

# THE TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD

## “Proof That Jesus Is God”

*And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun,  
and his clothes became white as light. Matthew 17:2*

Can you prove that Jesus is God? In a way, that's what this whole season of Epiphany has been about. That Christ, the Son of God, became true *man* needed no proof. He was born to a human mother. He grew up in Nazareth with His human family, including several brothers and sisters. He got tired and slept. He ate and drank. He cried real tears and shed real blood. He even died.

None of this happened in a vacuum, by the way. There were any number of people who could have confirmed that Jesus was, in fact, human, because that's what they *saw*. Mary held baby Jesus in her arms; the shepherds saw it and rejoiced. For 30 years, His siblings slept and ate and drank beside Him. The disciples spent three years doing the same. The soldiers at the foot of the cross saw the blood and water come pouring from His side. And before they laid Him in a tomb, Mary held her Son again. That Christ became human was *plain* to see.

What *wasn't* so plain was that this man, this helpless child, this “son of Joseph,” as He was called, is also true God. He didn't *look* like God. He didn't *act* like God. In fact, some would even say He never *claimed* to be God: that was just something the early church made up. And while the better part of those first few centuries was spent proving that Jesus is God, and as a result we have our three ecumenical creeds, the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian, the truth is the proof was there from the beginning. Just because Jesus never came out and said, “Hey, everyone. I'm Jesus; I'm God,” doesn't mean He didn't say it in other ways.

In John 8, Jesus says to some Jews, “Before Abraham was, I AM,” using God's personal name Yahweh to refer to Himself. In response, we're told they picked up stones to throw at Him. Why would they do that? Because that's what Leviticus 24:16 says to do to anyone who commits the sin of blasphemy, that is, the sin of claiming to be God. Now, Jesus escaped, but they *did* eventually succeed in putting Him to death; but, again, the reason they did so was that they clearly understood Him to be identifying Himself as the one Lord and God of Israel.

The question then becomes: Was Jesus telling the truth? You may already be familiar with C.S. Lewis' famous Trilemma argument, but if not, here it is in Lewis' own words:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse...Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God.<sup>1</sup>

The old '43 Catechism answers the question, "Why do you believe that Jesus Christ is true God?" by citing the following additional proofs:

- that the Scriptures also ascribe to Him *divine attributes*, noting that He was "in the beginning with God" (John 1:1, 2), that He has been given "all power in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:19), that He promises to be with us always (Matt. 28:20), and that He knows all things (John 21:17);
- that He receives, and does not correct those who offer Him, *divine honor and praise*, like when it says in the last chapter of Matthew that the disciples worshiped the risen Jesus (24:50);
- and that He does a number of *divine works*, also known as miracles.

Which brings us to today, the Transfiguration of Our Lord. Now, to be sure, we've seen a number of miracles this Epiphany season already: the miraculous star that led the magi to Jesus in Bethlehem, the manifestation of all three Persons of the Trinity at Jesus' Baptism, and Jesus' first miracle at Cana in Galilee, turning water into wine. These all certainly point to the fact that Jesus is God.

But the Transfiguration is different. As one commentator notes,

Here, for the first and only time in his earthly career (including his resurrection appearances), Jesus' dignity is made gloriously—even spectacularly—clear to the church...Nowhere else in the Gospels does Jesus shine and glow like this.<sup>2</sup>

Sure enough, if you take a look at, say, Matthew 28, where we read that *some* of the disciples worshiped Him, it also says that "some doubted" (v. 17). They weren't sure. Mary Magdalene had a similar experience at the tomb, mistaking the risen Jesus for the

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1952), 52.

<sup>2</sup> Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary, Vol. 1* (City: Publisher, Year), 166.

gardener (John 20:15). The two disciples on the road to Emmaus didn't recognize Him (Luke 24:16), nor did the disciples who went fishing at the end of John's Gospel (21:4).

But the Transfiguration leaves no doubt. All throughout His earthly life, it was plain that Jesus is true man; but here, on the mountain peak, there is no mistaking that He is also true God. The curtain gets "pulled back," as it were, and we get to see, clear as day, that our Savior is not just flesh and blood, as important as that is, but that He is also *Yahweh Himself*, the great I AM, who once spoke to Moses out of the burning bush. "God is light," the apostle John writes, "and in Him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). He is pure and holy, blameless in every way.

This is clearly the impression it made on the disciples who were there to see it in person. Writing in his second letter (1:16-18), Peter gives a firsthand account of what happened that day on the mountain, saying,

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.

They *saw*, they *heard*, they were *there*. And what they saw and heard was that Jesus is no mere man: He is God's Son. And if that's not enough to convince you, then, as Peter says, we have something more sure: the prophetic word, which is God-breathed, and therefore powerful, reliable, and true.

But at this point you may be wondering, "Does it even matter? Is it really so important that our Savior be true God?" The answer is "Yes!" Aside from Lewis' argument that either Jesus is God or He's a raving lunatic, or worse, there's also the point that if Jesus *isn't* God, then we're in a whole lot of trouble.

Our church is named Our Redeemer because we believe that Jesus Christ has redeemed us, that is, purchased and won us from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, with His holy precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death. But if Jesus is not God, then He *hasn't*. For "Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice" (Ps. 49:7-8).

Just so, we place no confidence in our *works* to save us, but, with the apostle Paul, we confess that we are justified by God's grace as a *gift*, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, who earned salvation for us (Rom. 3:23). But if Jesus is not God,

then He didn't earn a thing, surely having sins of his own, and we are stuck with a very, hopelessly long tab.

The golden letters on the cross hanging above our altar are an abbreviation in the Greek of the phrase Ἰησοῦς Χριστός νικᾷ, meaning "Jesus Christ conquers." As Paul writes in 2 Timothy 1, "Christ has abolished death" (v. 10). But if Jesus is not God, if He was just a mortal man, like us, then death abolished *Him*, and He has not overcome anything. And, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15 (vv. 17-19),

if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

So, it turns out to matter a great deal whether Jesus is who He claimed to be.

But, again, the proof was there from the beginning. It was there in the announcement of the angel Gabriel, telling Mary that her son would be great and would be called the Son of the Most High. It was there in the worship He received from the magi, offering Him their precious gifts. It was there in the voice of the Father from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." It was there in the miracle at Cana in Galilee, in which He manifested His glory. It was there on the mount of Transfiguration, and again on the third day. This Jesus, who was so plainly man, born of the virgin Mary, is also true God, begotten of the Father from eternity.

So, now, as Epiphany draws to a close, and we set our sights on the upcoming season of Lent, on Ash Wednesday and the 40-day journey to the cross and empty tomb, we do so in the confidence that our faith is *not* in vain, that we are *not* still in our sins, and that there is hope in the life of the world to come. We believe that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Redeemer. For as flesh and blood, He took our place under the Law, so that as pure and holy God He might keep it for us. As a mortal, He suffered and died on a cross, so that as the Divine He might overcome death and the devil for us. We see clearly now who Christ is, so that as we take a closer look at ourselves we may not lose heart but lean ever more on our Savior, Yahweh, the great I AM.

*In † His name. Amen. The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.*

*Soli Deo gloria*