

## **A Comparison of the Gospels Transfiguration**

*[New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Hello, and welcome to the latest in the series looking at comparisons of the Gospels, and today we are looking at the transfiguration. It is vitally important when looking at these comparisons that as well as looking at particular incidents we also look at the general messages that are contained in each Gospel account.

The four Gospel writers were not just simply giving four different accounts of the incidents which they witnessed during the Lord's life but were rather inspired of God to recount these incidents from four different perspectives. Matthew's overall theme was to show Christ as the King, Mark was to show Him as the perfect servant, Luke as the perfect man and John as the Son of God. We can see this right from the opening genealogies. In Matthew we can trace the Lord's lineage right to King David. Mark does not give us any lineage as a servant would not be considered worthy of such. Luke takes us right back to the first man, Adam, created initially as perfect. John also gives no lineage as the Son of God is Eternal, and chapter one of John's Gospel makes this very clear. John's Gospel chapter one verses one and two say:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.”

It is for this reason in particular that it is only John's Gospel which does not give the account of the transfiguration.

The references in the first three Gospels which recall the incident on the mount of Transfiguration are Matthew chapter 17 verses 1-13, Mark chapter 9 verses 2-13 and Luke chapter 9 verses 28-36, and we will go on to look at these but it is with John's Gospel which omits the story all together that I would like to start.

As mentioned, the omission is the most important thing we need to learn and appreciate by the Gospels account of this incident. The mount of transfiguration was to give the three disciples, Peter, James and John, a glimpse of the Kingdom yet to come of which Christ will be the central and main theme and in which Moses and Elijah as representing the Law and the Prophets will share in that Glory with them. It was during this supernatural display of Glory beyond anything they had seen before that the voice of God the Father speaks and declares Jesus to be the Son, the beloved Object and delight of His heart. The very object of John's Gospel, as already mentioned, was to show this very thing. So it is very clear that the Holy Spirit would desire us to see in John's Gospel the Glory of the Son in all His fullness and to be as overawed with this as if we too had been there with Peter, James and John on that momentous day.

I have already mentioned the first two verses of John's Gospel and the importance they have to the Christian Faith but I would now like to point out a few other things from this Gospel that will hopefully set the scene and give us that glimpse of the Glory of the Son in the same way as the

three disciples had on that day. Surely our desire must be that when we have finished our considerations today we are in the same condition as they were in verse 8 of Matthew chapter 17,

“When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.”

By the time that the Apostle John writes his Gospel and his epistles it is thought about 25 years had passed since Paul and Peter had been active. The Gospel of John is assuming, taking for granted perhaps, that the events recorded in the first three Gospels were known. Many dissenting voices were rising up and created concern in the early Church, and the main avenue of attack was around the person of Christ. Who is this Jesus? Was He really who He claimed to be? Quite ironic but not surprising that although so many years have past, and everything in our world has changed since the first century and yet the enemy, the Devil, still has the same plan of attack.

Very few people across this world would doubt the existence of Jesus and that He was a great man who went about doing good. Many would even say that He was a prophet. However, John begins his Gospel by laying down this foundation stone, that Jesus Christ was in fact the Eternal Son of the Eternal God, made flesh and brought into this world as the only way for sinful mankind to be made right with God and enjoy an eternal relationship with Him as our Father. It is important to note that the “beginning” spoken about by John at the start of his Gospel is going far further back than the “beginning” he refers to in chapter one of his first epistle or even the “beginning” of creation referred to in Genesis chapter 1 verse 1. This is in effect a beginning with no beginning!

This is hard for us to comprehend as we naturally think in time and sense but this is exactly why the Holy Spirit inspired John to write such things. His desire was for us to know the Father and for our joy to be complete in this. Perhaps the most powerful verses in the whole of the Bible are contained in chapters 13 to 17 of John’s Gospel, what are often referred to as the Upper Room Discourse. In chapters 13, 14, 15 and 16 the Lord addresses His disciples for the last time and then in chapter 17 He lifts His eyes to heaven and prays to His Father. In chapter 15 verse 11 and chapter 16 verse 24 the Lord talks about their joy being full and then in chapter 17 verse 13, He prays to the Father that His joy may be fulfilled in them. By extension this then comes to us who have accepted Him in faith which is truly a wonderful thing.

After John asserted the eternal nature and existence of the Word, he states in verse 3 of chapter one of his Gospel that all things were made by Him and through Him and then in verse 4 that He is the Light of men. An old Gospel Hymn that we sing often starts off by saying,

“The whole world was lost in the darkness of sin,  
the light of the world is Jesus.”

P P Bliss (1838 - 1876)

Then in verse 14 John makes it very clear that the Eternal Word became flesh and dwelt among us. How easy it is for this world at Christmas time to think and sing of a child born in a manger, and while it is a great thing that this is done, how far short it comes from the wondrous reality of what it actually means. In chapter 1 of John’s Gospel we are also introduced to another John, John the Baptist. John the Baptist was sent in order to prepare the way for the coming Messiah and the apostle John tells us in chapter 1 verse 17 another wonderful key fact of Christianity,

“For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came  
through Jesus Christ.”

Then in verse 18 he states that the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father has declared Him. Incredible, the God who had never been seen has been declared by the Son who ever dwelt in that position of closeness from all Eternity.

So it is important to see from John's Gospel chapter 1 that he mentions Moses as being the one who gave the Law. As mentioned earlier, Moses appeared on the mount of Transfiguration as a representation of the Law. Then it is very interesting that in verse 21 we read that the leaders of the Jewish people, the priests and the Levites, asked John the Baptist after he had told them he was not the Christ, if he was Elijah. This shows us how much emphasis they placed on the Prophets, of whom Elijah was highly regarded. So the importance of the Law and the Prophets to the Jewish people is very clearly stated here. It seems therefore interesting to me that this question they asked John the Baptist is only recorded in John's Gospel, where the Mount of Transfiguration is not mentioned. So however great the Law and Prophets were to the Jewish people and in particular how beyond imagination it must have been for Peter, James and John to see Moses and Elijah on the Mount that day, the Glories of the Son of God revealed in John's Gospel must be seen by us, and indeed them, as far greater.

Before we look at one or two other points from John's Gospel it would be worth reading the last two verses of John's Gospel chapter 20 which back up what we have just been saying:

“And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”

This term “The Christ” is an incredible one, it means God's anointed King. It is really a title of the Lord although is often used as a name as in Jesus Christ or Christ Jesus that we read of frequently in the New Testament. So John is telling us that the miracles that have been done and preserved throughout history in the Gospels are so that men and women can believe that He is God's anointed. Not only this, but also that Jesus is in fact the Son of God and furthermore, by believing these two facts we can have life in His name. This life is eternal in its existence and can have a life changing effect on the lives we live here and now. There are no other facts in this whole world that can have such an effect on us. In effect we are acknowledging Christ as King. He very evidently is not King in this world now, remember the choices the crowd made and the chants that rose up before Jesus was taken to be crucified, “Away with Him”, and “We will not have this Man to reign over us.” A day will come however when He returns to this earth to set up His Kingdom and He will sit again on King David's throne in Jerusalem and the world will come under His authority. In the meantime however how wonderful when we as Christians can acknowledge Him as such in our lives and submit to Him as both our Lord and the coming King.

Another interesting omission in the Gospel of John that we see in the other Gospels is when the Lord takes His disciples out of the upper room, after the discourse mentioned earlier, they cross the Brook Cedron and go into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. Once again He takes Peter, James and John a little further and Matthew, Mark and Luke all record that being very sorrowful He requests that if there be any other way then this cup should be taken from Him. As we know there could be no other way for salvation to be brought to this world and I do not think this is just coincidence that as John writes His Gospel to highlight the Glories of Christ as the Son of God, the Spirit of God guides him not to include this as there is no need for this interaction to be included in John's account. I feel it is almost the opposite reason that the Mount of Transfiguration is not recorded in John's Gospel. The transfiguration is not recorded as there is no need for John to record the Glory of the Lord on the mount whereas in the garden there is no need for John to record the Lord's thoughts as a subject man facing the horror of Calvary.

I would now like to mention some things which are the same in all three Gospels, and some others which are different, in the accounts of the Transfiguration itself. I always find it helpful to think that in comparing things we are looking for things that are the same and when contrasting we are looking for things that are different, that both are very valid in any study. All three Gospel writers mention Peter, James and John as well as that Moses and Elijah both joined them. We have

already considered that Moses and Elijah speak of the law and the prophets but as the Transfiguration is a prophecy of the Heavenly Kingdom to come perhaps we can also see Moses as a representative of those Christians who have died, and will be resurrected at Christ's return whereas Elijah represents those who will still be alive at Christ's return, and will never see death as Elijah himself experienced. It is good to remind ourselves of the incredible end to Elijah's life, like Enoch he was taken to heaven without dying. We read in Second Kings chapter 2 verse 11:

“Then it happened, as they [Elisha and Elijah] continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.”

What a way to end your life!

While we are not given any details like this in respect of the Rapture we are told that it will be in the blink of an eye and therefore what great comfort for every Christian to know that this is our hope for the future, not simply that we will get old and die. There is a well known hymn that states very clearly:

“The sky not the grave is our goal.”

H G Spafford (1828 - 1888)

In Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians chapter 4 he deals with a very real concern that they had, that those who had died will somehow miss the resurrection at the Second Coming of Christ. He explains that in fact the dead in Christ will rise first and we who are still alive shall be caught up together with them. Then in the very last verse of the chapter, verse 18, he gives the reason for clarifying this great truth with them:

“Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

It is also important to notice that the account of the Transfiguration in all three of the Gospels comes immediately after the point when the Lord had been explaining to them that His Kingdom would come on earth in a day to come but that some of them would see this Kingdom in miniature as a sample of what was coming in the future before they died. The disciples were very much of the opinion that the Messiah would come and release the Jews from the ruling Roman power and establish His Kingdom there and then, hence there was confusion and initial utter despondency when Christ was crucified. It also comes after they had been discussing who others thought the Lord really was, and the Lord was explaining to them how He must suffer before His Kingdom could come.

As we then look at the three records themselves it strikes us right away that Matthew and Mark say after six days whereas Luke says it was about after eight days. We can only assume that Luke was counting the day of Peter's confession until the day of the incident itself but the more important point here is that it is another example of the fact that these writers were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write these things at different times and without any collaboration with each other. Many would point to trivial differences such as this as reasons why the Bible should not be believed but I would say the opposite is true, and that it proves the authenticity of the Holy Spirit's inspiration. If I was writing an account of something that happened years before I would be checking my recollection with others who were there but these writers were not relying on their own imperfect memories.

Another very important and striking difference in Luke's account we can see is in Chapter 9 verse 29 of Luke's Gospel. This is the only Gospel where we are told that it was as the Lord prayed that He was transfigured before them. Again, no coincidence here that the Gospel writer who is showing Christ as the perfect Man tells us that as a dependant Man He is lifting up His heart and

voice to His Father at the very moment when He is displayed in all the Glory of His coming Kingdom, what a contrast.

It is also very interesting to notice the three different ways which the Gospel writers describe the brightness of the Lord's clothing's and His countenance. Matthew says His face was shining like the sun and His clothing was white as the light. Mark describes His clothing as being exceedingly white like snow, far whiter than any launderer could make them but doesn't mention His face. Luke says His face was altered and His clothes became white and glistening. All three were saying the same thing that this was something that was beyond anything they had experienced in this life but using their own impressions of what it really was like, Mark in particular taking a step further to say this was an appearance that could not be replicated by natural means. This reminds us surely of the day that Moses came down from meeting with God on Mount Sinai after the two new tablets of the Ten Commandments had been given. We read in Exodus chapter 34 verse 29 that the skin of his face was shining while he talked with God but he had no idea that this was the case. However, so incredible was the sight that Aaron and the people were afraid to come near him. How good it is if we can have such an experience with God that our appearance seems to be altered by it! I am sure we can all think of examples of people having such an experience of this.

As we go further down the texts of these Gospel accounts the next thing we notice is that only Luke tells us what Jesus was talking to Moses and Elijah about, that being His imminent death at Jerusalem. Again, I would say this is not just a mere coincidence as Luke's main theme in his Gospel is to show Christ in His manhood. It was of course in order to die that He became a man. Another hymn comes to mind,

“How wonderful that Thou the Son has come,  
and here for us as Son of Man has died.”

A von der Kammer (from German)

Finally, we come to the last section of story and we can see that all three writers say the same. Firstly, we are told that Peter wanted to build three tabernacles or booths. The Israelites dwelt in booths during the annual Feast of Tabernacles and we can read about this in Leviticus chapter 23 verses 34-42. He perhaps wanted to freeze the moment such was his enjoyment of it but while well intentioned perhaps it showed a real lack of understanding in two ways. This was a foresight of something that would be in the future and also it would have been inappropriate to put Christ in the same category as Moses and Elijah, Christ must always stand alone in His uniqueness irrespective of how great any servant may be. Secondly, our story ends on this wonderful note of the cloud that surrounds them and the voice of God the Father comes from Heaven giving this message. It should be noted that it was as Peter was making his suggestion that this voice came as a clear correction that no one can stand with or be compared to The Christ, The Son of God. Let's finish by reading Matthew chapter 17 verse 5:

“While he [Peter] 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!'”

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