

THE SACRED MOUNTAIN

“For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. 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.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.” (2 Pet. 1:16-18).

Something significant happened on the “Sacred Mountain”. Let’s see if we can find out what it was!

Peter wrote these inspired words as an old man who described himself as **“a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s suffering” (1 Pet. 5:1)**. Peter not only witnessed the sufferings of Christ, but also the miracles of Jesus. The first miracle, as you know, was the changing of water into wine and Peter was there. At that time Peter joined the other disciples of Jesus and “put their faith in Him” (Jn. 2:1-11). In addition to being an eyewitness to that miracle, Peter basically saw them all. Remember when someone was selected to take the place of Judas they had to have **“Been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us” (Acts 1:21,22)**; Peter met those qualifications! He apparently saw all of the miracles that Jesus performed. He saw Jesus make the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf to hear, and the dead come to life, Etc. Peter even experienced his own unique miracles. It was Peter who walked on the water (Matt. 14:29), found a coin in a fish’s mouth (Matt. 17:24-27), and heard a rooster remind him of a prophecy made by Jesus (Matt. 26:74,75). Moreover, the resurrected Jesus appeared to Peter first before He appeared to the twelve (1 Cor. 15:5). The apostles are listed four times in the Scriptures and every time Peter is listed first: (Matt. 10:2-4; Mk. 3:16-18; Lk. 6:12-16; Acts 1:13). Peter’s testimony is obviously significant!

Yet, Peter apparently considered all of the “evidence” he witnessed following Jesus for three years as secondary to what he experienced on the Sacred Mountain!

What he saw and heard on the Sacred Mountain was the only thing he mentioned that convinced him he was not following cleverly invented stories. Our text is from Peter’s second letter which he addressed **“To those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours” (2 Pet. 1:1)**. Thus, Peter was not telling these brethren something new, but merely “reminding” them and “refreshing their memory” (2 Pet. 1:12,13). As we have already mentioned, what happened to him on the Sacred Mountain somehow took precedence over everything else. Let’s take a closer look at what happened on that mountain and try to understand why?

THE BACKGROUND TO THIS EVENT

Peter was one of the first disciples. He began following Jesus at Bethany beyond the Jordan where John was baptizing (Jn. 1:28-42). This, of course, was before the wedding in Cana of Galilee where Jesus changed water into wine (Jn. 2:1-11). So, at the time of our text, Peter had been following

Jesus for over two years and yet none of the disciples understood that it was necessary for Jesus to die and be raised from the dead in Jerusalem.

Jesus did make a veiled reference to this death and resurrection when He drove cattle and sheep out of the temple. At that time the Jews demanded a “miraculous sign” and Jesus said: **“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (Jn. 2:19)**. The disciples, however, did not understand what He meant by this until after He was raised from the dead.

Before telling His disciples plainly that He had to die, Jesus took them to Caesarea Philippi. This city was in the Northern part of Israel near the city of Dan. The expression “from Dan to Beersheba” was used to encompass the totality of the Promised Land from North to South (1 Sam. 3:19,20). This wicked city was originally know as Paneas because it was the center for the worship of the Greek god Pan. It was named Caesarea Philippi by Herod Phillip, the son of Herod the Great, in honor of Caesarea Augustus. Caesar, as you know, considered himself to be a god. It is interesting that Jesus would take His disciples to Caesarea Philippi as this pagan city was so vile and corrupt that orthodox rabbis felt that no devout Jew should ever go there.

Mt. Hermon is the highest mountain in Israel towering 9,100 feet above sea level. Caesarea Philippi was nestled at the foot of Mt. Hermon and butted up against a large cliff known as the “Rock of the gods”. This cliff is 100 feet high and 500 feet wide. The cliff derived its name from the many shrines to pagan gods that were there. In the middle of the cliff was a large cave from which a stream flowed. This stream was one of three sources that formed the head waters of the Jordan River. Inside the cave was a pool so deep they could not measure it. The cave was called “The Gates of Hades” because it was believed that Baal would enter and leave the underworld through it. It is significant to remember that here at this cliff, and this cave, Jesus promised to build His church upon a “Rock” that the “Gates of Hades” could not prevail against (Matt. 16:18). The Deity of Jesus is that Rock! He is the only foundation upon which His Church can be built (1 Cor. 3:11). Nothing has, and nothing ever will be able to prevail against Jesus!

Next to the cave was a large niche with a statue of the god Pan. His worshipers greatly feared him from which is derived the word “panic”. Pan was portrayed as half goat and half man with an erect phallus. The worship of Pan involved bizarre sexual activity including copulating with animals.

It was in this evil environment that Jesus chose to ask His disciples who people thought He was. They replied John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. When asked whom they thought He was, Peter answered: **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16)**. Note that it was only after the identity of Jesus was clearly established that we are told: **“From that time on Jesus began to explain to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life” (Matt. 16:21)**.

That’s when **“Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. ‘Never Lord’, he said. ‘this shall never happen to you!’”**

That's when "Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get thee behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men'" (Matt. 16:22,23).

ON THE SACRED MOUNTAIN

The transfiguration of Jesus on the Sacred Mountain took place just a few days after leaving Caesarea Philippi. For some reason Jesus chose to take only Peter, James, and John with Him. The story is recorded in Matt. 17:1-13; Mk. 9:2-13; and Lk. 9:28-36. In each instance the account of His transfiguration is preceded by Peter's confession and the clear prediction of Jesus about His death. The connection of these events to the Sacred Mountain is important. The fact that Moses and Elijah talked with Jesus about His death in Jerusalem, for example, would be key in providing assurance that the death of Jesus was in harmony with both the Law and the prophets. The fact that Jesus forbade these three to tell anyone what happened on that mountain may also help to explain why the disciples were arguing among themselves as to who was the greatest (Mk. 9:9, 33-37).

The following is a compilation of what the Scriptures teach about what happened on the Sacred Mountain. We will start with Matthew's complete account, and then insert quotations from Mark and Luke when appropriate:

"After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. (where they were all alone – Mk.) There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, (and the appearance of His face changed – Lk.) and his clothes became as white as the light. (His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them – Mk.) (His clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning – Lk) Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. (They spoke with Him about His departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment in Jerusalem. Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him – Lk.) 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." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened – Mk.) (He did not know what he was saying – Lk.) While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, (Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them – Mk.) and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!' When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. 'Get up,' he said. 'Don't be afraid.' When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. 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.' (They kept the matter to themselves discussing what 'rising from the dead meant' – Mk.) The disciples asked him, 'Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?' Jesus replied, 'To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But 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.' Then the disciples

understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.’ (The disciples kept this to themselves and told no one at that time what they had seen – Lk.) (Matt. 17:1-13).

THE TRANSFIGURATION

Two times we are told that Jesus was “transfigured” on the Sacred Mountain (Matt. 17:2; Mk. 9:2). The Greek word used in both instances is “metamorphoo” which is the basis of the English word “metamorphosis”. It is a compound of two words “meta” (change) and “morphe” (form). It is used to describe what happens to a caterpillar when it “changes form” into a butterfly. Something radical happens to the caterpillar, and something radical happened to Jesus. One minute Jesus looked like He always looked and the next minute His face was shining like the sun and His clothes became as bright as a flash of lightening. This dramatic transformation made a profound impression on Peter. Remember! What happened on that Sacred Mountain convinced Peter that he was not following cleverly devised stories.

For your information, the same Greek word “metamorphoo” is also used two times to describe the transformation of believers:

- **“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2).**
- **“And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes to us from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18).**

Something radical happens to a new convert, just like something radical happens to a caterpillar, and something radical happened to Jesus. The transformation of a believer from the “works of the flesh” to the “fruit of the Spirit” is obvious (Gal. 5:19-26).

COMING IN POWER

Note again our text: **“For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power . . .”** The Bible has a lot to say about “power”. According to Mark, just before Jesus was transfigured He told His disciples: **“I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power” (Mk. 9:1).** According to Luke, just before the transfiguration Jesus gave the twelve **“power and authority to drive out demons and to cure diseases” (Lk. 9:1).**

Peter obviously had some concept of power before climbing the Sacred Mountain. On the mountain, however, he was exposed to a different dimension of power. In some mysterious way the power of God is made manifest in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). Jesus did not go to Jerusalem to take up arms and start a war. That’s what Barabbas did (Mk. 15:7). Jesus went to Jerusalem to die. He explained that unless a seed dies it abides alone, but when it dies it can produce much fruit (Jn. 12:24).

Just think about it. Jesus did not come to earth as a powerful warrior, but as a helpless infant. When the soldiers came to arrest Him, Jesus could have called for twelve legions of angels and utterly

destroyed them all, but He didn't (Matt. 26:53). Moses and Elijah did not talk with Jesus about a physical war they spoke with Him about a spiritual war. They did not talk about the death of His enemies, they talked with Jesus about His own death (Lk. 9:31). Praise the Lord, we now know that it was through death that Jesus destroyed him who had the power of death, that is the devil (Heb. 2:14).

Sadly, Peter did not immediately understand the significance of that experience. Some time later, for example, Jesus repeated to His disciples what He told them at Caesarea Philippi. He told them again that He had to go to Jerusalem to be betrayed, killed, and raised again **“but they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it” (Mk. 9:32)**. Luke also records that after Caesarea Philippi Jesus told His disciples again that He had to die, but **“The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about” (Lk. 18:34)**. Even up the time Jesus was arrested Peter continued his quest to keep Jesus from dying by drawing his sword and cutting off the right ear of a man named Malchus who was a servant of the high priest (Jn. 18:10, 11).

Later, however, it finally dawned on Peter what the “coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power” really meant. He paid attention to the words he heard on that mountain like a light shining in a dark place until finally the day dawned and the morning star arose in his heart (2 Pet. 1:19). Peter wanted us to do the same thing. He tells us to also take heed unto the prophetic word until the day dawns in our minds, and the morning star arises in our hearts. One day it finally dawned on Peter what Jesus had been trying to tell him all along. One day the same truth can also dawn upon us! We need our eyes opened to God's incomparably great power (Eph. 1:19). The power of God is truly capable of doing immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine (Eph. 3:20).

GOD SPOKE FROM HEAVEN

When Peter saw Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus he wanted to build three shelters, one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus. That's when God spoke from heaven and corrected Peter. Remember when Jesus was baptized God also spoke from heaven and said: **“This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17)**. After Peter suggested building three shelters, God again spoke from heaven and said basically the same thing. This time, however, He added **“Listen to Him!”** Note! **“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased listen to Him!” (Matt. 17:5)**. The point is, Jesus takes precedence over Moses and Elijah. We must “listen to Him” before we listen to anyone else. Jesus explains the Law and the Prophets, not the other way around. How simple! How profound! When we listen to Jesus the Law and the Prophets come sharply into focus. As we have already pointed out, Jesus is the only foundation upon which God can successfully build His church. Note: **“For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11)**.

FRESH MANNA

There are many lessons we can learn from what happened on the Sacred Mountain. Though it happened 2,000 years ago, here is a lesson that is as fresh as the morning news. The Hebrews in the

wilderness were to gather fresh manna every day. When they didn't, they found that yesterday's manna was "full of maggots and began to smell" (Ex. 16:20).

The illustration of fresh manna helps us to think about fresh evidence. The transformation of an unbeliever is fresh evidence. There is, of course, nothing wrong with citing as evidence the miraculous signs performed by Jesus twenty centuries years ago. John recorded the miracles of Jesus for that very purpose (Jn. 20:31). It is, however, difficult to prove those ancient miraculous signs to people in our own generation. It is particularly difficult to prove it to people who are illiterate. If we expect illiterate people to believe something just because we say so, we are setting a dangerous precedent. This is how cult leaders and false teachers deceive those who are "ignorant and unstable" (2 Pet. 3:15, 16).

There are something like 7,111 living languages in the world today. Of these, 3,995 have developed a writing system and 3,116 have not. Just because someone has a written language, however, does not mean that everyone who speaks that language can read. For example, English is a well known written language, but statisticians tell us that even in the United States 32% are functionally illiterate.

Thus, in the real world, how do you prove a miracle that happened 2,000 years ago? It is obviously quite difficult. The Bible is true, but producing ancient manuscripts to prove it is not practical for people who cannot read or write. Apparently 775 million people in the world fall into this category. It is not difficult, however, to point to people who have been "transformed" by the "power" of Jesus. True converts abound in every nation, tribe, and tongue. The "evidence" these converts produce is like fresh manna for new people are converted to Christ every day. Perhaps this is one reason why Peter emphasizes his eyewitness account of the "transfiguration" as proof that he was not following cleverly invented stories.

A missionary friend was working with a tribe that I am told was 97% illiterate. He told me that the "power of the Gospel" was the simplest way to convince unbelievers in the tribe to receive Christ. He said, for example, that when the head man of the village quits smoking opium, and stops beating his wife, everyone in the village immediately takes notice. Like a city on a hill the transformation of a life cannot be hidden.

THE TRUE IDENTITY OF JESUS

As we have already pointed out, Peter correctly stated: **"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16)**. The question is, what did Peter understand by those words? The word "Christ", as you know, comes from the Greek word "christos", which means "anointed." It is the equivalent of the Hebrew word "mashiach", or "Messiah", which also means "anointed".

There were, however, many "anointed ones" other than Jesus.

- Aaron, the high priest, was anointed (Ex. 29:7) as were all the high priests (Lev. 16:32).
- All the kings of Israel were anointed: Saul (1 Sam. 10:1); David (1 Sam. 16:13); Solomon (1 Ki 1:39) Etc.

- God told Elijah to “anoint” Hazael to be king over Aram, Jehu the king of Israel, and Elisha to succeed him as prophet (1 Ki. 19:15, 16).
- Since a lot of people were “anointed”, it is uncertain what Peter meant when he said that Jesus was the “Christ” or the “Anointed One” of God.
- Neither can we know for sure what Peter meant by saying “The Son of the Living God”. Note that immediately after making this “good confession” Peter rebuked Jesus (Matt. 16:22). Such rebellion is inconceivable to anyone who has a proper understanding of Who Jesus is!

THE TRUTH OF THE MATTER IS THAT JESUS WAS NOT JUST THE SON OF GOD

HE WAS GOD!

It seems that when this finally dawned on Peter he traced that revolutionary truth back to what he saw and heard on the Sacred Mountain. It was obviously unforgettable! It was something that he must have pondered over and over again. Imagine what it would be like to see the face of Jesus shine like the sun, and His clothing appear like flashes of lightening. Imagine what it would be like to actually see Moses and Elijah. Imagine what it would be like to hear the voice of God speak from heaven. The very idea that the Creator of the vast Universe would condescend to become a man on our tiny planet is all but incomprehensible. It is even more unbelievable that God incarnate would allow Himself to be beaten, abused, and crucified! Yet this is the very essence of the Christian faith.

Jesus was therefore not just “one of many Christs”, He was and is “THE CHRIST”! He was not just the “Son of God”, He was God!

This fact was so important that John began his Gospel by stating: **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, AND THE WORD WAS GOD!” (Jn. 1:1)**. The transition step between believing that Jesus was “with” God and that “Jesus IS God” is gargantuan! In fact, it cannot be achieved without the help of the Holy Spirit for **“no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3)**.

When a certain ruler said to Jesus: **“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”** Jesus immediately wanted to know what he meant by those words. Jesus said: **“Why do you call me good? . . . No one is good except God alone!” (Lk. 18:19)**. The ruler said the right words, just as Peter did at Caesarea Philippi. The question is whether either of them truly understood what they were saying? Did the rich young ruler realize that Jesus was really God?

Trying to understand or explain the mystery of the Godhead is beyond the reach of the finite mind. It is like trying to understand “infinity” or “eternity”. We can somehow conceive of distance by reference to millions or billions of “light years”, but we cannot truly understand distance that never begins and never ends. So also we can conceive of time by reference to millions and billions of years. Again, however, we lack the mental capacity to grasp eternity that has neither a beginning or an end. How then can our Infinite God fit into our finite mind. He can’t! When Jesus became incarnate, however, He represents to man all that the finite mind can comprehend. Thus Paul warned the Colossians: **“See that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which**

depends on human tradition and the basic principles of the world rather than on Christ. For in Christ all the fulness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fulness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority” (Col. 2:8, 9).

“And without all controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory” (1 Tim. 3:16 KJV).

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