

Implications for Worship from the Mount of Transfiguration

Scott Connell¹

The Mount of Transfiguration has long been considered one of the most mysterious events in the New Testament (Matt 17:1–13; Mark 9:2–13; Luke 9:28–36). Some source-critical scholars have considered it no more than a symbolic (non-historical) story created to demonstrate the Messiahship and deity of Christ. Others have believed it to be an ecstatic vision experienced either by Peter or even Christ himself. Still others have considered it a misplaced resurrection narrative out of chronological order in the synoptic gospels.² The reasons for attempting to explain *away* the miraculous nature of this event are predictable, though still unnecessary.

According to John McGuckin, whose work surveys the first eight centuries of attempts to interpret this event, the dominant approach of the church fathers (and that of conservative scholars today) is that of a supernatural historical event reflecting a high Christology. It was a marvelous revelation for the disciples on that mountain. McGuckin describes it as “an epiphany of the essential deity of Christ.”³ Robert E. Webber writes, “The transfiguration seems to be a preview of the Resurrection, and a verification of Jesus’ identity as the Messiah.”⁴ Kent Hughes explains, “This is not only a declaration about Christ, but a prophecy of what was to come.”⁵ The event held implications for the present as an affirmation of Christ’s

¹ Scott Connell, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Music and Worship Leadership and Program Coordinator for Worship and Music Studies at Boyce College, the undergraduate school of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

² The ecstatic vision or dream interpretation was advanced primarily by Albert Schweitzer (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus* [London: Adam and Charles Black, 1906], 380ff.) but has been long since discredited. The more influential view is that of the misplaced resurrection narrative identified with Rudolph Bultmann (*History of the Synoptic Tradition* [New York: Harper and Row, 1963], 249) and decisively rebutted by Robert H. Stein in “Is the Transfiguration (Mark 9:2–8) a Misplaced Resurrection Account?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976): 79–96. For a summary of these and other contemporary views, see D. A. Carson, *Matthew, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 9, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 434–35.

³ John Anthony McGuckin, *The Transfiguration of Christ in Scripture and Tradition* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 1–4. McGuckin surveys the broad spectrum of interpretations regarding this event as held in the first 800 years of church tradition generally and by various early church fathers of the same period specifically.

⁴ Robert E. Webber, *The Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*, The Complete Library of Christian Worship, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 199.

⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1989), 17.

deity, but also for the future as a preview of the coming kingdom. The presence of Moses and Elijah in the revelation also communicated a compelling perspective upon the past.

Many approaches to understanding this event lean heavily upon its parallels with a similar theophany that Moses experienced on Mt. Sinai in the Old Testament (Exod 24–34) and therefore may be seen as a *type* foreshadowing this occasion.⁶ The effort of discerning additional implications for worship is aided by considering both of these episodes as worship events.⁷ Each demonstrates an occurrence of worship as man encounters *unveiled* deity in a theophany and Christophany, respectively. Each also serves as a prototype for authentic worship relative to the covenant in which the incident is centered. Mt. Sinai is the locale where the old covenant was established and its cultic practice of worship formally inaugurated. As I will demonstrate, the Mount of Transfiguration is a unique event in the New Testament that seems to reflect a physical manifestation of the spiritual type of worship encounter that Jesus explains in John 4. It prefigures the future glory that will be revealed to all believers in eternal worship, the fulfillment of which our temporal worship is a pattern today (Heb 8). “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor 13:12). Comparing Sinai and the Mount of Transfiguration establishes priorities of earthly worship that point toward heavenly fulfillment. Contrasting the two experiences highlights the distinct implications of the latter for Christian worship.

Mt. Sinai and the Mount of Transfiguration

Few commentators discuss the Mount of Transfiguration apart from its seemingly undeniable connection points to Mt. Sinai. Parallels between the two include (1) the number in the party;⁸ (2) the reference to six days between a key previous event and the encounter;⁹

⁶ Some critical scholars see these parallels so significant as to consider the Sinai narrative as a literary archetype to the Mount of Transfiguration (McGuckin, *Transfiguration of Christ*, 13).

⁷ While the event of the Transfiguration occurred chronologically before the cross and resurrection, it is generally agreed by commentators that the event itself was a foreshadowing of the glory that will be revealed as a result of the new covenant (Rom 8:18, 2 Cor 4:17). Therefore, the disciples were permitted to briefly behold the glory of the Lord with unveiled faces, which makes it a partial fulfillment of 2 Cor 3:18, which serves as a premise for this paper: the work of the cross permits worshipers to behold the glory of God in the face of Christ. While the disciples’ revelation in this event was still external (as it was for Moses in Exod 24 and 34), the full revelation taught in 2 Corinthians is an unveiling of the heart, affording the revelation of Christ in the internal temple of the heart, where the religious affections are at work. These revelations occur “from glory to glory” until the final day of full glorification, which will be both external and internal. The Mount of Transfiguration serves as a helpful model for new covenant worship due to its similarities with Moses’ encounter with God, but also its distinct differences due to the now centralized role of Christ.

⁸ The *named* members of the Sinai party are Moses with Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John. Moses also took seventy of the elders of Israel (Exod 24:9).

⁹ Matt 17:1 and Mark 9:2 seem to many commentators to be reminiscent of Exod 24:9–18, where the cloud covered Mt. Sinai with the glory of God for six days. “And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud” (Exod 24:16b). Using the reference point in the synoptic gospels, the event that occurred six days earlier in Caesarea Philippi included Jesus’ prediction that “there are some standing here who

(3) the place of the encounter with God (i.e., a high mountain); (4) the manifestation of the presence of God's glory in the midst of his people (i.e., the "tabernacling" of his presence); and (5) the transforming effects of that manifestation upon the people involved.¹⁰ The main difference between the two is the presence of Christ in his incarnated form and the degree of effect upon the attendees. Therefore the differences between the two accounts must be considered to be due to the illuminating light and transforming power of fulfillment of Jesus as the new Moses, and the new covenant that Jesus came to ratify. Both undergird the New Testament experience even though the cross and resurrection are still to come.¹¹ It is a pre-view for the disciples of the glory of Christ (2 Pet 1:16) demonstrated in the resurrection, the ascension, and second coming, and is therefore reflective of new covenant worship in spirit and truth that will one day be fully experienced, but even now is experienced in part (Matt 5:8; 1 Cor 13:9–12, 1 John 3:2).

The implications for corporate worship presented here will be founded in part upon Paul's discussion in 2 Corinthians 3:7–18. In this passage, Paul contrasts the two covenants and argues that the new covenant is greater because it alone has the power to unveil the glory of God in the face of Christ for believers and therefore the power to conform them to the image of Christ. Based upon this text, it will be argued below that this will be the effect of worship when it is Christ-centered and gospel focused, which are the primary implications for worship from the transfiguration event.

will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom" (Matt 16:28). Luke uses Hellenistic reckoning of time by indicating that it was eight days later (Luke 9:28).

¹⁰ Robert H. Stein writes of the parallels between these two events: "The imagery [of the Mount of Transfiguration] draws heavily from the OT, in particular from the theophany to Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus. Some of the OT images that parallel Luke's account are a mountain on which revelation takes place (Exod 19:3), the alteration of Jesus' face (Exod 34:29), the glory of the Lord (Exod 24:16), a cloud (Exod 24:16; 33:10) . . . and fear (Exod 34:30)" (*Luke, The New American Commentary*, vol. 24, ed. David S. Dockery [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992], 282). Joel B. Green writes, "In Luke's model readers may well recognize his use of what have become stock expressions or conventional patterns borrowed from and based on the OT story of the Exodus (esp. Exod 24–34)—for example, the presence of companions, the setting on a mountain, the explicit mention of Moses, Jesus' change of countenance, reference to tents (or tabernacles), the cloud, the motif of fear, the clear allusion to Deut 18:15 ('Listen to him'), and the Lukan summary of Jesus' conversation with Moses and Elijah having to do with his 'exodus'" (Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997], 377–78). Green later refers to the "profusion of echoes of the story of exodus in this co-text." "The term itself is used in the LXX and Hellenistic Jewish literature with reference to the exodus from bondage in Egypt" (ἐξοδος) (382).

¹¹ The overtones of the gospel in this encounter are not subtle. Specifically, the supernatural appearing of Moses and Elijah representing the fulfillment of the law and prophets in Christ, and their discussion of Christ's "departure" (e.g., *exodus*) are clear references to the gospel events that are central to this encounter and the new covenant. Joel B. Green writes, "Thus, by way of such motifs as the recognition of Jesus as God's Son, the presence of a heavenly voice, prayer, Jesus' glory, drowsy disciples, the importance of 'sight,' the clouds, the presence of 'two men,' and so on, one may recognize in the transfiguration account echoes of earlier and later scenes in the Gospel and Acts: the baptism of Jesus, his temptation in the wilderness, the confession of Peter, his agony in the garden, the resurrection, the ascension, and the anticipation of his parousia." In a related footnote Green explains, "These connections are also widely noted" and cites four other sources for support (Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 379). More regarding these allusions to the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ is demonstrated below.

Two Mountains of God¹²

Mount Sinai and the Old Covenant

In some ways, the nature of worship's development—as well as the entire redemption story—can be summarized simply in the two accounts of Mt. Sinai and the Mount of Transfiguration. In Exodus 19, the people of Israel gathered at Mt. Sinai having recently been delivered from the bondage and oppression of Egypt in a stunning and miraculous manner. They had been delivered for the purpose of worshiping and serving God, but were shortly wandering in the desert, complaining and longing to return to captivity. God had initiated this deliverance through an exiled Israelite who had experienced his own encounter with the God of Israel in a profound way on the same mountain. Moses' extraordinary calling from God at the burning bush on Mt. Horeb (Exod 3) served as the impetus to return to Egypt as God's agent of deliverance for his people.¹³ Under his leadership, Israel learned of God's character and power through the devastating display of the ten plagues in Egypt (including the death of the firstborn son and the institution of the Passover). They also experienced the miraculous deliverance from Pharaoh's army by the parting of the Red Sea; the miraculous provision of their physical needs in the wilderness with manna from heaven and water from the rock; and a stunning defeat of Amalek through the simple human means of Moses holding his hands up with the staff of God over the battle, with some assistance (Exod 7:1–12:51; 16:1–17:7; and 17:8–16). Through all of this, Moses came to be seen as the central figure and leader among the people of Israel and serve as a *type* of Christ in the Old Testament.¹⁴ He

¹² Gen 8; Gen 22; 1 Kgs 18; Exod 17:1–7 and Num 20:10–13; and Exod 19 and 34. There are several references in Scripture to the mountain of God, most to Mount Horeb/Sinai. This is the mountain where God first called Moses; where Aaron was told by God to go to meet Moses to prepare for deliverance; and then where God brought the people of Israel back from captivity to enact his covenant with them. It was the mountain where they met God. See Exod 3:1, 4:27, 18:5, 24:13, Ps 36:6, Ps 68:15, and Ezek 28:14. Peter would later refer to the site of the Mount of Transfiguration as the “holy mountain” where the deity of Jesus was revealed and they heard the voice of God (2 Pet 1:18).

¹³ John I. Durham writes of the two encounters at Sinai in Exod 3 and 19–40: “Theophany and call are brought together in the narrative dealing with Moses for the same reason they are brought together in the narrative dealing with Israel in Sinai. Theophany describes the advent of God's presence; call describes the opportunity of response to that Presence. Theophany provides both stimulus and authority for response; response, despite choice, is virtually inevitable following theophany” (John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3 [Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987], 29). Here is found the fundamental principle of worship order—that of revelation and response. Durham continues, “Indeed, the experience of Moses in 3:1–12 is an exact foreshadowing of the experience of Israel, first in Egypt, then in the deprivation of the wilderness, and finally at Sinai. In each of these narratives, the Presence-response pattern is fundamental. In the climactic narrative of the Book of Exodus (perhaps also the climactic narrative of the entire OT), chaps 19:1–20:20 and 24:1–11, this pattern is the shaping factor” (30).

¹⁴ “Typology is the interpretation of earlier events, persons, and institutions in biblical history which become proleptic entities, or ‘types,’ anticipating later events, persons, and institutions, which are their antitypes” (Don McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2002], 162–63). See also Patrick Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Daniels & Smith, 1852). Fairbairn writes, “The existence, then, of such a relation [of type and antitype] pre-supposes and implies . . . that the things of the gospel, which constitute the antitypes, are

was a prophet and priest for the nation. As they gathered around Mt. Sinai, “the Lord said to Moses, ‘Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever.’”¹⁵ Regarding this event John Durham declares, “The Advent of Yahweh’s Presence at Sinai is the formative event of OT faith.”¹⁶

During the time at Sinai, God spoke to Moses “face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.”¹⁷ Moses made two requests of God as this extraordinary time at Sinai came to a close: (1) “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here”; and (2) “Please show me your glory.”¹⁸ God responded positively to both requests and when Moses finally returned to the people after forty days on the “mountain of God,” his face shone from having been in God’s presence. He had to put a veil over his face because the skin of his face shone and the people were afraid to come near him.¹⁹ God had allowed Moses to see the “afterglow” of his glory, which had transformed his appearance and gave him faith to move forward with God’s presence. Its effect seemingly went no farther than this. Remarkably, God eventually allowed Moses to look upon the glory of God with an unveiled face in the Tent of Meeting—

the great objects on which the mind of God was from the first directed for the good of his church; and that, to prepare the way for the introduction of these grand and ultimate objects, he placed the church under a course of training, which included among other things instruction by types, or designed and fitting resemblance of what was to come” (40).

¹⁵ Exod 19:9. The authority of Moses as prophet and priest was confirmed by the voice of God in the hearing of his people. It was God’s intention that the people would listen to him. Similarly, the same voice affirmed the greater role of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration: “This is my Son, my Chosen One, listen to him!” (Luke 9:35).

¹⁶ Durham, *Exodus*, 259. Durham explains, “The form of the entire Sinai narrative sequence has been determined by a single factor. That factor is also the reason for the attraction into and onto the Sinai narrative sequence of a variety of material having to do primarily with the requirements of the covenant and the media of worship, and secondarily, with the special role of Moses and those who extend Moses’ contribution. This factor is of course the gift of Yahweh of his Presence to Israel. From beginning to end, and in both its positive and its negative features, the Sinai narrative sequence, and indeed the Book of Exodus of which it is the important center, is linked to the Advent of Yahweh’s Presence to Israel at Sinai.” This event is “the supreme event of Exodus” (260).

¹⁷ Exod 33:11. According to R. Alan Cole, “Numbers 12:8 explains the meaning of this phrase. God will speak to Moses ‘mouth to mouth,’ that is to say, not in dreams and visions, but clearly and directly . . . He thus stands at the beginning of a long process of God’s revelation, which will culminate in the ‘suffering servant’ of Isaiah 53, and which will find its fulfillment in Christ” (R. Alan Cole, *Exodus*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 2, ed. Donald J. Wiseman [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1973], 235).

¹⁸ Exod 33:15, 18. Of the request to see God’s glory R. Alan Cole writes, “Moses’ prayer is to see the *kābôd*, the manifested glory (literally ‘weight’) of YHWH. This is a prayer to see God as he is: but in these terms, it is impossible . . . For a full revelation of what God is like, man must wait until Jesus Christ (John 14:9)” (Cole, *Exodus*, 235).

¹⁹ Scott Hafemann explains, “Moses’ mediation of God’s glory permits his presence to remain in Israel’s midst without destroying her. In this regard, Moses’ veiling himself is an act of mercy. At the same time, the very fact that Moses must veil his face is an act of judgment because of the hardness of Israel’s heart. This veil not only preserves Israel from being destroyed; it also keeps her from being transformed” (Scott Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, The NIV Application Commentary [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000], 148).

“Whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out” (Exod 34:34)—but he was the only one at this time to do so. A greater covenant and great high priest would be needed for God’s people to be able to worship in spirit and truth. In effect, a greater Moses would come to provide a greater worship.

The Mount of Transfiguration and the New Covenant

When Jesus took his disciples up the high mountain, God also came in a thick cloud just as at Sinai. Just as God spoke to Moses so that the people could hear and believe him, God also spoke to Jesus so the disciples could hear and believe him. This was a greater affirmation for Jesus here than for Moses at Sinai. God demonstrated not only that he spoke with Jesus, but also that Jesus was his Son with whom he was pleased—a reiteration of the affirmation from Jesus’ baptism in Matthew 3. He directly commanded them to “listen to him.” The writer of Hebrews puts forth this comparison: whereas Moses served as the type and initial mediator of worship between God and his people, Jesus became the great High Priest and eternal mediator of worship. Moses was the type and Jesus was the fulfillment, even as Sinai was the old covenant shadow while the transfiguration reflected a new covenant reality—all of God’s people could now behold the glory of God in the face of Christ.

The Mount of Transfiguration reveals the greater glory of the new covenant and its central figure.²⁰ Jesus took his disciples up a mountain to pray, and they returned having experienced a far greater manifestation of the presence of God. While more clarity came later, they encountered a revelation of what God’s people would have in worship under the new covenant. They experienced far more than any before them and in some ways more than any on earth did after them. On the Mount of Transfiguration, the earthly priest (i.e., Moses as a type of Christ) supernaturally appeared, but then disappeared, because the greater

²⁰ Robert Stein explains regarding what actually happened here: “There are three main explanations. (1) The preexistent glory of the preincarnate Son temporarily broke through the limitations of his humanity (cf. Phil 2:6–9; John 1:14b). (2) A glimpse of the future glory of the risen Christ is given to the disciples. Even as the first passion prediction (Luke 9:22) does not end in an announcement of death but in the promise of resurrection, so the discussion of Jesus’ departure is followed by a glimpse of the glory awaiting him at the resurrection (24:26; cf. also Heb 2:9; 1 Pet 1:21). (3) A glimpse of the glory of the Son of Man at the time of the parousia is given to the disciples. In support of the last explanation is the fact that the glory of the Son of Man at his parousia has just been mentioned (Luke 9:26; cf. also 21:27, where Luke referred to ‘cloud,’ as in 9:34–35, rather than ‘clouds’ as found in Mark and Matthew). Also 2 Pet 1:16–18 clearly understands it in this manner. Although the last explanation is the primary understanding of the event for Luke, elements of the second may also be present” (Stein, *Luke*, 283). With regard to worship, this event is an unveiling of the glory of Christ, who is the full representation of God (Heb 1:3, Col 2:9, and 2 Cor 4:4, 6). Joel Green writes, “As Jesus promised (Luke 9:27), these apostles have now seen, if only for a moment, the consummation of the kingdom for they have seen the Son, the Chosen One, Jesus, in his glory” (Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 379). It demonstrates the past and future brilliance of this glory in a unique moment that breaks into the incarnated present as well as the critical role of the gospel and its reward for new covenant worshipers by revealing (i.e., “unveiling”) the glory of this Christ. This glorious Christ is the object of worship and it is by his incarnation that the way is opened. As Jesus said, “But the hour is coming and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:23).

priest had come.²¹ Rather than a priestly representative who would enter God's presence on behalf of the people, the disciples were worshipers who encountered the glory of God directly in the face of Christ. Additionally, while the effects of Moses' encounter with God's glory had to be veiled and ultimately faded, the effects of the disciples' encounter with God's glory was with unveiled faces and grew continually brighter until the day of their own glorification, when they went to the place where Jesus intercedes and finally worship him face to face. The ultimate goal and fulfillment of the new covenant they glimpsed on the mountain-top that day was the work of internal transformation that leads to external encounter in the presence and glory of God.²²

While Moses had to veil his face until the glory faded because the people were afraid, the disciples for a brief moment saw the veil pulled back revealing the glory that the Israelites could not look upon. Moses experienced a fading glory on behalf of the people, but the disciples experienced an eternal glory that had previously been hidden from their understanding, but would ultimately become their eternal reward because of the gospel.²³ This reward is being shared with all those who embrace the gospel. The Israelites feared the glory they beheld, but the disciples desired to look deeper and longer. The glory of God as displayed in Christ is both accessible because of the gospel, and it is captivating. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:6, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." This external experience of the disciples at the transfiguration is a type of first fruits and preview

²¹ Robert Stein comments on Jesus' intent here. Luke twice mentions that Jesus went up onto the mountain to pray (Luke 9:28 and 9:29). "This second reference to Jesus' praying adds even more emphasis to this theme" (Stein, *Luke*, 284). Joel Green endorses the same priority: "With Luke's emphatic reference to Jesus at prayer, the backdrop is complete. The importance of this last note is difficult to overstate. Not only is prayer mentioned twice, but this reference follows hard on the heels of the parallel reference in v. 18, where prayer is represented as the setting for divine disclosure. In fact, through the use of the participial form, Luke has it that *while Jesus was praying he was transfigured* (cf. 3:21–22)" (Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 379; emphasis Green's). The reason for this ascent was to commune with God in prayer and worship, just as it was for Moses at Mt. Sinai. The role of prayer is heightened in this account.

²² Robert Stein here comments, "The transfiguration was not from the outside in but from the inside out. Jesus' 'person' was transfigured before his clothing. Both Matthew and Luke referred to Jesus' face shining 'like the sun' (Matt 17:2). It is difficult not to see in this some allusion to Exod 34:29–35 (cf. also 2 Cor 3:7–13). Moses' glory, however, came from the outside" (Stein, *Luke*, 284). Unlike Moses, the disciples did not return with glowing faces as occurred at Sinai. However, it is likely that their hearts "burned within" as a future experience with the glorified Christ would produce (Luke 24:32). The new covenant transformation of believers is patterned after Jesus' transfiguration—from the inside out.

²³ 1 Cor 13:12; 2 Cor 4:4, 6. John Piper writes regarding 2 Cor 4:4, 6, "This is one of the most remarkable descriptions of the gospel in the whole Bible. There is nothing else quite like it. It defines the gospel as 'the gospel of the glory of Christ'" (John Piper, *God Is the Gospel* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005], 59). He continues, "Let's be clear that we are talking about the *gospel* in these verses. The fact that Paul does not mention the facts of Christ's life and death and resurrection does not mean he has left them behind. They remain the historical core of the gospel. . . . When Paul speaks of 'the gospel of the glory of Christ,' he means that the events of the gospel are designed by God to reveal the glory of Christ. This is not incidental to the gospel—it's essential. The gospel would not be good news if it did not reveal the glory of Christ for us to see and savor" (61–62).

of the gospel and the internal worship in spirit and truth that it allowed.²⁴ Today's worship should point toward the final fulfillment of something akin to what the Mount of Transfiguration displayed. The events and truths of the gospel are irrevocably connected to this type of worship experience. When they are emphasized, their design by God is to "reveal the glory of Christ."

Implications for Worship

R. Kent Hughes in his commentary on Mark states regarding the event on the Mount of Transfiguration:

For a brief moment the veil of his [Jesus'] humanity was lifted, and his true essence was allowed to shine through. The glory which was always in the depths of his being rose to the surface for that one time in his earthly life. Or put another way, he slipped back into eternity, to his pre-human glory. It was a glance back and a look forward into his future glory.²⁵

The glory revealed in this incident, and in the kind of worship that this experience foreshadowed, is a revelation of the glory of God in Christ, who is now the central figure of worship. He is not just the access for worship as its great high priest and the mediator of the greater covenant, but he is also the object of worship and the worshiper's eternal reward. The desire in worship should now be to enjoy the glory found in Christ. In John 17:3 Jesus states, "And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." One day the veil of this life will be removed forever and God's people will know even as they are now fully known.²⁶ Until that day of unhindered access to the full knowledge of God,²⁷ worship in this life allows glimpses into this ultimate reality. This has a profoundly

²⁴ It is also a preview of the ultimate fulfillment of the work of the gospel and worship when worship once again becomes external. "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

²⁵ Hughes, *Mark*, 15.

²⁶ See 1 Cor 13:12. This knowledge is more than an intellectual understanding; it is a relational awareness and connection. It is a spiritual knowledge at the level of the religious affections that creates orientation, disposition, and pursuit of its end. Jonathan Edwards explains, "There is a twofold understanding or knowledge of good, that God has made the mind of man capable of. The first, that which is merely speculative or notional . . . The other is that which consists in the sense of the heart: as when there is a sense of the beauty, amiableness, or sweetness of a thing . . . Thus there is a difference between having an opinion that God is holy and gracious, and having a sense of the loveliness and beauty of that holiness and grace. There is a difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness . . . When the heart is sensible of the beauty and amiableness of a thing, it necessarily feels pleasure in the apprehension . . . which is a far different thing from having a rational opinion that is excellent" (Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light," in *Sermons and Discourses, 1730–1733*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 17, ed. Wilson H. Kimnach [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959], 414).

²⁷ "No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will

transformative effect upon man. It rightly orders things for man because it operates upon the affections to restore the image he was created to have. This process continues “from one degree of glory to another” until we are “conformed into the same image.”²⁸ This was the experience of man in the garden before being affected by sin. This is what God intended for man by creating the garden and setting man in the midst of it to enjoy the glory of God unhindered.

This is what the occurrence on the Mount of Transfiguration foreshadowed. It was a foretaste of the resurrection’s triumph and a preview of what worship would be when Christ, who had come to serve as the one true mediator between God and man, destroyed the veil. Worship now reveals transforming glory as it had always been intended to do. At the blazing center of new covenant worship is Christ and his gospel.

Implication #1—The Centrality of Christ and His Gospel

While Peter, James, and John were asleep, Jesus prayed to the Father as he often did. What the disciples awoke to see was what the Gospel writers described reflectively as seeing “the Son of Man coming in his kingdom,” “the kingdom of God com[ing] with power,” and simply “the kingdom of God.”²⁹ Peter would later describe his participation in the experience as the disciples having been “eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Pet 1:16). John would also reflect, “We have seen his glory, the glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). This was a Christ-centered worship encounter for which they had no parallel in history. Just as Jesus told the woman at the well in John 4, worship was changing. It was changing because the Messiah had come just as he had revealed to her in the same encounter (John 4:26).

As with Moses on Mt. Sinai, Jesus’ face began to shine. In addition, his clothes became brilliantly white as he was transfigured or, more literally, “metamorphosed”³⁰ before the disciples. The veil was being briefly, but remarkably, pulled back—allowing a glimpse into the

be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever” (Rev 22:3–5).

²⁸ See 2 Cor 3:18. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. writes, “In the deepest recesses of who they now are, at the core of their being—what Paul elsewhere and more frequently calls the ‘heart’ (e.g., Rom 1:24; 2:29; 8:28; 1 Cor 4:5; 2 Cor 3:2–3)—believers are no longer turned away from God’s glory but are drawn toward it and even into it in a transforming way” (Richard B. Gaffin Jr., “The Glory of God in Paul’s Epistles,” in *The Glory of God*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010], 149).

²⁹ Matt 16:28, Mark 9:1, Luke 9:27. Craig Blomberg believes this verse is “best taken as . . . a reference to Jesus’ transfiguration—the very next event described” (Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, vol. 22, ed. David S. Dockery [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992], 261). Robert Stein also suggests this as the most logical understanding (Stein, *Luke*, 280). Both assert this verse, having been preceded by a verse regarding the Second Coming of Christ in glory by both Matthew and Luke, makes it clear that the Transfiguration is a preview of the Second Coming, thus linking the concepts of the “coming of the kingdom of God” with the glorification of the Son. One cannot occur without the other. They are the same event.

³⁰ μεταμορφῶμαι is a rare Greek verb that occurs only four times in the N.T.: Matthew’s account of the Transfiguration (Matt 17:2); Mark’s account of the Transfiguration (Mark 9:2); Paul’s explanation of the transformation that occurs in believers by beholding Jesus (2 Cor 3:18); and his account of spiritual worship’s

eternal reality of the nature of Christ. The glory of God in Christ was being unveiled in a brief yet overwhelming way. Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus. The Scripture does not indicate how the disciples knew who they were, but somehow it was very clear to them. Both had had previous conversations with God on mountaintops—Moses on Mt. Sinai and Elijah on Mt. Horeb, where the Lord told Elijah to go “stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord” who appeared as a “gentle whisper.”³¹ Both had been shown God’s glory. Their presence has a multitude of meanings, but none more compelling than what Jesus later revealed to two disciples on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection when he taught them the gospel: “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.”³² Webber comments,

The presence of Moses and Elijah is of special importance, for they were the two major symbolic figures of Israel’s prophetic faith. As the last two verses of the Hebrew prophetic canon make clear (Mal. 4:4–5), together they framed the history of the covenant given at Mt. Sinai; it was through Moses that the covenant was established, and Elijah was to restore the covenant bonds lest the curse of its violation take effect. Their appearance with Jesus in his transfigured glory is an affirmation that the gospel of Jesus Christ, however much it may have seemed anathema to the established Judaism of the first century, arose out of the very heart and essence of the covenant faith of Israel.³³

Moses as the great lawgiver and Elijah as the great prophet represented the totality of the old covenant. Their submission to the Lord was symbolic of the resignation of the old covenant and consummation of the covenant that Jesus came to secure. The new covenant both fulfilled and replaced the old covenant that Moses and Elijah represented and that fulfillment was portrayed in this profound revelation of their conversation with the glorified Christ. Luke explains that the subject of their conversation was the manner of the fulfillment—the cross (i.e., the gospel). “And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.”³⁴ Hughes writes,

ability to transform believers by the renewing of their mind (Rom 12:2). Simon S. Lee explains, “Outside the NT, the verb occurs in Philo’s description of Moses’ transformation” (Simon S. Lee, *Jesus’ Transfiguration and the Believer’s Transformation: Studies of the Transfiguration and Its Development in Early Christian Writings* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009], 81).

³¹ 1 Kgs 19:11–12.

³² Luke 24:27. Robert Stein writes, “The presence of these men represent the law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah)—cf. Luke 16:29,31; 24:27 . . . The reference to these ‘two men’ ties together the transfiguration, resurrection (24:4), and ascension (Acts 1:10). The presence of Moses and Elijah refutes the incorrect guesses about Jesus’ identity given in Luke 9:8, 19” (Stein, *Luke*, 284). This also affirmed Peter’s confession that Jesus indeed was “the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” who had come to fulfill all of the law and the prophets through the gospel.

³³ Webber, *Biblical Foundations of Worship*, 199.

³⁴ Luke 9:30–31. The term “departure” is *exodus*, which seems to refer to his death (“which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem”), his resurrection (which is supported by the passion prediction in Luke 9:22), and ascension (which Luke 9:51 seems to support—“When the days drew near for him to be taken up,

They were talking about the cross and Jesus' death! The tense indicates that this was an extended conversation. They, the chief representatives of the Law and the Prophets, were carrying on a conversation with Jesus, who himself said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17).³⁵

Worship in spirit and truth will of necessity include this central reality that Christ revealed to the Samaritan woman. She said she knew Messiah was coming. Worship now must include the reality that the Christ has not only come, but that in worship, Jesus is that One (John 4:26). It must also include clear references to the reason he came and the means by which worshipers can see him in worship—the gospel! It is the gospel that reveals his nature and deity (2 Cor 3:18–4:6).

Implication #2—Worship as Beholding and Delighting in His Glory

Peter's comments at this point are potentially misunderstood. While the gospel writers all indicate that he made these comments "not knowing what he said," that does not mean that there was not any value to what he said. In some ways, what Peter said brings insight as to how he perceived the event as an ultimate worship event. The first part of his comment was that the experience was profoundly good. "Master, it is good that we are here" (Luke 9:33). Being in the presence of the glorified Christ in worship is a wonderful place to be. It caused them to lose all concern for the "demon-possessed valley" that they had left below and would have to return to. In the presence of such "grace and truth" as John described it, the "image of God" in man finds the greatest satisfaction and fulfillment that he was created to know. It is the pleasure of the garden recaptured and the hope of glory renewed. Luke explains quite simply in Luke 9:32, "Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory." It was at this point of the experience that Peter declared their delight to be there.

The second part of Peter's comment explains why he did not know what he was saying and that he would later, with greater understanding, be grateful that Jesus did not grant his request. "Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah."³⁶ Most commentaries emphasize the effect of Peter's act as equating the level of status of Moses and Elijah with that of Jesus. This certainly is part of Peter's error but there is likely more. Even though Peter had just heard six days earlier Jesus' first declaration of his earthly purpose to go to Jerusalem to die, he seems to have lost sight of that in this moment (as he would later do again). He did not yet grasp the necessity of future events that must take place for gospel

he set his face to go to Jerusalem."). Stein writes, "Moses and Elijah did not 'inform' Jesus of the details of his 'exodus,' for by 9:22 he already knew them. They were present rather to illustrate Jesus' fulfillment of the divine plan in the OT, i.e., he fulfilled the law and the prophets. This verse prepares the reader for 9:51ff" (Stein, *Luke*, 285). The correlation to Moses and the Old Testament "exodus" are evident.

³⁵ Hughes, *Mark*, 16.

³⁶ Luke 9:33. Part of the problem here is "that Peter erred in equating Jesus with Moses and Elijah. In contrast to Moses and Elijah, who were God's servants, Jesus is God's Son, the Chosen One" (Stein, *Luke*, 284).

enactment and fulfillment. However, he well understood the depravity and deficiency suffered from past events of rebellion and alienation by Israel. The glory had departed from the temple and Israel's worship life held no court in the presence of God. It had become empty ritual and practice even where there was an honest attempt to follow the old covenant practices. But with the life that God's presence gave, and with the hope of glory apparently now restored, Peter seemed to think, just as Moses and the Israelites set up the tabernacle to house the glory of God in the wilderness, "that it is good that all of the participants can preserve this moment for some length of time."³⁷ While not realizing this would prevent the fulfillment of the greater covenant, he seemed to see it as a greater fulfillment of the old covenant and a restoration of the kingdom to Israel—an eschatological event!

It was seemingly a good desire in his glory-saturated stupor, but a shortsighted and misinformed one. Accommodating his request would prevent the fulfillment of the gospel plan of redemption and the greater eschatological goal, which is apparently why Jesus remained silent. What Peter was still realizing, but had not yet fully grasped, was that in Jesus the presence of God had "tabernacled" among them. Again, referring to John's description, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). While the Mount of Transfiguration was significant, it was just a step in the process of God's more wonderful plan for worship restoration and the exaltation of Christ. Honoring Peter's request would prolong, if not prevent, the fulfillment of the cross and the resurrection's greater glory. Mediation of the new covenant was still required so that the gospel could be "good news" to a much wider world through the exaltation of Christ.³⁸ Until the ratification of the new covenant, worshipers could only hope to gaze through a veil upon a fading glory from a distance rather than truly behold it and be transformed by it. The new covenant had to be secured and the Holy Spirit had to be poured out upon Abraham's sons and daughters.³⁹

Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the people of God would become the temple of God (1 Cor 6:19). Peter would later come to understand and teach this great truth to God's people. "You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 2:5). Worship would no longer be a matter of time and place, but of "spirit and truth" (John 4:24). Peter's comments provide insight into how the disciple perceived and valued what was happening

³⁷ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 264. The Greek word σκέvé is the same word used for "tabernacle" or "booth." While some commentators view this as Peter's attempt to connect the event to the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev 23:39-43) and its implications that the final age has come in which God and Christ will now dwell with men (Rev 21:3-4), others believe it to be his desire to see some type of restoration of the glory of God to the temple. In either case, Peter is making a statement about worship. He just does not understand believers have "a building from God, a house not made with hands" for their eternal dwelling place with God and for worship (2 Cor 5:1).

³⁸ Phil 2:8-9 proclaims the necessary progression: "And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name."

³⁹ Even the disciples' experience on the Mount of Transfiguration was more like Moses' than what worshipers today experience. They gazed upon the glory of God in the incarnate Christ, which was unique. But they did so with human eyes rather than a transformed heart. It was an external experience that foreshadowed the internal reality.

as it was happening—it was a worship event unlike any other—one that he wanted to savor. Nevertheless, God’s ways are higher and he directly intervened in the moment to direct Peter’s attention away from the magnitude of the event to the person of Jesus.

Implication #3—The Keeping of Time in Worship

At this point in the narrative a most inexplicable thing occurred. A cloud overshadowed them.⁴⁰ D. A. Carson points out that the “cloud” is associated “in both OT and intertestamental Judaism with eschatology . . . and with the exodus.” The fact that Matthew points out that the cloud was “bright” is “a detail that recalls the Shekinah glory” and is “the more fundamental idea of the presence of God.”⁴¹ The disciples clearly realized that this was not a meteorological event and they became terrified. The first recorded appearance of this particular manifestation was almost 1,500 years before on Mt. Sinai. It was the same *cloud* that passed by Moses when he asked God to allow him to “see his glory” and he was allowed to see its afterglow. However, he was not allowed to enter it. It was the same *cloud* that surrounded Mt. Sinai so that no one could approach the mountain; that later filled the tabernacle to such a degree that Moses could not enter it; that led the children through the wilderness, and years after filled Solomon’s temple on Dedication Day so that the priests could not enter it. And it was this same *cloud* that Ezekiel saw rise from the Cherubim and move to the threshold of the temple because of Israel’s apostasy, then slowly move over the east gate of the temple to disappear over the Mount of Olives, not to be seen again for 600 years.

There had been no recorded sight of it since Ezekiel’s day but at this moment, with no advance warning, it came upon these three disciples and enshrouded them. It was the *shekinah* glory⁴² of God, and the view from below must have looked similar to the scene previously on Mt. Sinai as the top of this mountain became capped with the glory of God. Only one other person in history had been inside that cloud before. Moses was allowed to enter it to receive the old covenant tablets and to commune with God. The priests were not allowed to enter it. The people were not allowed to come near it. Since the veil was placed in the Holy of Holies to cut off the intimate presence once known in the Garden of Eden, it had been hidden completely or fearfully viewed from a distance. Now the disciples were in the cloud!

⁴⁰ Robert Stein explains, “The divine presence comes upon the scene in the form of a cloud, a common symbol of the presence of God (Exod 16:10; 19:9; 24:15–18; 33:9–11; 40:34; 2 Sam 22:12; 1 Kgs 8:10–11; Ezek 10:3–4; Ps 18:11). Clouds are also a means of taking people up to heaven (Acts 1:9; 1 Thess 4:17; Rev 11:12) and are associated with the parousia (Mark 13:26; Matt 24:30). In Luke 21:27 Luke used the singular ‘cloud’ rather than the plural found in Mark 13:26 and Matt 24:30, tying the parousia more closely to the transfiguration. He also used the singular ‘cloud’ in Acts 1:9” (Stein, *Luke*, 286).

⁴¹ Carson, *Matthew*, 438. Carson references W. L. Liefeld (“Theological Motifs in the Transfiguration Narrative,” in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. R. N. Longenecker and M. L. Tenney [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974], 170) for support of the latter point.

⁴² The *shekinah* glory is a reference to the visible glory of God. See Richard R. Melick Jr., “The Glory of God in the Synoptic Gospels, Acts, and the General Epistles,” in *The Glory of God*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 103.

What was the difference now? Why could the people not come near the cloud on Sinai but Peter, James, and John could stand in the midst of it on the top of this mountain? Why were the priests, even after all of their preparations of ritualistic cleansing, unable to enter the temple on that day when the cloud descended, but these three disciples were not struck dead as it engulfed them? And why could Moses (the “friend of God”) not enter the Tent of Meeting when this presence filled it, but these men, who would soon flee at Jesus’ arrest and in at least one case deny him publicly three times, became the first people on earth to ever behold the manifestation of the glory of God in the person of Christ? It was because of the presence of the one who brought them into the cloud. It was a gift of the mediator to share this with them in worship and a brief taste of what he was going to accomplish on their behalf (and that of all new covenant worshipers). That gift included a preview of the future glory that they would one day experience in his presence. The accompanying presence of Moses and Elijah demonstrated the elements of the past that had necessarily preceded this event. While worship occurs as a present revelation of the deity of Christ, it rests upon the gospel’s past events and points toward its future hope. There is a timelessness associated with worship that gives orientation to the worshipers’ existence in this lifetime.

Implication #4—The Necessity of the Word of God in Worship

A voice came out of the cloud, proclaiming, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!” (Luke 9:35). Matthew expresses the message of the voice a little differently, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt 17:5). Both phrases—“Chosen One” and “in whom I am well pleased”—indicate favor bestowed upon Christ that no other has ever possessed. It is not the disciples who are pleasing to God. In fact, it is more likely that when they heard the command to “listen to him” in the manifest presence of a holy God, every instance of not having listened to him flooded their minds and grieved their hearts. This may be the explanation of the terror that came next as the penetrating light of God’s presence pierced their darkness. The compulsive human response to the holiness of God is well described by Isaiah’s experience of the exalted Lord in Isaiah 6: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips” (Isa 6:5). While Peter indicated that it was good for them to be there at the beginning of this episode, this quickly changed. When the cloud overshadowed them and the voice spoke from the cloud, Matthew explains, “they fell on their faces and were terrified” (Matt 17:6). It no longer seemed good to be there, and there was no more desire to build tabernacles. Now the problem of worship became real, and the need for Christ’s finished work was made plain.

The centrality of Jesus’ role as mediator in this experience and indeed in all of worship is poignantly portrayed in the next verse: “But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Rise, and have no fear.’ And when they lifted their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.”⁴³ Moses and Elijah had disappeared, and there only remained Christ. This singular focus upon Christ in this narrative serves in an allegorical fashion to demonstrate a theological imperative. “For

⁴³ Matt 17:6–7. Commenting on this verse Blomberg explains, “‘They saw no one except Jesus’ reads more literally, *They did not see anyone but Jesus only*. The word *only* (*monos*) comes at the end of the sentence for emphasis. The disciples must focus on Christ alone. He will prove sufficient for their needs” (Blomberg, *Matthew*, 264).

there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5). Bob Kauflin undergirds this point in his book *Worship Matters*, “Worship itself cannot lead us into God’s presence. *Only Jesus himself* can bring us into God’s presence, and he has done it through a single sacrifice that will never be repeated—only joyfully recounted and trusted in.”⁴⁴

There is only one primary means by which worshipers may listen to Christ, as the disciples were instructed to do and later instructed the church to do as well. It is the word of God. In Ephesians 1:17 Paul prays for the church at Ephesus “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him.” The unveiling of our hearts accomplished by the gospel includes the related imagery of the ability of them to see (2 Cor 4:4): “In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” It is in the words of Scripture that worshipers *see* Christ. They are the means by which worship’s mediator and object are revealed and understood so that worshipers may “listen to him.”

Implication #5—The Transforming Power of Worship

When the disciples made their way back down the mountain, Jesus was able to explain things to them that they had not previously understood. There had been questions about who Jesus was, when Elijah would come, and Jesus’ proclamation of the necessity of his death and resurrection. While their comprehension was not perfect, Matthew writes that after this experience “the disciples understood.”⁴⁵ When Peter wrote of this event later in his second letter, he revealed some of this comprehension Jesus gave them:

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 (2 Pet 1:16–18).

The experience of the revelation of the glory of Christ had opened their eyes to new understanding, encouraged their faith in the face of opposition, and permanently changed the course of their lives. Peter, James, and John were not perfect, but they went on to be instrumental in advancing the kingdom of God that they had just seen revealed. Their preach-

⁴⁴ Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 74; emphasis Kauflin’s.

⁴⁵ Matt 17:13. Though Jesus told the disciples to keep silent about these events until after his departure, their reference to “what they had seen” in Luke 9:37 expresses the impact of the event. Stein writes of this phrase, “The verb is an intensive perfect, which indicates that this scene produced lasting effects on the disciples” (Stein, *Luke*, 287).

ing of the gospel expanded the kingdom into new areas of the world and helped many become worshipers. More than anything else, they became followers of Christ. This experience and many others in the presence of Christ would continually transform them into his image and empower them to be like him as they became a part of his body. Webber concludes,

The transfiguration of Christ, together with his resurrection, embodies the promise of a corresponding transformation for those who are his. The same Greek word used for Jesus' transfiguration is used by Paul for the transformation of the life of the believer (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18), and John promises that "we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).⁴⁶

It is not the experience alone that causes such transformation, at least not on the surface. An experience without meaning has little value, but an experience with meaning and significance is a transforming event. This is not the first time they have encountered the information that Jesus was God's Son. In fact, Peter had already confessed this belief the previous week. However, this is the first time they have seen the evidence of his deity in such a profound manner linked to their understanding. The miracles were amazing, but many saw the miracles and turned away later. Jesus taught as one having authority, but many could not understand the teaching or came to conclude that the teaching required a change of life for which they did not possess the faith to implement. While the miracles and the teaching were necessary components of Jesus' ministry, what changed on that mountain was the degree of faith in the disciples as they beheld the manifestation of the teaching in the deity of Christ. The miracles and the teaching were signs and words to point back to the person of Christ and who he truly is. The disciples experienced the person of Christ in a manner that changed them. It could be said that this was the incarnation of Christ in their worship experience. Christ being glorified before their eyes served to reveal his deity and Lordship in their lives. This produces the glorious byproduct of worship—it infuses faith and transforms its participants as "Word becomes flesh!" It is in this manner that religious affections are at work in worship. The Spirit operates upon the affections to reveal the person of Christ to the unveiled heart of the worshiper.

Implication #6—The Necessity of a Gospel Focus in Worship

In contrasting the experience of Moses on Mt. Sinai with the experience of the Mount of Transfiguration, the gospel focus of worship becomes more evident. While both were experiences of the manifested presence of God, only one was tethered to the new covenant and its fulfillment of the old covenant. While Mt. Sinai foreshadowed a more glorious access to God's presence, the Mount of Transfiguration demonstrated that a time is coming and now is! 2 Corinthians 3 elaborates on the necessity of the gospel to see Christ.

⁴⁶ Webber, *Biblical Foundations of Worship*, 200.

Beholding the Glory of the Lord—2 Cor 3:7–18

There is a very significant difference between the two events that Paul highlights in his second letter to Corinth. This passage lies at the scriptural foundation for this study's understanding of transforming worship. It arises from the profound difference between the old covenant, which was a weaker covenant, and the new covenant that Hebrews speaks of as the "better covenant" (Heb 7:22). That difference is the presence of Christ's role in the new covenant, and that is why New Testament worship is also Christ-centered worship. At Mt. Sinai a Passover and an Exodus made the experience possible. In the Gospels, however, the fulfillment of these "types" is now present. Sinclair Ferguson points out in his commentary, "[Jesus'] death would be the new Passover; the salvation of his people would be the new Exodus."⁴⁷ Jesus' role precipitated a new worship. In *Created for Worship*, Noel Due states, "In a very real sense this is the goal of the process of redemption, just as it was in the Old Testament exodus. God brought Israel out from the bondage of Egypt that they might serve/worship him. God's mercies have brought this new humanity out from the bondage of its idolatry, legalism, guilt, fear, and the judgment of God's wrath, to serve him in a new and living way."⁴⁸ The typology of Sinai and the Old Testament is instructive and inspiring, but the difference Jesus makes is extraordinary. Jesus' perfect work on the cross and subsequent resurrection ratified a new covenant and new access to the presence of God—"But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed" (2 Cor 3:16).

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul contrasts the two covenants. The old covenant he calls "the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone," which came with such a glory that "the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of it" (2 Cor 3:7). He then asks the question, "Will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?" (2 Cor 3:8). He continues to elaborate on this comparison between "the ministry of condemnation" and "the ministry of righteousness." If the former had glory, then the latter has exceeding glory. In fact, in comparison it makes the former really seem to have "no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it" and "much more will what is permanent have glory" (2 Cor 3:9–11). The degree of the glory is one difference in the two covenants and is demonstrated by the presence or absence of the veil. Moses had to put a veil over his face, and as a result the Israelites could not gaze upon the glory of God. Even then, it was a fading glory. It was a fading glory because apart from Christ they could barely glimpse the "afterglow" that Moses had seen in the cleft of the Rock. Even in that, they were fearful and could not approach that glory, just as they could not approach or enter the cloud. Even to this day, "whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their heart. But when one turns to the Lord (the *rock* Moses had been hidden in), the veil is removed." Those who are hidden in Christ have the veil lifted. Which leads to Paul's conclusion: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Let's Study Mark* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 136.

⁴⁸ Noel Due, *Created for Worship: From Genesis to Revelation to You* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 185.

⁴⁹ 2 Cor 3:15–18. John MacArthur explains, "The veil of a hardened heart made them think they could save themselves. Causing them, therefore, to miss the meaning of both covenants . . . It is only when 'a person

Those who are in Christ can look upon the glory of God because of Christ. And not only can they enter the cloud of God's glory, but when they gaze upon the glory of the Lord in the face of Christ, they are transformed (or transfigured) into that same glory. They are conformed to the image of Christ, who is the exact representation of the invisible God (Heb 1:3). In worship, when God's glory is revealed in Christ, worshipers are transformed into this same image. Christ-centered worship is transforming worship. One cannot look upon the glory of God and remain the same. John Piper states, "The primary way to become more and more like Christ is to lift the veil and fix your gaze on his glory and hold him in view. . . . In other words we are transformed into his image by looking at his glory. You become like what you constantly behold."⁵⁰ Philip E. Hughes, in his commentary on 2 Corinthians, draws the connection between 2 Corinthians 3 and the Mount of Transfiguration:

Further light is thrown on this passage when we consider what took place on the occasion of the transfiguration of Christ. On that mountain height Moses and Elijah appeared with Christ, but it was *Christ alone* who was transfigured with heavenly radiance before the eyes of Peter, James, and John. It was *his* face that shone as the sun and *his* garments that became white and dazzling. It was of *him alone* that the voice from the cloud said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him." And thereafter the disciples saw no one, *save Jesus only*. It is he who abides. The glory in which Moses and Elijah appeared was not their own but Christ's glory—the glory which he had had with the Father before the world was (Jn. 17:5). Just as in the wilderness the glory which shown from Moses' face was the reflected glory of Yahweh, so too on the mount of transfiguration the glory with which he was surrounded was the glory of the same Yahweh. Christ's alone is the full, the abiding, the evangelical glory. To turn to him is to turn to the Light of the world. To follow him is not to walk in darkness, but to have the light of life (Jn. 8:12).⁵¹

Simon S. Lee in his work, *Jesus' Transfiguration and the Believer's Transformation*, also shows similarities between the transfiguration accounts and 2 Corinthians 3. Specifically, "both draw on Moses Transformation account in Exod 34."⁵² There appears to be a triangulation of these three passages (Sinai, Transfiguration, and 2 Cor 3) with the new covenant interpretation given by Paul in this passage. Whereas, Moses is the only one who experiences

turns to the Lord' (cf. Isa. 45:22) that 'the veil is taken away' . . . Paul borrowed the image of salvation as a 'veil' being 'taken away' from Moses' unveiling himself in God's presence: "Whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take off the veil until he came out" (Ex. 34:34). Moses removed his veil because he wanted a direct vision of God's glory. So it is with sinners who turn to God through Jesus Christ. "The veil is taken away' and they have a clear vision of the glory of God reflected in the face of Jesus Christ" (John MacArthur, *2 Corinthians*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003], 112).

⁵⁰ John Piper, "Summer is for Seeing and Showing Christ," *Desiring God*, June 11, 1995, accessed 29 November 2011, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/summer-is-for-seeing-and-showing-christ>.

⁵¹ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 112–13; emphasis Hughes'.

⁵² Lee, *Jesus' Transfiguration and the Believer's*, 80.

transformation in Exodus 34; and Jesus' appearance is the only one transfigured on the high mountain; "For Paul, however, the transformation experience is not limited to a special few . . . but instead becomes the normal experience for believers as a result of their exposure to the glory of Christ."⁵³ Lee continues,

It is also interesting to notice the strong δόξα motif in 2 Cor 3–4 and in the transfiguration story, which is clearly from the Mosaic transformation tradition. While this particular use of the word δόξα is not paralleled elsewhere in Paul, it is one of the most important themes of the transfiguration story. Paul insists on the far greater glory which accompanies his New Covenant ministry and as a result of his unveiling of the Gospel of the Lord of glory, "we all" are enabled to see the glory. This revelatory experience of the glory, according to Paul, comes from God's new creation activity of spreading "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (4:6). The reference to "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" finds its narrative parallel especially in Luke's version of the transfiguration story. Luke refers to Jesus' altered face in 9:29 and associates it with the δόξα in 9:31; and the three disciples are said to witness the δόξα in 9:32.⁵⁴

John Calvin noted the role of the image of God in man when exposed to the glory of God. "Observe, that the design of the gospel is this—that the image of God, which had been effaced by sin, may be stamped anew upon us, and that the advancement of this restoration may be continually going forward in us during our whole life, because God makes his glory shine forth in us by little and little."⁵⁵ This is the effect of the greater covenant. Finally, R. Kent Hughes explains,

Moses' temporary exposure to the glory of the Lord worked a mighty transformation in and upon him. But the new-covenant ministry of Paul is even more transforming because our exposure is constant and continuous (there is no veil). And more, it works in the reverse order of Moses' experience, first by effecting a *moral* transformation into God's image . . . The change is progressive, so that willing exposure to the sunlight of God's presence will burn his image ever deeper into our character and will. And ultimately, at Christ's appearance, we will undergo a *physical* transformation in glory. This is what Paul's ministry offered, and this is the grand and great difference between his and Moses' ministry.⁵⁶

⁵³ Ibid., 81.

⁵⁴ Lee, *Jesus' Transfiguration and the Believer's*, 82. For a collection of essays on the theological concept of the δόξα (i.e., glory of God) as part of the Theology in Communities series, see Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *The Glory of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

⁵⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 187.

⁵⁶ R. Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness, Preaching the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 80. See also Isa 25:7: "And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations."

G. K. Beale in *We Become What We Worship* writes, “People resemble what they revere, either for ruin or restoration. God has made all people to reflect, to be imaging beings. People will always reflect something, whether it be God’s character or some feature of the world.”⁵⁷ Commenting on several New Testament passages, Beale applies his thesis to sanctification:

Thus to be “transformed [*metamorphoō*] by the renewing of your mind” in Romans 12:2 is the virtual equivalent to “becoming conformed [*symmorphos*] to the image of [God’s] son” in Romans 8:29. Such an equivalence is pointed to further from observing the combination of “renewal” and “image” in Colossians 3:10: “you have put on the new man who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him” . . . (also Eph 4:22–24). Similarly, 2 Corinthians 3:18 affirms that those who want to be near the Lord will take on his likeness.⁵⁸

This idea of transformation (i.e., “metamorphosis”) that results from beholding divine glory in worship events such as those described in the transfiguration and in 2 Corinthians 3 is also used in relation to a life of unceasing worship described in Romans 12:1–2.⁵⁹ The connections between the two are once again quite clear as what takes place in the event is inextricably linked to what takes place in life. In this way, the event becomes a source of empowered lifestyle worship.

Jeremiah Burroughs (1599–1646), an English Puritan and Congregationalist, helpfully summarizes the truths set forth here in his work, *Gospel Worship*:

This is that which the happiness of the church is set out by in Revelation 22:4: “They shall see his face and his name shall be in their foreheads.” This is the privilege of the church. And that it is such a blessing to draw nigh to God you may see from Ephesians 2:18: “For through him we both have an access by one Spirit unto the Father.”

Through Christ we have access by one Spirit unto God the Father, and now, Paul says, “Ye that were strangers and foreigners are made fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God,” and verse 13: “but now by Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were afar off are made nigh by the blood of Christ,” and you have access through Christ. So our coming nigh to God is such a privilege as cost the blood of Christ. . . . And by drawing nigh to God often, you will come to increase your graces abundantly. How will your graces act? The presence of God will draw forth the acts of grace as the presence of the fire draws

⁵⁷ G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 284.

⁵⁸ Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 218; emphasis Beale’s.

⁵⁹ John MacArthur explains, “The phrase ‘are being transformed’ translates a present passive participle of the verb *metamorphoō* and refers to believers’ progressive sanctification. The Christian life is a continual process of growing into the ‘image’ of the Lord Jesus Christ, ascending ‘from’ one level of ‘glory’ to another” (MacArthur, *2 Corinthians*, 116). Other similar passages that do not reference this specific word but indicate the same process are Rom 8:29, 1 Cor 15:49, 51–53, Phil 3:13–14, 21, Col 3:10, and 1 John 3:2.

forth out heat. So the presence of God will draw forth our graces. And by this means we come to live most holy lives.

We read that Moses was upon the mountain forty days with God, and when he came down his face so shone that the people were not able to bear it. What's the reason? It was because he was so near to God. Would you have your faces shine in a holy conversation before men? Converse much with God, be often with God, be near to him and that will make you shine as lights in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. We find it so with some who converse much with God: There is a shine upon their very countenances. . . . "You shall have many who love to be in God's presence so that they think on it overnight and long for the time when it comes. I am never better than when I am with God. I think when I get into God's presence, either in prayer or any duty of God's worship, I find my heart warmed and quickened. They are ready to say with Peter, "Master, it is good being here."⁶⁰

This is what the gospel brings to worship because it focuses us on Christ—the mediator and object of new covenant worship—as the image of the invisible God. In his face is found the all-satisfying and transforming glory of God. Emphasizing these aspects of Christian worship inspires all worshipers to proclaim with Peter, "Lord, it is good that we are here."

⁶⁰ Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Worship*, ed. Don Kistler (1648; repr., Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990), 44–46.