

Mission Impossible? Mission Accomplished!

Introduction: On the Mount of Transfiguration

In Luke 9:28-36 we have one of three accounts in the Gospels of Christ's transfiguration. We read that Jesus took His three most trusted disciples, "Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray" (Luke 9:28). There on the mountain Jesus was transfigured before them: "And as he prayed, the fashion (appearance) of his countenance was altered, and his raiment (clothing) was white and glistering (dazzling)" (Luke 9:29). All three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) mention the appearance of two Old Testament heroes, Moses and Elijah (representing the Law and the Prophets), on the mountain with Jesus and His three disciples; but Luke is the only Gospel writer who tells us what Jesus, Moses and Elijah discussed together: Luke 9:30-31, "And, behold, there talked with him (Jesus) two men, which were Moses and Elias (Elijah): who appeared in glory, and **spake of his decease** (or departure, literally "exodus") **which he should (was about to) accomplish at Jerusalem**". Now, don't you agree that's quite an odd topic of conversation and, indeed, quite an odd sentence? Who talks about someone's death as something **they are going to accomplish**? Well, **Jesus does**, and He does so because **the mission that He was going to accomplish** would, indeed, **be accomplished by His death**.

So, what exactly was this mission that Jesus "was about to accomplish at Jerusalem"? Where did it originate? What was its purpose? What exactly did it involve? Was it a success? These are some of the questions I want us to think about in this article, with God's help.

The Foretelling of Christ's Mission

The very first mention in the Bible of Christ's mission is found way back in Genesis chapter 3 where, after Adam's fall (his act of disobedience to God's command which resulted in the entrance of sin and death into the world, and mankind being banished from God's holy presence), God tells the serpent (Satan) "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it (he) shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15). Right back in the beginning of human history, God intimated that one would come who would rescue the human race from the awful curse that Adam had brought upon us when he foolishly listened to the devil's lies. In fact, this mission was actually planned long before man was even created: 1 Peter 1:20 states that Christ's mission was "foreordained before the foundation of the world".

Throughout the Old Testament scriptures, hundreds and thousands of years before Jesus was born on earth, **prophecies** were given by God's special, inspired spokesmen that tell us of the Messiah, the Saviour, who would one day come into the world. For example, the prophet Isaiah, who wrote seven hundred years before the birth of Christ, said "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel (God with us)" (Isaiah 7:14); Matthew tells us that this prophecy was **fulfilled** when Jesus was born of the virgin Mary (Matthew 1:22-23). And again, Isaiah 9:6, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace". The person that God was going to send on this mission would be so special that not only

would He be a man, born miraculously of a virgin, but He would also be “The Mighty God”. It would take One who was both God and man to accomplish this mission.

There are hundreds of prophecies in the Old Testament relating to Jesus Christ, the Messiah, many of them will be familiar to anyone who has heard the Christmas story. If you are not familiar with the Christmas story (and I don’t mean the one about Santa Claus!), why don’t you go along to a Christmas service at your local evangelical church (i.e. one that believes what the Bible says – all it!).

In addition to the **prophecies** of the Old Testament, there were the **types and shadows** of the **Mosaic ceremonial law**. These also pointed to the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who would come as the **antitype**, fulfilling the typical animal sacrifices by His once for all sacrifice: “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins. Wherefore when he (Jesus) cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body hast thou prepared me: in burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin thou hast had no pleasure. Then said I (the Lord Jesus), Lo, I come” (Hebrews 10:4-7, quoting Psalm 40:6-7). The book of Hebrews is full of Christ, showing that He is the fulfilment of the offerings and the shadowy types of the ceremonial law.

Can you see, then, how appropriate it was for Jesus, on the Mount of Transfiguration, to be discussing with Elijah (representing the **Prophets**) and Moses (representing the **Law**) the mission which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem? It was a mission foretold by the Prophets and by the types and shadows of the Mosaic Law. Indeed, the whole of the Old Testament, from Moses to Malachi, may be viewed as one big picture portraying the Messiah who was to come: “And **beginning at Moses and all the prophets**, he (Jesus, after His resurrection) expounded unto them (two disciples on the road to Emmaus) **in all the scriptures the things concerning himself**” (Luke 24:27).

The Beginning of Christ’s Mission

With Christmas approaching, the thoughts of Christians tend to focus on the birth of Christ, when Christ’s mission on earth began: and a truly amazing birth it was! a birth announced by an angel to His mother-to-be, a virgin called Mary (Luke 1:26-38); His conception by the Holy Spirit coming upon her, and the power of the Highest overshadowing her (Luke 1:35); a birth heralded by a choir of angels to a group of shepherds (Luke 2:8-14); the birth of one who was God from all eternity, coming into the world, which He created, as a human being (John 1:1-3,14). No wonder the hymn-writers struggle to find words to convey the wonder of this miracle; Charles Wesley tries his best in these words, “Our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man” (from the hymn “Let earth and heaven combine”, no. 174 in Christian Hymns); Charles Wesley again, “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see! Hail the incarnate (in the flesh) Deity!” (from the hymn “Hark! The herald angels sing”, no. 171 in Christian Hymns). Some of our popular Christmas hymns contain some very profound thoughts concerning the birth of Christ which we tend to gloss over because the words and tunes are so familiar to us; this Christmas, make sure you think carefully about the familiar words that you are singing (see our article on “Worship”, particularly the section “Worship with the Understanding”).

And then, at the age of thirty, the man Jesus Christ, the Messiah, appears on the stage of the land of Palestine and is announced by John the Baptist as “the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Here is where His mission begins in earnest.

The Nature of Christ's Mission

This brings us to the reason for Christ's mission: the reason why the second person of the Godhead became a man. Surely this must be no common mission for God Himself to undertake it.

Jesus' mission was unique in at least two ways. **Firstly**, in its **purpose**: it was **to restore** what Adam had lost in the Garden of Eden - **eternal life and fellowship with God**. David, in Psalm 69, speaks prophetically of Christ when he says, in verse 4, "then I **restored** that which I took not away"; it was man that had lost fellowship with God, but it was God, in the person of Jesus Christ, who came to restore that broken communion and bring peace between God and man. Isaiah says, "your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:2): our sin and rebellion has **made a breach** between us and God; but Christ came **to heal that breach**. Jesus Himself said, "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). We are all born into this world **estranged from God our maker** by our sin, but Jesus came to **reconcile us to God**: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them" (2 Corinthians 5:19). Jesus' mission was a rescue mission unlike any other rescue mission: He came to rescue sinners from the consequences of their sin.

Secondly, Jesus' mission was also unique in its **method**. Jesus' mission was to be accomplished **by His death**. Jesus was **born in Bethlehem** in order that He might **die at Calvary**. In Matthew 16:21 we read, "From that time forth (just a week before the transfiguration) began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, **and be killed**, and be raised again the third day". As the apostle Peter says, "(Jesus) his own self **bare our sins** (took the load of guilt which was due to sinners) **in his own body on the tree** (the cross)... For ye were as sheep going astray" (1 Peter 2:24-25). Jesus Christ, by His sacrificial death, took the punishment which was due to His straying sheep: He paid to God the Father the debt which we owe for our sin and rebellion, so that we might be forgiven, have our broken relationship with God restored, and receive eternal life as a free gift of God's grace. "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23). **What is eternal life?** Jesus answers that question in John 17:3: "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent". Jesus is here saying that the **real essence of eternal life** lies not simply in its **quantity** (for ever) but especially in its **quality** (knowing God). To have that fellowship between God and man, which was lost in the Garden of Eden, restored, this is the true essence of eternal life: and this is what Jesus came into the world to restore by His atoning death. If you remember the Christmas story, this is what the shepherds heard the host of angels singing at the announcement of Christ's birth: "Glory to God in the highest, and **on earth peace** (peace between God and men), good will (God's good will) toward men" (Luke 2:14); this is what Jesus was born into this world **to accomplish**; this is what Jesus **did accomplish** "through the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:20).

The Accomplishment of Christ's Mission

This great mission, which the Lord Jesus Christ came into the world to complete, was accomplished at Calvary, where He died on the cross. Was there any doubt that He would complete His mission? The accomplishment of Jesus' mission was so certain that, in John 17:4, the day **before** His death,

Jesus speaks of it as already an accomplished fact: “I have glorified thee on the earth: **I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do**”. And then, of course, on the cross, we read in John 19:28-30: “After this, **Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished**, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst. Now there was set a vessel full of vinegar: and they filled a sponge with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop, and put it to his mouth. When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, **It is finished**: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost (gave up his spirit)”. “**It is finished**”. This was no cry of despair: “I am finished”; this was a word of victory and triumph - it is one word in the Greek: “**Tetelestai**” - “**It is finished**”. The great transaction had been completed: the sins of God’s people, which he had laid on His Son, had been atoned for; peace between God and men had been purchased by Christ’s death; Mission Accomplished! Revelation 5:9 says that by His death Jesus, the Lamb of God, purchased unto God, by His blood, people “out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation”. “We have redemption through his (Christ’s) blood, the forgiveness of sins” (Ephesians 1:7).

How do we know that Christ’s mission was successful? how do we know that His sacrifice was a sufficient atonement for sin? His resurrection from the dead, which followed three days later, confirmed that His mission had been a success, and that the price of redemption had been accepted by God the Father. Jesus did no wrong: He lived a life of perfect obedience to His Heavenly Father, He always did those things that pleased Him (John 8:29). Therefore, the grave could not hold Him. By His death, Christ had defeated death itself. As Paul writes, “Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him” (Romans 6:9); and again Paul writes, “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:54-57). That which was **Mission Impossible** for every other human being since Adam fell – including Tom Cruise – was **Mission Accomplished!** thanks to Jesus Christ! Well might we cry, “Hallelujah! What a Saviour!”

The Motivation for Christ’s Mission

I have mentioned the Foretelling of Christ’s Mission, the Beginning of Christ’s Mission, the Nature of Christ’s Mission, and the Accomplishment of Christ’s Mission. But I have yet to mention **why** He undertook the mission in the first place. Why did God the Father agree to send His Son into the world as a man in order to die for undeserving, guilty sinners? Why did God the Son, knowing exactly what it would cost Him to complete His mission, nevertheless, willingly come? The over-riding reason is clearly set before us in the scriptures: it was “for (because of) **his great love** wherewith he loved us” (Ephesians 2:4). “For God **so loved** the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). “**Herein is love**, not that we loved God, but that **he loved us**, and sent his Son to be the propitiation (the atoning sacrifice, the sacrifice which appeases the wrath of God) for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

It was **love** that moved the Father to send His Son on this mission, and it was **love** that moved the Son of God to come and accomplish this mission. Perhaps my favourite Christmas hymn, by Frank Houghton, puts it like this: “Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour, **all for love’s sake** becamest poor; thrones for a manger didst surrender, sapphire-paved courts for stable floor”. Verse 2 of the same hymn says, “Thou who art God beyond all praising, **all for love’s sake** becamest Man; stooping

so low, but sinners raising heavenwards by Thine eternal plan". And then the final verse begins, "**Thou who art love beyond all telling**, Saviour and King, we worship Thee" (no. 180 in Christian Hymns). Another Christmas hymn, by Edward Caswall, says, "Sacred Infant, all divine, **what a tender love was Thine**, thus to come from highest bliss down to such a world as this!" (no. 178 in Christian Hymns).

Christ "**loved** the church (all those individual Christian believers who collectively make up the universal church of Jesus Christ), and gave himself for it" (Ephesians 5:25). But the love which prompted Christ's mission was more than just a **general love** for all His people; it was also a very **personal love**, so that the apostle Paul could speak of "the Son of God, who **loved me**, and gave himself **for me**" (Galatians 2:20). The Christian believer knows that God **loves him personally**.

Have you experienced the wonder of God's love **for you**? Can you say, from your heart, the Son of God (Jesus Christ) **loved me**, and gave himself **for me**? This question brings us to our next heading.

Our Response to Christ's Mission

Jesus Christ completed His mission successfully. He did it out of love. By His death He made an atonement for sin. His resurrection from the dead attested to the fact that His work of salvation had been accepted by God the Father. But a question still remains: **how do we benefit from Jesus' accomplished mission?**

We know from the Bible that not everyone will be saved by Jesus' death. Jesus Himself said, "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). In John 6:28-29, in answer to the question "What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?" Jesus replied, "This is the work of God, that ye **believe on him whom he hath sent** (the Lord Jesus, the Messiah)". It is only those who exercise "**repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ**" (Acts 20:21), who enjoy peace with God and are eternally saved; "**repent**" or "**perish**" (Luke 13:3) is the stark message of Jesus Christ Himself. When the Philippian jailer cried out "what must I do to be saved?" the apostle Paul and Silas told him, "**Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved**" (Acts 16:30-31). Romans 5:1 says, "being **justified** (accounted as righteous) **by faith**, we have **peace with God** through our Lord Jesus Christ".

Imagine you are on death row for terrible crimes that you have committed against the king; the king's son agrees to pay the debt himself; the king therefore offers you a free pardon; he sends his ambassador to the jail in which you are kept, awaiting the death penalty; the ambassador arrives and shows you the document, signed by the king himself: what are you going to do? Are you going to accept it gratefully with tears for the king's mercy and his son's lovingkindness? Or are you going to reject it and say, "No thanks: I'll take my chances; I don't think things are as bad as you make out; I'll be fine; and in any case... I'm innocent!". Is this any way to respond to the king's free pardon? is this any way to treat his son's sacrificial death? will **you** foolishly reject your only way of escape? Yet this is just what millions of sinners do who reject God's offer of salvation in His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus told the religious leaders of His day, "**ye will not come to me**, that ye might have **life**" (John 5:40); and again, in John 10:10, "I am come that they might have **life**": will you choose **death** instead?

Faith is the hand that receives God's free pardon that will set you free. Will you reject God's offer of salvation which Christ has accomplished at the cost of His own life? Jesus has done the work, we receive the benefits through repentance and faith: telling God that we acknowledge our guilt and are truly sorry for the offences we have committed against Him, turning from our sin with sorrow and trusting in the finished work of Jesus Christ the only Saviour of sinners, and yielding our lives to Him as our glorious Lord. The mission is accomplished: Jesus paid the penalty for sin on the cross for all who will believe. Hold out the hand of faith and receive God's salvation; then, as one of the sheep for whom Christ died, live a life of joyful obedience to Him, out of love and gratitude for what He has done for you; as Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep... My sheep **hear my voice**, and I know them, **and they follow me**" (John 10:11,27).

So, this Christmas, marvel at God's wonderful love in sending His Son, in human form, as a baby; but don't let your thoughts of Christ remain in **a manger at Bethlehem**; look ahead to the ultimate reason Christ was born into the world: look ahead to **the cross at Golgotha**, and the mission He accomplished there when, by His death, He purchased the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and peace with God for all who will receive Him as their only Saviour and Lord. Will you accept the salvation God offers in His Son? Will you accept the salvation which the Lord Jesus accomplished at the price of His own life's blood? Will you acknowledge yourself as a guilty sinner who needs rescuing, and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as the only one who can save you from the hell that your sins deserve? Will you choose **life, or death**? Be wise this Christmas; accept God's wonderful, indescribable gift: Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 9:15)... **choose life!** Amen.

We will look at another aspect of the transfiguration, God willing, in our next article.