

## INTRODUCTION

I would like for you to recall in your mind an unforgettable vacation experience you had. Before you went your friends told you how magnificent the place was. You browsed through tourist guides to make sure that you knew what routes to take, the specific attractions you had to stop by to look around and take pictures at, the famous local delicacies to try out, souvenirs to buy, etc. Then let us fast forward to the final evening of your trip. How differently did you feel? Perhaps you thought: "I wish this vacation could last longer." Indeed the next day you would go back to the reality. There will be laundry, dirty dishes, lawn to mow, etc. In Matthew 17 Peter, James and John might be able to share your feeling. The three disciples were privileged to see a snapshot of Jesus' glory. But Jesus' intent was not for His disciples to remain on the mountain top. There was unfinished business in His salvation plan. To Jesus' disciples and to us an uphill vision is to prepare for a downhill mission.

Before we study the passage in depth first we need to ask the question: for whom was Jesus' transfiguration intended? Was it for Jesus? Did God the Father try to boost Jesus' morale soon before Jesus went to the cross? No, this spectacular vision was in fact for the three disciples. We are told in **verse 1** that: ...Jesus *took with him* Peter, James and John the brother of James, and *led them* up a high mountain... Then **verse 2** reads: There he was transfigured *before them*... Also **verse 3**: Just then there appeared *before them* Moses and Elijah... Matthew hinted that Jesus could have gone there alone, but He brought the disciples with Him for special purposes.

We can roughly divide the passage into two main sections: first, the three disciples went uphill to witness the transformation of the Man of God, then they traveled downhill as Jesus reiterated the consummation of His plan of salvation.

## EXPLANATION

### 1. 上山 – 人子變像 Uphill – Transformation of the Man

First, Jesus took the three disciples, went uphill and the Son of Man transformed Himself and revealed His glory before them.

#### A. 神性 Deity

In doing so, Jesus disclosed His deity to His disciples. Let us look at **verse 2** again: There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. We are familiar with similar descriptions of brightness, whiteness and bright cloud (in verse 5) that depict God's glory in the Bible. For example, in the Old Testament when God appeared at the tabernacle we see in **Exodus 40:38** that - So the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels. The three disciples understood that Jesus was showing His deity by the display of God's glory. Jesus did not transform into a different body. Rather, He was revealing the glory

that He had all along. As a comparison, when Moses went up the Mount of Sinai to obtain the Ten Commandments a second time after the Golden Calf incident. He spent forty days and nights with God. **Exodus 34:29** records that something unusual happened to Moses afterward: When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD. Whereas Moses was reflecting God's glory like a mirror, Jesus was illuminating God's glory like the sun. Just when Jesus was showing His glory, God the Father spoke to the disciples. **Verse 5** reads: ...a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" God the Father verified Jesus' deity as His Son by His voice. He spoke to His people through Jesus.

## B. 結局 Destiny

Through Jesus' transformation He did not only disclosed His deity as God, He also revealed the destiny regarding His death. **Verse 3** tells us that two important Old Testament figures appeared: Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Luke the gospel writer helped fill us in with the topic of their conversation in **Luke 9:30-31** – 30 Two men, Moses and Elijah, 31 appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. The Chinese Union Version correctly translates the word "departure" as "death." Moses and Elijah are two of the three persons in the Bible who did not go through death (the third one being Enoch). To the Jews Moses represents the Law of God and Elijah was a well-known prophet. Both Moses and Elijah were rejected by the people they served. The Israelites grumbled to Moses in the wilderness and challenged his leadership. Elijah felt that he was the last faithful follower of God when Israel bowed down to idols. Jesus was unwelcomed by the Jews too. Through Moses God established a covenant with His people. Elijah renewed the covenant broken by idolatry. Now Jesus was sent by God the Father, not only to continue God's covenant, but He also established a new covenant with those who put their faith in Him. Every time we observe the communion we will read **Matthew 26:27-28** or similar passage – 27 Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. 28 This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." By the appearance of Moses and Elijah there was a symbolic meaning as if Jesus received a baton from those two Old Testament saints. From now on, Jesus went to the cross to complete God's salvation plan. His destiny was to die for us.

Going back to the transformation scene. How did the three disciples react to this spectacular vision? In **verse 4** Matthew told us Peter's response: Peter 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." Peter might mean "Wow! How fortunate we are to witness such glorious scene and to meet two forerunners in God's Kingdom!" or "How fortunate you three are that James, John and I are here to serve you by building some tents to provide you shades from the sun!" It can be a mix of both. **Luke 9:33** states that Peter's proposal of building tents was uttered "...As the men were leaving Jesus." Peter simply did not want Moses and Elijah to leave because he wanted to immerse himself in this once-in-a-lifetime experience. Frightening? Yes. However, such divine encounter was not something anyone could ask for.

The transformation of the Son of Man was for the sake of the disciples. After hearing all the teaching and seeing the miracles from Jesus they still did not quite understand Jesus' deity as God and His destiny of shedding His blood. Therefore, Jesus arranged this supernatural phenomenon to reinforce those ideas to the disciples. You see, God created us with five senses for a reason. It is one thing to read from the Bible and know that God is great, it is quite another thing to experience His mighty power. From the exodus out of Egypt to wilderness wandering the Israelites saw the Red Sea being divided, they ate the manna fell from the sky, and on Mount Sinai they heard the trumpet blaring, smelled the smoke rising and felt the earth shaking. There was little doubt that God was real! We have similar experience in our daily life. Many of you saw this (picture of firework on the screen) the past Tuesday. It is one thing to "see" firework on pictures. You can also watch a firework show broadcast on TV. The camera captures the best angles – close-up, panoramic shots, you name it. However, nothing tops the experience when you watch a firework show on the spot. You hear the blasting when fireworks are launched and when they explode in the sky. The glittering and the myriad of changing colors are beautiful beyond description. If you stay close enough you may even smell the odor of fire powder! Those sensations enrich your knowledge about firework.

Just like firework our ecstatic feeling may last for a moment only. Though in this life we will never see the same vision the disciples witnessed, there may be times when we experience first-hand how real God is in our lives. Perhaps God answered your prayer in a personal and special way. May be God used a familiar Bible verse or gospel song to touch your heart. It could be a moment of solitude when you were alone watching the sunset, listening to the wind and chirping of the birds. No matter what it was, you felt very close to God. You whispered to God: "Lord, how good it would be for me to stay here forever!" But you know you can't. God's purpose is for us to bring this intimate moment back to our everyday life so that even when we are chasing deadline at work or in school, fighting against traffic jam or overwhelmed by milk bottle and dirty diapers we know that God is with us.

## 2. 下山 – 成就計劃 Downhill – Consummation of the Plan

An uphill vision is to prepare for a downhill mission. Jesus did not want His disciples to linger on the mountain top. There was an important mission downhill for the consummation of His salvation plan.

### A. 不能分享 Not Shared

Therefore, Jesus forbade the disciples to share their experience about the vision. Please look at [verse 9](#) with me: As 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." Why not? From a human perspective the disciples would brag about their extraordinary encounter, saying to others: "Let us tell you what we saw on the mountain that day," or "You will never believe if we tell you whom we met." Besides, there is a more important spiritual significance to Jesus' order. Notice that Jesus did not ask the disciples not to share their experience ever, but they could only do so after Jesus was resurrected. You may remember that in Jesus' earlier ministries, every time after He performed a miracle He prohibited people to share their experience with others. For example, after Jesus healed a leper He told the patient in [Mark 1:44](#) – "See that you

don't tell this to anyone..." In Mark chapter 5, after Jesus raised a girl from the dead [Mark 5:43](#) records: He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this... It was because the time for Jesus to go to the cross has not arrived yet. He did not want people to swarm around Him because they could gain benefit from His supernatural power to heal their diseases or cast out demons. Jesus did not want the Jews to enthrone Him as a political leader to overturn the Roman government either. Jesus wanted people to come to Him because they acknowledged their sins and realized the need of a Savior. What people ultimately need to be freed from was not the bondage of a political authority but the bondage of a spiritual regime. However, after Jesus' resurrection from the death the disciples would no longer have any confusion as to what kind of King Jesus came to be and what sort of Kingdom He came to establish.

## B. 不能倖免 Not Spared

Jesus told His disciples that they were not allowed to share their uphill encounter. Next, Jesus emphasized that His life would not be spared. As they were going downhill the disciples asked their teacher about the appearance of Elijah. Let us read Jesus' reply in [verses 12 to 13](#): 12 "...Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist. The disciples were aware of the Old Testament prophecy in [Malachi 4:5-6](#) that one day Elijah would come back. Those are the very last two verses in the Old Testament, which read: 5 "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. 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." Since the disciples saw Elijah moments ago, they wondered if that Elijah was the same person foretold in the prophecy. After hearing Jesus' answer, the disciples knew that the promised "Elijah" had arrived. He was none other but John the Baptist. When John the Baptist was still in his mother's womb an angel told John's father Zachariah in [Luke 1:16-17](#) about his coming son that: 16 "Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." This "Elijah" would fan a spiritual revival, and He would pave the way for Jesus. When John arrived he called the Jews to repent, and baptized them to indicate a new beginning of their spiritual life. Besides mentioning about the reformation John brought, Jesus also hinted that just like the Elijah in the Old Testament being threatened by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, and just like John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod, then "in the same way" Jesus' life would not be spared. Jesus came to die on the cross.

## CONCLUSION

In this passage Jesus shows us that an uphill vision is to prepare for a downhill mission. By His own example Jesus demonstrated to the disciple that the road to receive glory is not to stay on the mountain top. It is through going into the people. In the subsequent section of Matthew 17 a crowd for waiting for Jesus' help as He went downhill. Jesus set an example to His disciples that He did not come to the earth to enjoy His glory. But He came to serve His people. How did the uphill supernatural experience change the disciples? Peter wrote in [2 Peter 1:16-18](#) that: 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. 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 heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. Peter testified based on his eye-witness account that the Christ he preached was God. John shared something similar in [John 1:14](#) - The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. The glory John saw from Jesus on the mountain top could only be the true glory of God. Such conviction energized Peter, John and many of Jesus' disciples to live a life for Christ. They willingly imitated after Jesus and sacrificed their lives for the sake of the gospel. Like Jesus' disciples we may have an uphill experience. We went to Christian conferences and listened to good preaching. My wife can tell you that one benefit of going to a retreat is that she does not need to cook! Some people enjoy going to Christian music concerts. They pour out their emotion by singing, jumping and lifting of hands. Some of our church members, myself included, just came back from the Navajo mission a week ago. Besides serving the local people we had a great opportunity to stay close to God in a peaceful environment to meditate on God's Word and to pray to God. We know that while those experience are wonderful, they are just a small part of Christian life. After all, no one can stay "high" at all times! We spend most of our time on our daily routine of studying, working or taking care of kids. Once in a marriage class I asked every couple to give some wise advice to single people. One sister summed it all: "Life is monotonous." Indeed dating is romantic and exciting. But after one gets married life will be very different. Once in a while we may have an uphill experience with God. But God's heart is for us to bring that intimate relationship with Him into our everyday life. Jesus calls us to imitate after His example to serve others and to proclaim this one true God to the fallen world.