



THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY – THE TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD

Whose Interpretation?

2 Peter 1:16-21 (NIV)

¹⁶ For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” ¹⁸ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. ¹⁹ We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. ²⁰ Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. ²¹ For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Imagine being the Apostle Peter. You were there when Jesus showed his glory on the top of that mountain. As you were coming down, Jesus told you, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” (Matthew 17:9) You have to hold on to this experience for months. Then the times comes. Jesus died on the cross, rose on the third day, ascended into heaven but promised to return in all his glory, the glory you saw. Now you get to talk about.

“Guys, let me tell you about what we – me, James, and John – saw. That day we went to the top of the mountain, Jesus became pure white, whiter than any bleached clothes, brighter than the sun itself. Moses and Elijah appeared and talked with Jesus about his departure, his sacrifice in Jerusalem, the laying down of his life to take away the sins of the world. God the Father spoke from heaven that day saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!’ (Matthew 17:5b) He lived that perfect life for us. His mission was to crush Satan and give us his holiness. He accomplished that. We know that Jesus is God, the perfect Savior of the world because we saw his majesty. He will come again in that glory. Be ready for his return by trusting that he has the full approval of God the Father, that he has lived perfectly for us and that he has taken away our sins by his death.”

And then someone responds, “Well, Peter, that’s your interpretation.”

Really? An eyewitness corroborates an account with three others declaring a truth for which he is arrested several times, beaten several times, and will later be crucified for upside down, and the matter is dismissed as being nothing more than an interpretation?

In our country, we have freedom of religion, to believe as we want. So, for the most part, Christians are rarely physically persecuted here. However, we are still persecuted – and maybe in a way that’s worse. Instead of being able to lay down our lives for our God, dying because we confess that Jesus is the perfect Son of God who lived holiness for us and took away our sins on the cross and that he is the only way to heaven, we are dismissed. We’re told, “That’s just your interpretation.” We’re put down as irrelevant. People care so little about the Jesus we believe in and confess that we don’t even get to die for our faith. That leaves us wondering, “What, then, is the point of sharing it if no one cares, if no one will listen?” “Is Christ really unknowable?” And we want to throw our hands in the air and give up.

Peter was physically persecuted for confessing Christ as the perfect substitute for all people, but he was also persecuted by people dismissing what he had to say. The people he was writing to in order to prepare them for Christ’s return in glory on the Last Day wrote Peter and his message off as just being an interpretation. They were saying that he made up these stories about Jesus, clever as they were. So, they don’t have to give Peter the time of day to take what he was saying seriously. It was just his interpretation.

Funny thing, interpretation. We tend to only use that word when there is a language or understanding barrier. What we may fail to realize is that every time we open our mouths and every time we read a word off of a page, we are interpreting. A vast majority of the time, the interpretation is clear without any room for dispute or misunderstanding. If I say that there is cake in the fellowship hall after worship today, you know exactly what I mean. You interpret correctly that sweet sugary goodness will be available for all after our worship service is over in the room next door. Now, if I said that in Hebrew, you would probably need an interpreter. And when we don’t understand things, new things, unfamiliar things, we need to ask for help to understand, like trying to pronounce the name of a city spelled T-o-o-e-l-e. I would say “tool” or “tool-e,” but someone who knows better tells me it’s correctly pronounced, “too-will-ah”. It’s left up to interpretation until someone who knows better than me, more than me, tells me what it actually is. I need that guidance and correction from others to get the right interpretation, but the right interpretation does exist.

So, as people claim Peter is just imposing his own interpretation about God on them, he responds: "We did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain." (verses 16-18) This is what I saw. This is what I heard. I was there. I saw Jesus in his glory. I heard the voice of God the Father speak his approval of his Son, the one he appointed as Savior of the world. This is what happened.

"Yeah, but, Peter, people's memories are unreliable. People misremember things. People convince themselves of facts that never really happened." And this is true. We are imperfect humans. Peter was an imperfect man. We have faulty memories. We don't always communicate in the best way. So, how do we know what really happened vs. something being someone's interpretation?

This is why Peter doesn't just stop with giving his testimony as an eyewitness. He continues to explain how we are to interpret the event: "We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it..." (verse 19a) Peter is saying, "Test my words with what you already have. You have God's Word as spoken by prophets. Use that. If you want to know how to interpret this, let Scripture interpret Scripture. Let anything unclear be clarified by comparing it to the rest of the Bible. This message of approval from Jesus' transfiguration is the same account given by Matthew, Mark, and Luke in what they wrote so that we could know God. This all lines up – and on purpose!

If we are tempted to think that all this Jesus stuff is just people putting their own spin, their own interpretation, on things, then consider this: "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (verses 20-21) God's Word does not come about by a prophet, a person, putting their interpretation on it. No, it comes straight from God, from a pure source, from someone who cannot lie. It comes from someone who does not twist his words or plays mind games with us. In fact, it comes from the very being who created our ability to communicate and made our minds with the ability to interpret the sounds that form language. This is God's interpretation, not Peter's, not a prophet's, not any man's, but God's. He spoke clearly so as to be known by us.

Scripture, God's Word, like any communication needs interpretation, but it is not a hopeless endeavor where we can never be certain of what God is actually saying to us. He speaks to us in our language. He shares truths that we can understand. He gave us 66 books written over 1500 years by 40 different authors to guide our understanding of him. From this, the Bible has been translated into more than 1500 languages. He wants and makes it work that all people can know him.

God does not leave interpreting the Bible up to an individual experience. He gives us the Church, this great multitude of believers, to read it together, to study it together. He does not want us to sit by ourselves, locked in a room and cut off from others, and try to figure this all out on our own. The interpretation of God's Word is not a solo experience. When we are unsure of what something means, we draw on the experience and learning of other brothers and sisters in Christ.

That's what Peter is saying. "If you think this is just my interpretation, that I made this stuff up, test it to the completely reliable Word of God. It didn't come about through human imagination. It came from God so that we would know him and know what he has done for us, that he brought us out of the darkness of our unbelief, the darkness of our ignorance of not knowing God and not knowing what he has done to save us from our sins and to save us from the devil and hell itself. God communicates to us in our language. He shines his light on us through our words. He makes known to us what we never would be able to figure out on our own – that Jesus is the perfect Son of God who lived holiness for us and died to pay the penalty for all the things we have ever done wrong as only this God Man could do."

No doubt we have all been challenged at one time or another that what we believe about God, what we profess about him, is just our interpretation. Maybe where we need to start with the person who claims that is to ask, "What parts are up for interpretation?" Let them answer. You may find out what they're really saying. They may be confused because they know many learned Christians who conflict with each other on explaining God's Word and its teachings, that they see so many Christians believing different things and are overwhelmed by the differences that they don't know where to even start to make sense of it all. You can be that light to guide them to understand and know their Savior from sin. Their answer may show you that they have never really studied the Bible because they can't tell you which parts are up for interpretation. That's a place where you can offer to be the Church, the fellow Christian, to offer to read and study God's Word with them or with the pastor or other learned Christians through Sunday School classes, through the Sunday morning adult Bible study, through the Sunday night Bible Information Class. Start with them by reading the Bible together, as it was meant to be. Maybe as you listen to their answer as to why everything is up to interpretation you find out that there are things that the Bible says clearly but they say are uncomfortable truths, statements that challenge their way of thinking and they don't like it. None of us like being told that we are wrong in our thinking. This person in front of you is no different. Then kindly ask them if the words are clear or if it is really left up to individual interpretation because that's a different wrestle.

God's Word is up to interpretation, but not in a hopeless way. God has communicated it to us in our language so that we can know him and know how he has saved us. He also gives us lots of source material to check harder to interpret passages to easier ones. We let God's Word interpret itself and lead our interpretation, our understanding. Because this is from God, we, like Peter, have a message that is completely reliable and can be understood.

Today, hear that completely reliable message again: Because Jesus was transfigured on that mountains, we know that he is the Son of God. We know that he is without sin, holy as shown by his bright white appearance. He lived under God's law in order to complete it for us because none of us are able. His approval was announced by God the Father on that mountain top. Over the next six weeks for the season of Lent we are going to see the Son of God go forth into war on our behalf. He battled temptation for us. He held at bay the influence of the world for our sake. He dealt the fatal death blow to Satan by dying on the cross and rising again on the third day in order to free us from sin's captivity. These are not cleverly invented stories left hopelessly up to the interpretation whims of fallible people. This is the light of God shining in a dark place, shining on us. His Word is the light that the great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language gathers around. Jesus is our approved Savior from our sins. Because he stands approved, we too will stand approved when he returns on the Last Day in his glory. Amen.

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