coming in glory, when the Son of Man will come in His Kingdom.

IV. Matthew 17 – The Transfiguration

Six days later Jesus took Peter, James and John with him up a high mountain by themselves. The Gospel of Luke adds that there they prayed. While they were there, Jesus was transfigured before their very eyes!

What does that really mean?

Matthew uses the Greek word **metamorpho-o**, from which we get the English word *metamorphosis*. In Matthew, it is translated “transfigured.” The Gospel writers Matthew, Mark and Luke did the best they could to describe what that meant, to be transfigured, something indescribable. They wrote: “*Sunlight poured from his face. His clothes were as white as light. They were dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them, and as bright as a flash of lightning.*”

Here is an interesting observation: when Moses went up Mt. Sinai to meet with God and receive the Ten Commandments, his face shown with the *reflected* light of God's glory. But Jesus emitted his own internal light. He was the source of the light. In fact, He *is* the Light. He was transfigured. This breath-taking experience proved to the disciples without a doubt that Jesus is the Son of God and the promised Messiah.

That was astonishing enough, yet suddenly **Moses and Elijah** appeared too, talking with Jesus. Moses was the person in the OT who went up Mt. Sinai and received the Ten Commandments carved in stone from the hand of God. He also received and wrote down all of the laws, commands, and instructions God gave to him for the well-being of God's people. During the Transfiguration, Moses represented the Old Covenant and the promise of future salvation, which was soon to be fulfilled by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Elijah, one of the prophets from before the time of King David, is mentioned in the final sentences of the Old Testament. In the book of the prophet Malachi, God says, "*Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.*"ⁱⁱⁱ During the Transfiguration, Elijah represented the promise of future restoration.

As they saw Jesus transfigured, **Peter, who was always impulsive, blurted** out the first thing that popped into his head. "*Master! What would you think if I built three memorials - tabernacles - shelters here on the mountain – one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah?*"

Peter tries so hard but he still doesn't get it. Jesus, Moses and Elijah are not equals. Only Jesus is the Son of God. Only Jesus was transfigured. Only Jesus will die and be resurrected, and then come again at the end of time to rule with power.

V. The Cloud

While Peter was still babbling, a bright cloud covered them. During the Exodus, when there was a cloud over the Tabernacle, the tent of meeting, the people of Israel knew that God was present there^{iv}.

Now from out of the cloud God spoke the same words that he used when Jesus was baptized at the beginning of his ministry. God said, "*This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!*"

Listen to Him! Do what He says! Don't contradict Him. His word is Truth. He says only what the Father tells Him to say. Listen to Him! What he says about His upcoming suffering, torture and death is true. So are his words about rising from the dead. You can trust and believe all that Jesus says. Listen to Him!

VI. Peter's Letter: Completely Reliable Prophetic message

Now look back at Peter's letter again. (2 Peter 1:16-21). That incredible, amazing, astonishing, terrifying experience of the transfiguration, seeing God's glory and hearing the voice of God is what Peter and James and John witnessed. Because they were eye-witnesses of His Majesty, they had authority to teach and to preach God's Truth.

If that fact wasn't enough for the recipients of the letter or for the false teachers, then in addition to the Transfiguration is the "**completely reliable prophetic message**" of the Old Testament. The prophecies of Scripture were not made up from someone's imagination or creativity. Prophecy, the words of Scripture, including the entire Bible, did not come about just by a prophet's own human interpretation of things. They were not just writing their own opinions; their words were inspired by God which literally means "God breathed." The Holy Spirit guided the human authors so that their words would be nothing less than the word of God.^v But the process was not mere dictation. Each human author kept his own peculiar literary style, vocabulary, special emphasis, perspective, and the like. Because God is incapable of inspiring falsehood, His word is altogether true and trustworthy.

VII. Conclusion

We are having a difficult time here in the United States this year, with knowing whether or not what we hear is "completely reliable," true, and trustworthy. There are many accusations of "fake news" and "alternative facts." It used to be that only those grocery store tabloids made up stories as news. But now there are hundreds of websites, Facebook posts and twitter messages that publish "cleverly devised stories," as Peter says, to support alternate viewpoints and to discredit opponents. How can we tell what to believe?

Be encouraged. The apostles, the prophets and the other Biblical authors did not write myths, or stories, or fake news, or alternative facts. They wrote God's Truth as it was revealed to them. Those who were eye-witnesses of the majesty and glory of Jesus Christ wrote down what they saw and heard and experienced, so that we might learn, and live.

Christians are blessed to be able to turn to the Word of God to find the standard for life, to be instructed in how to follow Jesus' teaching, and, just like the caterpillar that was metamorphosed into a butterfly, to "*be "metamorpho-o" - transformed by the renewing of your mind.*"^{vi} "*into the likeness of Jesus Christ.*"^{vii}

Now fly!

Amen.
