

Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

17:1-13

by J.C. Ryle

Transcript

These verses contain one of the most remarkable events in our Lord's earthly ministry, the event commonly called the transfiguration. The order in which it is recorded is beautiful and instructive. The latter part of the last chapter showed us the cross; here we are graciously allowed to see something of the coming reward. The hearts which have just been saddened by a plain statement of Christ's sufferings are at once gladdened by a vision of Christ's glory. Let us mark this. We often lose much by not tracing the connection between chapter and chapter in the Word of God. There are some mysterious things, no doubt, in the vision here described. It must needs be so. We are yet in the body. Our senses are conversant with gross and material things; our ideas and perceptions about glorified bodies and dead saints must necessarily be vague and imperfect. Let us content ourselves with endeavoring to mark out the practical lessons which the transfiguration is meant to teach us. In the first place we have in these verses a striking pattern of the glory in which Christ and his people will appear when he comes the second time. There can be little question that this was one main object of this wonderful vision. It was meant to encourage the disciples by giving them a glimpse of good things yet to come. That face shining as the sun and that raiment white as the light were intended to give the disciples some idea of the majesty in which Jesus will appear to the world when he comes the second time, and all his saints with him. The corner of the veil was lifted up to show them their Master's true dignity. They were taught that if he did not yet appear to the world in the guise of a King, it was only because the time for putting on his royal apparel was not yet come. It is impossible to draw any other conclusion from St. Peter's language when writing on the subject. He says, with distinct reference to the transfiguration, we were eyewitnesses of his majesty (2 Peter 1:16) It is good for us to have the coming glory of Christ and his people deeply impressed on our minds. We are sadly apt to forget it. There are few visible indications of it in the world: We see not yet all things put under our Lord's feet (i.e. Hebrews 2:8). Sin, unbelief and superstition abound. Thousands are practically saying, We will not have this man to reign over us. It doth not yet appear what his people shall be; their crosses, their tribulations, their weaknesses, their conflicts, are all manifest enough, but there are few signs of their future reward. Let us beware of giving way to doubts in this matter: let us silence such doubts by reading over the history of the transfiguration. There is laid up for Jesus, and all that believe in him, such glory as the heart of man never conceived. It is not only promised, but part of it has actually been seen by three competent witnesses. One of them says, We beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the father, (i.e. John 1:14). Surely that which has been seen may well be believed. In the second place we have in these verses an unanswerable proof of the resurrection of the

body, and the life after death. We are told that Moses and Elijah appeared visibly in glory with Christ: they were seen in a bodily form. They were heard talking with our Lord. Fourteen hundred and eighty years had rolled round since Moses died and was buried; more than 900 years had passed away since Elijah "went up by a whirlwind" into heaven: yet here they are seen alive by Peter, James and John! Let us lay firm hold on this part of the vision. It deserves close attention. We must all feel, if we ever think at all, that the state of the dead is a wonderful and mysterious subject. One after another we bury them out of our sight; we lay them in their narrow beds and see them no more, and their bodies become dust. But will they really live again? Shall we really see them any more? Will the grave really give back the dead at the last day? These are the questions that will occasionally come across the minds of some, in spite of all the plainest statements in the Word of God. Now we have in the transfiguration the clearest evidence that the dead will rise again. We find two men appearing on earth, in their bodies, who had long been separate from the land of the living, and in them we have a pledge of the resurrection of all. All that have ever lived upon earth will again be called to life, and render up their account: not one will be found missing. There is no such thing as annihilation. All that have ever fallen asleep in Christ will be found in safekeeping: patriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs, down to the humblest servant of God in our own day. "Though unseen to us they all live to God." He is not a God of the dead, but of the living ("Luke"). Their spirits live as surely as we live ourselves, and will appear hereafter in glorified bodies, as surely as Moses and Elijah in the mount. These are indeed solemn thoughts! There is a resurrection, and men like Felix may well tremble. There is a resurrection, and men like Paul may well rejoice. In the last place we have in these verses a remarkable testimony to Christ's infinite superiority over all that are born of woman. This is a point which is brought out strongly by the voice from heaven which the disciples heard. Peter, bewildered by the heavenly vision and not knowing what to say, proposed to build three tabernacles, one for Christ, one for Moses and one for Elijah. He seemed, in fact, to place the law-giver and the prophet side by side with his divine Master, as if all three were equal. At once, we are told, the proposal was rebuked in a marked manner. A cloud covered Moses and Elijah, and they were no more seen. A voice at the same time came forth from the cloud, repeating the solemn words made use of at our Lord's baptism: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him!" That voice was meant to teach Peter that there was One there far greater than Moses or Elijah. Moses was a faithful servant of God; Elijah was a bold witness for the truth: but Christ was far above either one or the other. He was the Saviour to whom law and prophets were continually pointing; he was the true prophet to whom all were commanded to hear ("Deuteronomy"). Moses and Elijah were great men in their day, but Peter and his companions were to remember that in nature, dignity and office they were far below Christ. He was the true sun: they were the stars depending daily on his light. He was the root: they were the branches. He was the Master: they were the servants. Their goodness was all derived: his was original and his own. Let them honor Moses and the prophets as holy men, but if they would be saved they must take Christ alone for their Master, and glory only in him. "Hear ye him." Let us see in these words a striking lesson to the whole church of Christ. There is a constant tendency in human nature to "hear man." Bishops, priests, deacons, popes, cardinals, councils, presbyterian preachers and independent ministers are continually exalted to a place which God never intended them to fill, and made practically to usurp the honor of Christ. Against this tendency let us all watch, and be on our guard. Let these solemn words of the vision ever ring in our ears: "Hear ye Christ." The best of men are only men at their very best. Patriarchs, prophets, and apostles, martyrs, fathers, reformers, puritans—all, all are sinners, who need a Saviour: holy, useful, honorable in their place, but sinners after all. They must never be allowed to stand between us and Christ. He alone is the Son, with whom the Father is well pleased; he alone is sealed and appointed to give the bread of life;

he alone has the keys in his hands: "God over all, blessed forever!" (Romans 9:5). Let us take heed that we hear his voice and follow him; let us value all religious teaching just in proportion as it leads us to Christ. The sum and substance of saving religion is to hear Christ.

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