



The Investigator's Gospel

An Eyewitness Journey Through Luke

Session 11 – Chapter 9b – The Transfiguration

The Confession of Peter (Luke 9:18-20)

18 Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say I am?”

19 They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life.”

20 “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “God’s Messiah.”

Luke’s account of the Confession omits the important geographic reference included in Matthew and Mark – that the event takes place in the region of Caesarea Philippi. It is curious that he eliminates this detail, as the context of location is important to the understanding of the story. Matthew’s account is the most complete (16:13-19):

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

14 They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

15 “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

16 Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

17 Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Caesarea Philippi was a city on the southwestern slope of Mount Hermon in northern Israel. Initially known as Paneas (or Pnias) it was renamed by Philip the tetrarch in honour of Caesar Augustus. It marks the northernmost extent of Jesus’ ministry.

In Old Testament times, the city was a center of the Canaanites’ Baal worship. Later the Greeks substituted their god Pan for Baal, and later the Romans used it to develop worship of their emperors.

High cliffs nearby housed a cave dedicated to the Greek god Pan. There was also a temple dedicated to Pan’s father Hermes, and a Temple to Augustus Caesar, who was worshipped as “divine” in the eastern parts of the Roman Empire. His divinity arose from being heir of Julius Caesar, who had been elevated to godlike status; Augustus had been proclaimed “Saviour” of

the Empire. Other rock cuts held statues dedicated to the mythical nymphs and other Gods of the Greek and Roman pantheon.

Significantly, it was to this pagan, Gentile area that Jesus took His followers outside of Judea and Galilee to a center of pagan deities, where He asked them two vital questions:

- “Who do people (Luke: “the crowds”) say that I am?”
- “Who do you say that I am?”

The answer to the first question was easy enough. People – including Herod – believed that He was a prophet along the lines of (the now beheaded) John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the Old Testament prophets. John the Baptist had been speculatively identified the same way (Mark 6:14-16).

But Peter stepped forward to answer the second question: “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*” (Mark 8:29; Matt. 16:16).

It may be that Jesus looked at the great rock cliffs standing nearby as He replied, “*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah [that is, Simon, son of Jonah]; this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in Heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter [“Rock”], and on this rock I will build My church*” (Matt. 16:17–18).

The revelation of Jesus’ identity, which has been building since Luke 7 and the question of John the Baptist (*Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?*), is now complete – but it took a special revelation from God for the full understanding to come.

Some have understood “*on this rock I will build my church*” to mean the bedrock of faith, like the faith Peter was demonstrating here – the reality of Jesus’ identification as Messiah, and Son of God. Others believe that Peter himself (and for some, the other disciples as well) was the rock, the key figure on whom the church was to stand, and that his successors have continued that foundational role. Another view, based on the language Jesus used, is that Jesus made a word play on Peter’s name to indicate Himself as the Rock on which His church is built.

Surrounded by statues and temples dedicated to all the known gods, Jesus asks, “*who do you say I am?*” And Peter identifies Jesus as the “*Son of the Living God*” – not the son of one of these other dead gods or Emperors. Amidst all the competition of the world’s beliefs, even in the face of the Imperial Cult, Peter says Jesus is unique, and above all else.

“*The gates of Hades will not overcome it.*” This line, found only in Matthew, confirms Caesarea Philippi as the location of the event. The Temple of Pan stood in front of a large cave, still visible today, often filled with water from an underground source, and in ancient days shuttered by large gates. Sacrifices would be made and tossed into the water-filled cave; if they sank, it was a sign of the sacrifice’s acceptance by the gods of Hades. As a sign of the power of the Pagan religions, it was significant; as a symbol of death, even more so, as not even the power of death would prevail against Christ or his church.

The key point of the incident, however, is that Jesus is the Messiah. Standing in the shadow of a city named in honour of Rome's emperor, Jesus was declared to be the very Son of God. He was more than just the Messiah of the Jews; He was the Saviour of the whole world.

Luke's abbreviated retelling ("Peter answered, *"God's Messiah"*) leaves the final revelation of the true identity of Jesus to the Transfiguration, soon to follow. But why does he omit all the other material from Matthew and Mark, which we know he otherwise consulted?

Luke's Gospel, intended to reach out to the communities of faith established by Paul in largely Gentile areas, treads carefully around issues which might prove offensive to Gentile ears, both Greek and Roman. Non-Jews are treated sympathetically throughout Luke's Gospel; perhaps Luke considered the Caesarea Philippi context too potentially inflammatory to his audience (or even dangerous to possess), not only in picturing Jesus' triumph over pagan false gods, but also in his supremacy over the Imperial cult, in a city named in honour of the Emperor!

Jesus Predicts his Death

Now identified as the Messiah, Jesus tells the disciples what this means (Luke 9:22): *"The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."* For Jesus, the role of Messiah was that of the Suffering Servant, foretold in four songs in the Book of Isaiah, which include Isaiah 42:1-4; Isaiah 49:1-6; Isaiah 50:4-7; and Isaiah 52:13-53:12. Here's a small part:

*He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.
Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

Luke omits, while Mark (which is Peter's account) includes, *"Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him."* Jesus responds, *"Get behind me, Satan, you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns"* (Mark 8:33). Peter, with the help of God, identified Jesus as Messiah, but misunderstands what that will mean. Again and again, Jesus will plainly state what awaits him, but his disciples remain incredulous.

Jesus then, outlines The Way of the Cross – that not only Jesus, but his followers, will "take up their cross" – that is, will embrace self-sacrifice as a way of life: *"for whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it."* In the first centuries of the church, these verses were truly lived out – to be a Christian meant to put livelihood, life and limb on the line. In our modern context, we seldom present the "cost" of following Jesus, focussing, in our consumer mentality, almost exclusively upon the "benefits." Perhaps, like Peter, we *"do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns"*

The Transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36; Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8)

“About 8 days after Jesus said this,” Luke writes (Matthew and Mark say 6), *“Jesus took Peter, James and John up onto a mountain to pray.”* While tradition indicates Mount Tabor, in Galilee, other scholars point to Mount Hermon, or one of the mountains on the high Hermon range. A large church and monastery marks the Tabor location.

“As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed (Matthew: “shone like the sun”), and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.” When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, after being in the presence of God, *“his face was radiant.”* It is as though we are reliving the Exodus moment of the revelation of God to Moses on Sinai, and the giving of the Commandments – the true beginning of Judaism. The clothes which “gleam like lightning” reappear in the angels at the post-Resurrection tomb (Luke 24:4) and the Ascension (Acts 1:10). Throughout the Revelation, the citizens of heaven are also clothed in white. Jesus is *“the one come from heaven* (Luke 1:78; John 3:13).”

“Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.” Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets – the totality of the Jewish faith. The ministry of Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. The presence of Moses and Elijah confirms the full blessing of God upon Jesus. Curiously, neither Moses nor Elijah has gravesites – Moses was *“buried by God* (Deuteronomy 34:6)” while Elijah was taken to heaven in *“a chariot of fire* (2 Kings 2:11).” And now they reappear in heavenly glory.

Only Luke mentions that the topic of Jesus’ conversation with Moses and Elijah was his *“departure”* (exodos), which he was going to fulfill in Jerusalem. The giving of the Commandments has been evoked; now the Exodus itself, the seminal experience of the nation of Israel; the deliverance from slavery and the entrance into the Promised Land. The term tells us that the whole event of Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection is the New Exodus, the deliverance of people from sin, and the entrance into the Kingdom of God. They confirm that the events in Jerusalem are not random or unwelcome (as per Peter’s criticism), but are part of the plan of deliverance.

The disciples, who had been asleep, awoke to the incredible sight. Peter suggests building *“three shelters* (9:33).” Scholars have puzzled over the significance of Peter’s statement. The Greek word for “shelter” is skene, the word used in the Septuagint for the tabernacle, Israel’s portable place of worship in the desert (Ex. 25:9). It is also used of the temporary huts or booths assembled during the Old Testament Feast of Tabernacles. Since the tabernacle represented God’s presence with his people, Peter may be wishing to celebrate God’s intervention in the events he is witnessing. Luke, also baffled, writes, *“He did not know what he was saying.”* Best leave it at that!

Peter is interrupted in any case: *While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. A voice came from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.”* Clouds are often symbols of God’s presence in

the Old Testament and Judaism. The closest Old Testament parallel appears in Exodus 24:16, when God's voice calls to Moses *"from within the cloud"* at Mount Sinai.

A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen (Mark: whom I love; Matthew: whom I love, with whom I am well pleased); listen to him." The parallels to the Baptism of Jesus are clear; the addition of *"listen to him"* to the Baptismal formula is perhaps directed to Peter and the others, who are still reluctant to believe the path which Jesus has chosen. This is made clear later in the chapter, as Jesus again predicts his death (Luke 9:44-45): *"Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men."* *But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it.*

Jesus' Predictions of his Suffering and Death

It is not until after the Resurrection that all of this will become clear to the disciples. The angels at the Resurrection tomb quote the events in this chapter (Luke 24:6-7): *"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'"* *Then they remembered his words.*

Jesus does the same with the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:25-27): *He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.*

And again, as he appeared to all the disciples after the Resurrection (Luke 24:44-46): *He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.*

Conclusion

The "Confession of Peter" and the Transfiguration, both of which are followed by Jesus declaring what will happen in Jerusalem and his role as the "suffering servant" Messiah, are the context in which the whole of the Passion of Jesus is to be understood. What happened to Jesus was not a tragic accident, but a fulfillment; it is the New Exodus, the deliverance from captivity and slavery to sin, to life in the Kingdom of God. Unlike the original Exodus, the path is not 40 years in the desert, but rather "taking up your cross" and following Jesus in self-sacrifice for the blessing of all.

Caesarea Philippi – with Ancient Temples Superimposed on the Landscape



Mount Tabor



Church of Transfiguration

