

Beyond Your Wildest Imagination

Matthew 17:1-13; with Mark 9 and Luke 9

Shortly after his question about his identity, Jesus takes three of his disciples with him up a mountain to pray. When Jesus began to pray, these three disciples saw something beyond their wildest imagination. They saw the real Jesus: his outer shell briefly stripped away, and his true identity revealed.

What happened on that mountain was what the Bible called Metamorphoses: a change of form; present the essence of a thing as separate from the outward fashion. Transform, transfigure, metamorphoses is seen in 2 Corinthians 3:18 with reference to the shining on Moses' face. Paul makes use of this change in Romans 12 when he contrasts not to be conformed in the fashion of the world, but be transformed in your inner life by the renewing of your mind. Mark tells us in chapter 16 that the disciples on the road to Emmaus did not recognize Jesus because he was in another form of a different kind: a form truly representative of his inner nature.

Metamorphoses can be seen in nature with butterflies and moths. Human imagination has taken metamorphoses to the big screen.

The Transformers: The Movie is a 1986 animated feature film based on the animated series of the same name. It was released in North America on August 8, 1986.

The story takes place in 2005, 20 years after the events of the TV series' second season and serves to bridge into the third season. The film's tagline was: "Beyond Good. Beyond Evil. Beyond Your Wildest Imagination."

I wonder if Peter, James and John used "Beyond Your Wildest Imagination" when later trying to describe what they saw on the mountain?

The following scripture is Matthew's description of Jesus' transfiguration with what Mark and Luke add in italics.

Matthew: ¹After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves *to pray. They were all alone. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.* ²There he was transfigured before them. *Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light; dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.* ³Just then there appeared before them in glorious splendor Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. *They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.*

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." (*He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.*)

⁵While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; *whom I have chosen*; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

⁶When the disciples heard this, *when the voice had spoken* they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." ⁸When they looked up, *and when they looked around*, 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." *The disciples kept this to themselves, discussing what "rising from the dead" meant, and told no one at that time what they had seen.*

¹⁰The disciples asked him, "Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?"

¹¹Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. ¹²But I tell you, 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." ¹³Then the disciples

understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.

What an incredible event! Imagine being one of those three men, seeing Jesus changed into a being brighter than the noonday sun. What would it have been like to be there to see Jesus chatting with Moses and Elijah, heroes of the faith from Israel's past? No doubt, this was beyond their wildest dreams.

"He was transfigured before them" in an expanded translation could read: "His outward expression was changed before them, that outward expression proceeded from and was truly representative of His inward being." (Wuest)

While we allow our mind to soak in what it might have been like to see this event, we have to ask some questions.

Why would Jesus reveal himself in such a way? Why just these three? Why did this happen? What is God teaching with this event? (Who, what, where, when, why, and how. Can't we just read the passage, allow our imaginations to take a walk on the mountain and move on? Nope. You don't get your moneys worth that way.)

One of the keys to understanding why Jesus revealed himself in this fashion and the importance of this event is in the six days mentioned. Six days from what? And why mention time at all?

In the Gospel's, it is not necessary to indicate precise time relationships between events. Some events are not even

in chronological order. But in this case, the six days relates the mountain event to the disciple's understanding of who Jesus is with Peter's confession, and, some suggest, Jesus statement about some "will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Also, it is possible that a parallel is being drawn with Exodus 24:16; "For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from within the cloud."

Given all of Matthews parallels with the Old Testament to this point, there is a good chance his Jewish readers would have recognized this mention of six days linking Moses' glorification on Mount Sinai and Jesus' transfiguration.

The cloud, the voice from the cloud, Moses and Elijah, the shelters that Peter wanted to build, all these details relate in some way to God interaction in Israel's history. Matthew's brethren would have to be blind not to see this. But, Jesus did describe some of them as having selective vision; of being optically challenged. Jesus revealed himself in such a way that goes beyond just fulfilled prophecy. He also connects himself with Israel's history.

Our next question is easily answered. Why just these three? Why just his so called inner circle? The answer: we don't know. We are not told. But, there are some interesting "firsts" associated with these three.

Peter seemed to be the spokesman for the Twelve. Whether this was by consensus or self-appointed, we don't know. This gift or ability was not wasted. In Acts, for example, he stood up with the Eleven and addressed the crowds (Acts 2). Peter was also the one sent to the house of a centurion named Cornelius to deliver the gospel (Acts 10). So the first gospel message to the Jews and the Gentiles is credited to Peter.

James became one of the early leaders of the Church in Jerusalem and first of the Twelve to be martyred for the faith (Acts 12).

John, you could say, being present while Jesus was being questioned after his arrest, and standing with Mary and the other women at the crucifixion, saw "first-hand" the brutal injustice humans can inflict.

Of the Twelve, these three witnesses the first glimpse of Jesus true identity: truly beyond their wildest imagination. Though not told why just these three, the Transfiguration began the journey to the understanding of the true nature of God's Kingdom for Peter, James, and John.

While they were listening to the conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, a bright cloud surrounded them and a voice spoke from the cloud. Peter looked over at James and John and said, "Cool!" right?

I don't think so, Dave. What did they do? They dropped face first to the ground,

terrified. Why would God do this? Why would he put them in such a situation without any warning? What is he teaching them?

I did some word searching. I wanted to comprehend as best I could the intensity of this moment. The word I found looks like the word phobia. The form the word takes expresses an intense fear, as you can imagine. The idea behind phobia, from what I could tell, is a type of fear that causes flight: like, “feet don’t fail me now.”

But, these men have just seen a man that they have been traveling with just light up brilliant white, talking to two men who have been dead for years, and now a bright cloud surrounds and speaks to them. Where do you run?

This was an intense, gripping fear; sore afraid; extremely terrified. This was not a ‘walk up behind someone and say boo scared.’

This is limp-limb, weak-kneed, I want to run but my feet won’t move, drop-to-the-ground, wet pants terrified. They had no doubt who was speaking. This goes beyond politely asking, “May I have your attention, please.” This was a 2x4 get your attention time. Do you think God had their full attention?

Make no mistake disciples! Listen to and obey Jesus, my Son!

Over the years, I have thought a lot about this next scene. I have often wondered about the possibility of some

humor in one of the most spectacular events in the Bible.

We are not told how long Jesus, Moses, and Elijah talked. So, we don’t know how long these three laid petrified with fear, their face in the dirt. A few moments before the bright light appeared and the cloud fell, they were sleepy. Now, they are in position to nap, but I doubt that napping was on their mind. What might they be thinking?

What would you be thinking? Think about the worst scare you ever had. What happens to you physically, mentally, and emotionally when you have had the be-gee-bees scared out of you?

If you remain conscious, your heart rate and blood pressure increases. Your breathing becomes shallow and rapid. You may begin to perspire: sweaty palms. Your entire body trembles; your mind races. These guys might have been thinking, “What’s going to happen next? Earthquakes? Thunder and lightning? Is the earth going to open up and swallow me? Is fire going to drop from the sky?”

You are on the ground, eyes closed, face down in the dirt, nearly scared to death, and then someone touches your shoulder.

I don’t know about you, but I see some humor here. I imagine whomever he touched first jumped like they had been shot. Maybe all three did. I imagine Jesus smiling just a little as his wide-eyed

friends look around, spit dirt, stand up and brush themselves off.

We can laugh a little. We weren’t the ones face down in the dirt. Maybe they laughed a little too, when they later told the story of one of the most amazing events they ever witnessed.

But, for now, Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” The three kept this to themselves, discussing what “rising from the dead” meant, and told no one at that time what they had seen on the mountain.

Peter, James, and John did not yet understand the meaning of what just happened. They could not fathom the Messiah dying like a common criminal. Unable to grasp the fact that Jesus would be crucified, they discussed “rising from the dead.” In light of what they had just experienced, can you imagine that discussion?

Matthew brings his readers to the turning point in his gospel account with the spokesman Peter’s verbal declaration, “You are the Christ, the Son of God.” Within a week’s time, Jesus affirms this verbal declaration with a glimpse of the Kingdom that went beyond these three disciple’s wildest imagination.

What they saw unmistakably displayed the glory and the power of God. The disciples were given a glimpse of the splendor to come after the Cross. Jesus’ transfiguration redefined the kingdom for

His disciples. After His death and resurrection “the kingdom of God comes with power.” The mark of the kingdom will not be angelic armies marching to crush the power of Rome, Israel’s oppressors. The kingdom of God comes with power in order to change ordinary human beings who choose to follow Jesus. The kingdom, at least until Jesus reappears, is about transformation, not conquest.

It is good to be concerned for the poor and the oppressed, and do all we can to help them. But never forget that the kingdom Jesus died to establish is concerned first of all with the transformation of individuals. God’s power is available to bring each human being personal, inner transformation.

We exist to help people find new life in Jesus.