

The Transfiguration

DAVE BAST

There is a moment in Jesus' ministry that seems almost magical or otherworldly. It is the one scene in the Gospels that could look like a modern movie with its computer graphics. Jesus' outward appearance changes and he is joined by two of the great but long-gone prophets of the Old Testament. The disciples who are with him are shocked; but what are we supposed to make of this story now? Stay tuned.

BOB HEERSPINK

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. Bob, the story that I mentioned in the introduction is the Transfiguration. It comes in Matthew 17, as you know, and it is really sort of a bridge between the ministry of Jesus that Matthew has been describing and the passion of Jesus, which is about to unfold in Jerusalem – his suffering and death.

BOB HEERSPINK

And it is a very different kind of story than what we have experienced in the Gospels thus far, isn't it?

DAVE BAST

Yes; I mentioned these computer-generated special effects that movies are full of today, and this is one place where they would probably be useful if we were going to illustrate the New Testament; but let me just read Matthew's account of it from Matthew 17:1-9:

¹After six days, Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ²There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light. ³Just then, there appeared before them Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. ⁴Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters; one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁵While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him." ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground, terrified. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." ⁸When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them: "Don't tell anyone what you have seen until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; that is a phenomenal story; and you know, the question is what does it mean? I think sometimes, Dave, when we read passages like this we don't always look at what comes before or after; and I find it very interesting the way that passage is introduced. After six days... it is like a little pointer saying: Something happened about a week ago...

DAVE BAST

Exactly.

BOB HEERSPINK

That really, you need to unpack...

DAVE BAST

What was that something, right? You start with that.

BOB HEERSPINK

To make sense of this.

DAVE BAST

Right; and they went up a mountain. Well, they were still in the area known as Caesarea Philippi; if you look back to Matthew 16, the week before, that is where Jesus has been and Peter makes his great confession there. This is a gentile territory. It is actually in what today is southern Lebanon, so it is a very mountainous region, and Peter there confesses: You are the Christ, the Son of the living God; but then Jesus immediately begins to talk about his suffering – his coming suffering and death.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and I think as I look at this passage, you know, there is so much that happened between Jesus and the disciples that isn't in scripture. There is just no way everything that happened could be there. I would think over those six days, there has been kind of a running debate going on, where Peter is saying: Wait a minute; this cannot happen. You cannot go to the cross. You cannot die. You are the Messiah. And it is like a week later now, this episode is going to underscore some things that Jesus says you have to know about me.

DAVE BAST

I think that is exactly right. In fact, John says near the end of his Gospel: If everything that Jesus said and did were written down, the world could not hold all the books it would take; so there is a lot more that is left out, but we can sort of guess at what it must have been. They're exploring this whole concept of how can you be the Messiah, who is also going to suffer and die? To them – to the disciples, and to every sort of ordinary Jew of the time – that simply could not be. If you were the Messiah, you didn't suffer and die, you were going to conquer; and if you suffered and died, you couldn't be the Messiah; you know, it is an either/or.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I wonder, up on that mountain when Jesus is transfigured, whether Peter at first thought to himself: You see? My view of things is justified. I mean, here is Jesus standing literally as the light of world.

DAVE BAST

Right; just look at the details of the story as it happened. Jesus climbs this mountain; he takes his inner circle; the other disciples are left behind someplace; it is just Peter, James and John – the ones who so often saw the most significant events kind of close up; and as they are up on this mountain, suddenly Jesus is transformed. We call it the Transfiguration. His appearance changes; his face begins to shine; his clothes turn white. In fact, it is interesting, all three of the synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – tell this story; and there is sort of a difference of opinion how to describe this brightness – this light. Mark says it was like clothes that were bleached white. He goes to the laundry room for an example. Matthew says his face shown like the sun and his clothes were white as light; and Luke says he looked like lightning – like a lightning bolt. It just was mind-blowing; and then these two other people show up.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; we have Elijah, we have Moses – the Law and the Prophets – witnessing to Jesus. You know, sometimes we have this notion, I think, Dave, that the New Testament is off to one side and the Old Testament doesn't have much to say to New Testament believers – to Christians today. Elijah and Moses standing there as a witness to the Old Testament reminds me of the way we have to keep the Old Testament and the New Testament connected.

DAVE BAST

Not two different stories, but two parts of the same story; and again, I think this is a very powerful way of saying that the Old Testament is really about Jesus, too.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

That Moses and Elijah serve him, and his story; and Peter, of course, now being Peter, he sort of starts to talk... I think he is nervous. I think he is scared.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; everybody else is tongue-tied, but not Peter.

DAVE BAST

Yes; Peter says: Well, let me build three tents or booths or shelters up here on the mountain, one for each of you.

BOB HEERSPINK

You see, I think he is still wanting to go back to his view that the Messiah does not have to suffer – he doesn't have to die. Here is Jesus glorious. He says let's create three little booths and anybody who wants to see you – anybody who wants to connect with you – can come up the mountain. Let's just freeze this moment in time.

DAVE BAST

Maybe he is going to charge admission. He sees a business opportunity, I don't know; but while he is sort of fumbling around and stumbling and bumbling, being Peter, suddenly another voice sort of breaks into the conversation.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; what I really love about the text is that it says: While Peter was yet talking... It is almost as if God the Father is having to break into Peter's ramble and say: Okay, Peter; that is enough. Let me explain things. You have made a hash out of it so far. You don't have it right. Let me unpack what is going on here so that you and the disciples can really understand what this event is about.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and Matthew also says that a bright cloud covered them; and this, of course, is no meteorological phenomenon; this is the *shechinah* – the cloud of God's glory that filled the tabernacle in the wilderness, that fell upon the Temple when it was dedicated by Solomon – this is the visible symbol of the presence of the living God, and the voice comes out of that cloud to say: This is my Son; my beloved Son; my Son whom I love; I am well pleased with him; listen to him.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; and the meaning of those words – that is the center, really, of this episode. Those words we have to unpack some more when we come back.

Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Dave, we have been talking about the Transfiguration, and we have talked about how Christ is transformed on the mountaintop. His glory is revealed; but as Peter reflected on this event later on in his life, he didn't really focus on so much the light emanating from Christ. He focused on the words God spoke. In 2 Peter, Peter

picks up this episode. Let me read what he says. He said:

1:16 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. So, he sees the majesty reflected in the glory that shines on Christ.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is a clear reference to the Transfiguration.

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly; but then he says:

17 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 heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

DAVE BAST

Yes; direct eyewitness testimony, like so much of the Gospels. Incidentally, the Gospel of Mark is usually thought to be the testimony of Peter, too.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, Peter remembered this. It made a huge impression on him; and the thing that he most singled out was the voice. I find that so significant on a number of levels, because we would probably tend to be dazzled by the visuals of it, you know. We are used to that in the movies.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

Just spectacular scenes and images, and...

BOB HEERSPINK

We are more interested in special effects than in the dialogue today.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and it is always the word. Scripture always keeps coming back to the word. What really gave glory and honor to Christ wasn't the light, it was what the Father said of him from out of the cloud. That was his true glory: This is my Son whom I love. Listen to him.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; now, those are the same words that the Father spoke at the baptism. You know, at the point in which Jesus begins his ministry there is this affirmation with regard to who he is; and then here as he turns the corner to go to Calvary, the same affirmation comes.

DAVE BAST

I think that is important, too, because we mentioned the fact that this is sort of a hinge in terms of the structure of the Gospel of Matthew. Earlier he has dealt with all the works and words of Jesus – his teaching, his healing, his preaching; pretty soon it is going to really zero in on the suffering of Jesus – the last week of his life; and here the affirmation of God is repeated, underscoring Jesus' true identity.

You know, it was tough for the disciples to put together this idea of a suffering Messiah, and this means, I think, of helping them hang onto that idea when they had to go through the events themselves of watching Jesus die on the cross.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, God the Father takes words from Psalm 2, which refer to the Messiah as his Son. He takes words from Isaiah 42, which talks about the Servant – ultimately the Suffering Servant – and brings them together; and bringing together those two realities, the Messiah and the Suffering Servant, really defines for the Father who Jesus is.

DAVE BAST

And holding onto both parts of it. So we start with who is Jesus, and I think the story is meant to remind us that he is the Son of God. He is the beloved. He is the one with whom the Father is well pleased; and never mind... don't lose sight of that fact when you see him go to the cross, which was a cursed kind of death; nevertheless, despite the fact that it seems as though he is under the curse of God, he remains the beloved Son; that deep mystery.

BOB HEERSPINK

There is none like him; I mean, that is the implication of the word.

DAVE BAST

So the curse that he will undergo must not be because of himself; there must be some other explanation for it, and of course, that gets us into the whole question of him bearing the sin of the world.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; but there is in this statement from the cloud that the Father speaks words that you don't find in the baptism. He adds the words: Listen to him; and I think it is easy to skip over those words, but those words to me are so critical for this story. Peter has been arguing with Jesus about the direction of his life, and he is basically saying: Jesus, you've got it wrong. And now the Father comes and he says: Listen to him. In fact, I think it is very important that he says: Listen to *Jesus*, not: Listen to *them*. Moses, Elijah, sure they testify to Jesus, but the Father comes and says: My final revelation – my final word – is spoken in my beloved Son.

DAVE BAST

Right; Jesus trumps all those who have gone before, and for that matter, all who come after. It is true that there is a lot of controversy in the world today about competing religious claims, and one of the things that we find we are constantly running up against in working in various places in the world, especially where there is a dominant religion of a different type is why should I put Jesus higher than all the others?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

Why is he the greatest? Why is he the Son of God? How can that even be? And here at the center, at the heart of this story, the Father himself endorses the Son's authority. Listen to him means not just read his words and think about them, but follow them – obey them.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; the tendency of so many religions today is not to kick Jesus totally out of the picture, but it is simply to say: He is one of many; and that is very tempting in a pluralistic world – we live in a pluralistic society. The Father does not allow us to go that route. He says: Listen to Jesus – listen to Jesus. And I find it so powerful that the disciples fall on their faces at the end of this episode, and it specifically says: And when Jesus brings them up, they only see Jesus – only Jesus.

DAVE BAST

He is left alone. I remember years ago reading an essay by a Jewish theologian, and it was really good; I mean, it was well written and much of it was true. His basic thesis was Christianity and Judaism are really the same. Christianity is Judaism for Gentiles, and they are all about grace. Judaism properly understood – the Old Testament – isn't about law or works righteousness, it is about the grace of God and salvation; and I found again and again and again myself agreeing with him, and I got to the end and basically he said: See, there is nothing Christianity has that Judaism doesn't, and I thought: Except Jesus.

BOB HEERSPINK

Except Jesus, yes.

DAVE BAST

Yes, except Jesus, and Jesus is everything.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and the Father specifically says: If you want to honor me, honor my Son. And we will explore that some more when we come back after this break.

DAVE BAST

Yes, what does it mean to listen to Jesus for us?

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Hi; welcome back. This is *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast, along with Bob Heerspink, and it is great to have you with us today. We have been talking about the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus – Matthew 17:1-9. We explored the meaning of the story, Bob. Really, it points to the ultimate identity of Jesus. He is the divine Son, the one with whom the Father is pleased; he is the beloved; and also he is the one who has authority ultimately. He is the highest and the one who is supreme; the one to whom all other scriptures testify; the one to whom we are supposed to listen; but if you ask me the purpose of this story, I think that is a little bit different, and I would answer, in a word I think it is encouragement.

BOB HEERSPINK

Encouragement for Jesus or for the disciples?

DAVE BAST

Well, one of your favorite sayings, Bob, that I love to quote so often is: Reject the tyranny of the *or* for the glory of the *and*. It doesn't have to be either/or, it can be both.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, because I do think that this is encouragement for Jesus. I mean, Jesus is the Son of God, but he is the *incarnate* Son of God. He grew in his understanding of his mission, and I think as he goes to the cross, this is a powerful way in which the Father says: Hang in there. You are on track. What you are saying is exactly the words that I would give you to speak.

DAVE BAST

Yes; just look at what happens as the story unfolds. Look at him in the Garden pleading with these very three – Peter, James, and John – to stay awake and watch with him, and how disappointed he is in them for failing him. He needed encouragement, too; and this provides him with the supreme... what should I say... stamp of approval... blessing of the Father... As he goes forward to the cross, never forget: You are my beloved. I am well pleased with you.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and we need those kinds of encouragements, too. Being a Christian, keeping on track in discipleship, can really become challenging; and we can start questioning the direction that we take. I mean, I think we sometimes even ask the question: Is Jesus who he claims to be? Is he the Messiah? And for Peter, James, and John they needed this and we need the testimony of the story in our own lives. I think it is really interesting that at the end Jesus is the one who touches them and lifts them up. You know, they need that personal touch from Jesus. Jesus touches a leper to bring healing; he touches them to lift them up and encourage them in what they are going to face; and we need that same kind of encouragement from Jesus, too. I need it. We all need it.

DAVE BAST

You just made me think of a great verse in Ephesians Chapter 1. Paul writes about how we are ⁵predestined for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ in accordance with God's pleasure and will ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the beloved.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Literally, it says... in his beloved Son.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, the same kind of language.

DAVE BAST

Yes; we are... And the Puritans took that verse and said: We are accepted in the beloved. This is hard for me to believe because I look at myself and I am not very pleased, especially with my inner life – what I don't show to the world, you know. Outwardly, I am quite respectable, inwardly it is a different story; but to believe that *I* am God's beloved son because of Jesus, I am accepted in the beloved with that same kind of pleasure. The Father has pleasure in us.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; and you know, I think for myself I can get so bogged down in the everyday, even as a disciple. You know, you are just living in a world which is so overwhelming with regard to its challenges; sometimes I don't even want to open the newspapers. You don't look into the future – you don't see the broader vision – and here, really, Jesus is saying God is giving us a vision of what is ahead.

DAVE BAST

This glory, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

This glory is for me!

DAVE BAST

Right, and for us.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I don't really think of that very much. I mean, it is like, here I am. I have to do my duty. I have to be a disciple; and this story comes along and says: Beyond the suffering, beyond the cross that you will have to bear in your discipleship, hey, Bob, there is glory coming.

DAVE BAST

Yes; here we are, you know, we are running downhill, sort of, as we age. Our bodies are weakening; they are growing old. We lose our beauty, we lose our strength, if we ever had any; we lose our hair...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; I've lost that quite a while ago.

DAVE BAST

But what is ahead is glory. We are going to be transformed. Paul talks about an eternal weight of glory beyond compare; and actually, C. S. Lewis picked up on that phrase in a very famous sermon that he preached called *The Weight of Glory*. In it near the end he says this: It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses; to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship; and that is what we are going to be! We are going to have such glory, such sharing in the likeness of Christ, if we could see people in heaven as they are now, we would be tempted to fall down on our knees before them.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, that is our future; and just as this vision is given to Jesus to keep him going, we need to take that vision to ourselves and say: You know, the Lord rewards all who are faithful; and that beyond all of the burdens that we carry, all the brokenness, we are going to experience that glory for eternity.

DAVE BAST

First the cross, and then the crown; and that is true for Jesus and it is true for us; and as John wrote: Eye has not seen, nor has ear heard, nor has it entered into our minds to conceive what the Lord has prepared for those who love him. So, hang onto that today and every day!

BOB HEERSPINK

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you are thinking about what you are hearing, and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear about on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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