Metamorphosis
(Transformation)
3339 metamorphoo

Introduction

The Word of God uses the Greek word, “metamorphoo,” four times in the New Testament. This powerful word describes the transfiguration of Christ in the gospels as well as the change of believers in becoming more like Christ while on earth. The word literally means “metamorphosis,” or “change in form.” The word is commonly used to describe changes in form in nature. The New Testament employment of this dynamic term illustrates dramatic and applicable truths.

Part I: The Transfiguration of Christ

The Scriptures

Matthew 17.2 “And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and his garments became as white as light.”
Mark 9.2 “Six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them;”
*Italics* denotes use of the Greek word “metamorphoo.”

Observations

Jesus’ Change in Transfiguration

When Jesus was changed, His face shone like the sun. Although He was a man with a human body, He was changed at that time and His face became as bright as the sun. This was different than Jesus’ resurrection body, viewed by the same disciples between Jesus’ death on the cross and His final ascension into heaven. That body could be viewed by men on earth. But not the transfigured body on the mountain: during this change in Jesus’ body His face could not be gazed upon at length because it was as bright as the sun.

Not only was the skin of Jesus’ face altered, so were His clothes. Matthew 17.2 says they became, “as white as light.” Mark 9.3 tells us, “His garments became exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them.” Man-made material became a source of light. In this miraculous event, God not only changed Jesus’ flesh but He modified the fabric of His apparel as well.

This event would certainly be remembered by the three men present for the rest of their lives. God was showing them that Jesus was His Son. He did so in a miraculous and astounding event: metamorphosis.
Other Pertinent Facts

1. Jesus’ Conversation

While Jesus was transformed, He spoke with Elijah and Moses. The Bible neither tells us of what they spoke, nor if Peter, James and John could hear the dialog. God revealed the identity of the other two beings to the three witnesses and to us in the Scriptures; He chose to give us no more information.

2. The Words of a Confused Man

Peter spoke to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Scripture offers analysis of Peter’s thinking when he uttered those words: “For he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified.” Previous quotes are from Mark 9.5-6. All three were afraid and unsure what to do or say; Peter spoke.

3. The Audible Words of God

Matthew 17.5 records another event on top of the mountain. “A bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, ‘This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!’ ” In these words God the Father offered a life application for the metamorphosis of Jesus Christ to the three men present and to us who read this account in the Bible. Since no such thing had been seen before, since this was a clear indication of Jesus’ deity, and since this was an event in which God the Father singled out God the Son as unique among all men, Peter, James and John should have realized Jesus’ identity, how the Father viewed Him and that it was imperative to listen closely to all He said. So should we. In case any of us might miss the point, the Father made a rare audible statement from heaven.

How can we become doers of this passage of Scripture (an act God endorses in James 1.22-25)? We must regard Jesus as God’s beloved Son. We will perceive Him as one who greatly pleased His Father. We are to make effort in both understanding all He said and in living accordingly.

4. Jesus’ Words To Peter, James and John

After the words from heaven, the three disciples fell on their faces and were quite afraid. In Matthew 17.7, Jesus “came to them and touched them and said, ‘Arise, and do not be afraid.’” This discloses much about the heart of Jesus. He was significantly honored by His Father; then a moment later He observed these men He loved and gently cared for them amid their fear. He physically touched them while they were on the ground. He also provided instruction for them amid their confusion. He told them to get up and to not be afraid. This balance illustrated His concern and His leadership as the great shepherd.

Jesus spoke to the men again as they descended the mountain. In Matthew 17.9 He commanded them: “Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.” The three were uncertain what was meant by “(rising) from the dead” (Mark 9.10). No reason is given in
Scripture for Jesus’ directive. We don’t know why He told the men to keep this incident to themselves until after the resurrection.

5. The Discussion of Elijah

A discussion about Elijah ensued. It is mentioned both in Matthew 17.10-13 and in Mark 9.11-13. The men had seen Elijah during the transfiguration of Christ. They had heard scribes say Elijah would come before the Son of Man. Jesus told them that Elijah had come and that “they did to him whatever they wished.” The disciples understood that Jesus was speaking of John the Baptist.

**Application**

**Jesus Is God’s Beloved Son**

We are to worship Jesus as the Messiah, as God’s Son and as Lord. We must proclaim Him in the gospel accordingly. We must not communicate to others that a different view of Jesus is an option for anyone who will be in heaven. We are to personally pursue His honor and glory with our words and our actions.

**Jesus Pleased His Father Greatly**

God spoke audibly of His pleasure in Jesus at His baptism, on this occasion and in John 12 when Jesus prayed just hours before His death to glorify the Father. He also testified of His pleasure in Jesus by answering prayers, performing miracles through Him, causing miraculous events at His death, raising Him from the dead and showing believers His ascension. God the Father left no doubt about His evaluation of His Son. Therefore we should worship Jesus, give thanks to Him in prayer for His faithfulness and give thanks to the Father for His Son.

As in Jesus’ life, the most important aspect of our lives is to glorify the Father. We should follow Jesus’ priority in our own lives. This day should not be measured by its degree of difficulty, whether or not our personal preferences were met, if we accomplished all we desired, how others treated us or how we feel. The day should be evaluated in terms of how completely we glorified the Father. Items of consideration may include our response to the Word, our level of love, our motives in work and relationships with others (did we strive to honor our Lord?) and the content and frequency of prayer. Not only is such a mindset right, progress in it is attainable through the grace of God (Hebrews 4.15-16)

We can also follow specific examples of how Jesus glorified God. John 15.8-11 tells us that following Jesus’ pattern of obeying the Father’s commandments results in abiding in His love, bearing fruit, proving to be His disciples and having full joy. 1 Peter 2.18-25 identifies Jesus’ response to unfair treatment as an example for us (He did not sin, did not lie, did not revile or threaten, but rather entrusted Himself to the Father who judges righteously). 1 John 3.16-18 teaches us that Jesus’ love in laying down His life for us shows us how we are to love. Ephesians 5.25 makes the same point specifically for husbands.
We Are To Listen To Him

At the metamorphosis of Jesus Christ, God the Father told those present how to respond: “Listen to Him.” As we consider the implications of Jesus’ transfiguration, one of them certainly must be, “Listen to Him.” How can we do this? Include the gospels in our rotation of Scripture we read. Notice especially the words of Christ as He speaks about the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 13.44-46), love (Matthew 5.43-47; John 15.13-14), the desires of our heart (Luke 9.23-25), courage (John 16.33), service (Mark 10.43-45), His own motives (John 6.38) and dozens of other life issues. We must not only hear the words but accept them: replace our own thoughts on these things with His. Speak based on His words. Act accordingly.

Jesus Showed Love for the Disciples in Kind Care and in Instruction

Jesus expressed His love for the three men by a touch of His hand in kindness while they laid face down. He then told them what to do---do not fear. How often has God shown His love for us as we read it in His written Word? How many times has He given us the direction we needed through His Word? As Jesus conveyed love through His touch and audible words, so the Father loves us through His written Word. Let us take time now to give thanks for Jesus’ involvement and guidance of the disciples and for God’s personal love and teaching in our lives through the living and active written Word.

This picture of Jesus’ effective love for His companions gives us an opportunity to evaluate how we love those in our lives. Do we include physical gestures of encouragement when they would show love? Do we speak the truth of instruction from the Word when we understand how the Word applies and others do not?

The Commentary of Scripture on the Transfiguration of Jesus

2 Peter 1.16-21 provide biblical commentary concerning the transfiguration of Jesus as recorded in the gospels. “For we did not follow cleverly devised tales 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, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Gory, “This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased”---and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the mountain. And so we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you will do well to pay attention...no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, ...but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”

The event on the mountain made Peter, James and John eyewitnesses of His majesty. They heard the audible words spoken from heaven. This makes the prophecy of Scripture more sure. Therefore we should hear and obey the Word of God.
Part II: The Change of Believers in Sanctification

Introduction

Metamorphosis in Nature

God uses nature to illustrate what type of change He intends for us in sanctification as His children.

1. The Caterpillar Changes To a Butterfly

One occurrence of metamorphosis in nature involves the change of a burly, slow moving, dull colored and earthbound caterpillar to a beautiful, colorful, delicate airborne butterfly. These creatures are significantly altered in many ways.

2. The Tadpole Changes To a Frog

God also created another animal that changes dramatically. The tadpole is an underwater organism that becomes an air breathing frog. It transcends from a speedy swimmer to an animal with disproportionately strong legs, known for jumping on land.

The Scripture

Romans 12.2 “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”

*Italics* denotes use of the Greek word “metamorphoo.”

Observations

The Topic is Sanctification

This verse is written to believers. The contrast is between being “conformed to this world” and a “(renewed) mind, that you may prove what the will of God is.” Romans 6.10-14 describes this process: “do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.” Ephesians 4.22-24 speaks similarly of putting off sin and putting on righteousness. Titus 2.12 says the grace of God instructs us “to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age.” The transition that is the topic of Romans 12.2 is sanctification: the change toward godliness that is the believer’s occupation from salvation until glorification.

Transformed: Metamorphoo

The Greek word used to describe this change is metamorphoo. The word is used in nature to describe the dramatic changes in form of caterpillar to butterfly and tadpole to frog. The word
used elsewhere in Scripture to characterize the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain. The use of this concept to describe a believer’s sanctification in Romans 12.2 is powerful. It says that our change in becoming more like Christ should be so bold that it is similar to the concept of metamorphosis in nature and elsewhere in Scripture.

There are other changes in the life of a believer that are extreme. The day a person comes to Christ with faith in the gospel there is a new direction of life. In the New Testament the word “repentance” (“metanoeo”: literally, to change one’s mind or purpose) is most often used to describe this turning in life orientation. We will certainly be changed when either through death or rapture we lay aside these temporal bodies and are given eternal bodies that don’t die, require sleep or cry. The new bodies will enable us to be with the Lord face to face, in person, unlike these bodies. Yet for neither the stunning alteration in direction associated with the gospel nor for the exchange of earthly bodies for eternal is the word “metamorphoo” used in Scripture. The word describing change in form is rather utilized to describe the change of a believer from conformity to the world to obeying the will of God.

Since this is so, we ought to strive to live accordingly. This truth from God’s Word gives us great hope in relation to as yet unresolved sin issues in our lives. In Him we certainly can change and we can do so emphatically. Our confidence is in God as we embark on our mission. Our purpose for today is to make progress in changing toward holiness.

The Scripture

2 Corinthians 3.18 “But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”

*Italics* denotes use of the Greek word “metamorphoo.”

Observations

The Important Idea

In the preceding verses Paul has discussed how the glory of God, visible on the face of Moses after he came down from meeting with God on the mountain, faded. So Moses put a veil over his face so that the people of Israel would not observe the fading away. The comparison of the old and new covenants is made, with the illustration that a veil on the heart is lifted when one comes to Christ. In verse 18 we are told that we need no veil because our interaction with God does not come and go (we have the Spirit within, verse 17).

As Christians in this time, we behold the glory of the Lord. It does not change, but it is not in person. In our ongoing sanctification, which began when we first encountered the glory of God through the gospel and will end when the glory is in person (when we are home forever), we are becoming more like Christ. We are being transformed from the first glory to becoming more like the permanent glory. Scripture again uses the term “metamorphoo” to describe this change toward holiness.
Application: What To Do To Seek To Metamorphosize

Remember the vivid truth God gives us in Romans 12.2 in characterizing our sanctification capabilities as metamorphosis. Since this is true, we must choose to dwell on this in relation to our present opportunities to put off sin and put on righteousness (Philippians 4.8: “whatever is true...let your minds dwell on these things”).

We can think in terms of metamorphosis when seeking to resist temptation. We can remember Jesus’ transfiguration as a picture of how boldly we can become more like Christ. We can reject thinking that envisions sin as a large insurmountable foe (1 John 5.3-5). When we are reproved by God in His Word we must respond by repenting of sin. We should pray each day repenting of known sin, while remembering that change through the power of the Word and the Lord is possible.

We are also to plan, making no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts (Romans 13.14). We can also plan what we must change in our lives to flee temptation and to pursue God’s honor (2 Timothy 2.22).

The combination of right thinking, right response to the Word and right action, along with the certain response of the Lord to our prayers, will result in a pattern of life change that God describes as metamorphosis.

Conclusion

The consideration of the Greek word “metamorphoo” gives us robust truth for life in Christ on two levels.

As we consider the transfiguration of Christ plus God’s audible comments and God’s written comments about the event, we understand important facts about Jesus. He was God. He was God’s beloved Son. He lived a life on earth that was well-pleasing to His Father. We are also given an occasion to respond to the truth. We worship Jesus. We seek to follow His example and also live lives that glorify the Father. We purpose to listen to Him, as God directed us. We regard Scripture as more certain because of this event.

We also observe the dynamic truth about metamorphosis in regard to sanctification. Romans 12.2 gives us a starting point from which we purpose to think rightly, respond to the Word rightly and act rightly as we rely on God’s power to become more like Christ.