

The Transfiguration Matthew 17:1-13

Over the past few weeks we have seen a transition in Jesus's ministry. We have studied the first two years of His life and actions alongside His followers, and now we are seeing Him focus His attention more specifically to His 12 disciples in order to prepare and equip them in their knowledge of Him as the Messiah. In front of the gates of Hell, Peter proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, but then attempted to argue with Jesus as Jesus presented to them the fact that He would be killed in Jerusalem. Jesus took that as an opportunity to emphasize the value of losing one's life for His sake- to deny oneself and follow Him- in order to find true life in the coming eternal Kingdom.

At this point the disciples' minds were spinning as they are trying to make sense of Jesus being the Messiah, yet He's talking about being killed shortly; and they didn't get what He meant in saying "raised up on the third day." I'm sure they were on top of the world when Jesus admitted that He was the Messiah, but just moments later their hopes were completely dashed to the ground as Jesus talked about His death. They had been on the wildest of emotional rollercoasters, nothing was panning out as they had expected. At the mention of Jesus dying, perhaps some even began to doubt His Messiahship. I can see Peter perhaps thinking towards Jesus *"How can you be who you say you are- you wouldn't allow this to happen if what you say is true! Messiah... dying... there's no way!"*

I would guess that there are many in this world today that have had a similar sentiment towards God or Jesus. *"God- If you are really a loving God, how could you allow this to happen? Jesus, if you really 'so loved the world,' why didn't you stop this bad thing from happening in the world that you love?"* And as we wrestle with those types of questions, what we really need in those moments is a glimpse into God's glory- a reminder of His power, might, wisdom, control. We need a glimpse into the spiritual world, to be able to see His glory and be woken up from our distorted human perspective, to refocus our understanding that He is infinitely beyond us in His knowledge, greatness, and care. We need a glimpse of His glory to remind us of the real world that lies ahead of us, the world that will make this world seem as just a vapor.

A glimpse of glory is what Jesus gave a few of His disciples who perhaps needed it the most, as they staggered from Jesus's most recent words and actions. I hope that as we look at today's passage, you too will get a glimpse into His glory, and that no matter what kind of life roller coaster you have been on, that you would be

encouraged by seeing His glory, and by being reminded of the glory that is to come. Let's read the first part of the passage, [Matthew 17:1-3](#).

So, six days later... six days after the declaration of Jesus as Messiah, six days after Jesus told them plainly that He would be killed, after these six days- He took with him Peter, James, and John up a high mountain by themselves. These were His three closest followers and friends, who would later serve as witnesses to the event that was to take place. Now the Bible doesn't specify the name of the mountain- church tradition places the transfiguration on Mount Tabor, which is just outside of Nazareth, but most commentators and biblical scholars agree that the more likely mountain was Mount Hermon, which is still within the region of Caesarea Philippi. At over 7,000 feet tall, Mount Hermon is the tallest mountain in Israel, and is often covered in snow during winter months. Now what was the purpose in Jesus taking His 3 closest companions on a hike up the mountain? The parallel passage in Luke fills in some details for us, [Luke 9:28](#) lets us know that they "went up on the mountain to *pray*." And then Luke goes on to tell us in the following verse ([verse 29](#)) that it was "while He was praying" that this transfiguration, this manifestation of glory, began to take place. Luke also does a little bit of tattle-telling, he lets us know in [verse 32](#) that these three disciples had fallen asleep, but woke up to see Jesus in His glory along with Moses and Elijah. Jesus and the disciples spent the night up on the mountain, in [verse 37](#) Luke tells us that they all came down the next day, so it's understandable that perhaps after a long day's hike, they get to the mountain after dark, and Peter, James, and John are exhausted and have trouble staying awake as Jesus is praying.

And then perhaps the bright light of Jesus's face and clothing woke them up, and not only Jesus was seen in a state of glory, but Moses and Elijah also appeared in glory as Luke's account tells us as well in [verse 31](#). And in that same verse we are given one more detail, and that is what Jesus, Moses, and Elijah were talking about- Luke says they "were speaking of His departure, which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem."

What an awesome gift God gave these 3 disciples who desperately needed reassurance, encouragement, and confirmation. They needed something to sustain their faith, something on which to hang their hat, something they could always look back on and remind themselves of the truth and glory of the One they were to proclaim. As they wrestled with all that Jesus had most recently presented to them, this one event confirmed on many levels what they *wanted* to believe, yet found *difficult* to believe. First, they were able to see confirmed Jesus's divinity, as He was transfigured into a state of glory. John Wesley describes the event like this, he

says: *“The indwelling Deity darted out its rays through the veil of his flesh: and that with such transcendent splendour, that he no longer bore the form of a servant. His face shone with divine majesty, like the sun in its strength; and all his body was so irradiated by it, that his clothes could not conceal his glory, but became white and glistering as the very light.”* I mentioned that Luke tells us that there was some glory involved with Moses and Elijah as well, but that might be understandable given they were 2 dead guys that were now in some sort of spirit form, but Jesus was a living man, now shedding some of His human flesh in order to confirm the reality that He was more than a mere mortal man.

Perhaps Peter, James and John were reminded of how Moses’s face shone with light after he came down from meeting with the Lord on Mount Sinai. [Exodus 34 \(verses 29-35\)](#) tells about this, it says that from that time on Moses wore a veil over His face because the people were afraid, as it shone too brightly for the people. And Moses would take off the veil when he would meet with God, and then put it back on afterwards for the people. It was like the glory of God radiated so brightly and strongly that Moses, when he met with God, somehow absorbed some of it. Everyone here has seen glow in the dark toys, or glow in the dark sticker stars- the Zinc Sulfide in them absorbs the light, and then can be seen emitting some of that light when it becomes dark. Moses was like that times 1000. But here Jesus, on *His own* was radiating the light, and it wasn’t just on His exposed face as was the case with Moses. His whole body was full of light! It was obvious Jesus wasn’t emitting absorbed light from another source like Zinc Sulfide or Moses, no He was producing it Himself and the glorious light was piercing even through the clothes He wore.

Not only was the changed appearance of Jesus confirming for these 3 disciples, but the presence of Moses and Elijah was hugely confirming as well. Moses represented the Old Testament Law, and Elijah represented the Old Testament Prophets, and here they were discussing with Jesus the details of His departure from earth. Surely not just His death, but His “departure” as Luke puts it ([Luke 9:31](#)), most likely meaning Jesus’s death, resurrection, AND ascension into Heaven. The representatives of the law and prophets, the 2 very things that those who rejected Jesus held so tightly to, were here confirming with Jesus His mission. And notice the subservient way in which the narrative describes this event- Jesus is transfigured into His divine glory first ([verse 2](#)), and then Moses and Elijah appear ([verse 3](#)). It wasn’t as if Jesus had climbed the mountain to speak with the elevated gurus Moses and Elijah and seek their counsel as heads of Judaism, no- Jesus was there in His divine glory and then Moses and Elijah were summoned to Him. The way in which this event took place demonstrated Jesus’s superiority over the law

and the prophets, and yet also showed that the law and the prophets were in complete agreement with Jesus.

Through this event the disciples also saw confirmed the eternity of the soul. Jesus had talked so much about the resurrection of the dead- that those in Him would live again. As I mentioned a couple a of weeks ago, the very influential Sadducees did not believe in an afterlife, and the presence of Moses and Elijah proved that they were wrong, and that Jesus was right. Let's keep reading, [verse 4](#).

Often Peter gets ragged on because of this statement of his. Luke mentions that Peter didn't realize what he was saying ([Luke 9:33](#)), not that it was a bad idea, but probably as in Peter didn't realize that Moses and Elijah weren't going to hang out for an extensive amount of time. I don't think there was anything wrong with what Peter said, if there had been, surely Jesus would have corrected him as He did earlier. No, it was a good idea, but an unnecessary idea, and Jesus didn't need to answer Peter because God was about to speak, verse 5... ([verses 5-6](#))

These are the same words God spoke from the heavens right after Jesus was baptized in the Jordan river- with the exception that here, God adds: "listen to Him!" Not only does the presence of Moses and Elijah testify to the glory of Jesus, but God Himself booms from the heavens saying that Jesus was His loved son, that He was pleasing to God, and that His followers needed to listen to Him. And upon hearing God's voice, the three disciples probably felt a little like Job in how Job had wrestled with not understanding God's plan, and then God showed up with His voice thundering, answering Jobs questions with questions such as: "*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?*" ([Job 38:4](#)), "*Have you ever in your life commanded the morning, and caused the dawn to know its place?*" ([Job 38:11](#)) "*Have you understood the expanse of the earth? Tell Me, if you know all this.*" ([Job 38:18](#)) And Job, terrified not only of God's questions, but of God's holy presence replies "*I have declared that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know... I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes.*" ([Job 42:3-6](#)) Any doubt of God's plan involving Jesus as the Messiah and His death, at that point in the disciples' lives, was surely dispelled and they were left in frightful awe of an almighty God and His glorious Messiah son, Jesus. Verse 7... ([Matt. 17:7-13](#))

The religious leaders had been saying that Elijah would return before the Messiah came. Elijah technically never died, He was whisked away to Heaven in a chariot of fire ([2 Kings 2:11](#)), and it was assumed that he would one day return to help usher in the Messiah. The disciples knew this was a common understanding, and so

in their minds they thought: what better way to convince the religious leaders of Jesus's Messiahship, than to tell them that they personally eye witnessed Elijah come, and that Elijah contributed towards confirming Jesus as the Messiah? That would win them over, and take the heat off of Jesus and the disciples! So, they're thinking, why would Jesus tell them NOT to tell anyone? And thus they respectfully seek that answer by asking the question, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" They were thinking, since Jesus didn't want them to tell anyone, then perhaps the scribes were wrong in saying that Elijah would come first. But Jesus basically answered, no- what they say is true- Elijah comes first, but he came as John the Baptist. Not reincarnated or disguised in someone else's flesh, but metaphorically speaking, John the Baptist came prophesying and proclaiming repentance in like manner as did Elijah. Just as Elijah aimed to restore and put things in their proper state, reforming the people and their relationship with God, preparing the way for God's movement, so John came and restored through correcting peoples' assumptions of the Messiah and thus preparing the way for God's movement through that Messiah.

Some say that this role of Elijah was completely fulfilled through John the Baptist, but others contend from this passage that there is still an "Elijah" yet to come that will prepare the way for God's restoration that will occur with the return of Jesus. An Elijah that will restore all things through the restoring of God's creation and the ushering in of God's Kingdom. Only in God's time will we see which of these views is correct.

More than likely, the disciples understood the prediction of Elijah coming as being fulfilled through John the Baptist, as [verse 13](#) indicates. In their mind, it was probably settled. But what they had still yet to grasp was the concept of Jesus rising from the dead. [Mark 9:10](#) informs us of this detail, in Marks' parallel account to this passage. In the book of Mark, after Jesus told them to tell no one until He had risen from the dead, he states: "*They seized upon that statement, discussing with one another what rising from the dead meant.*" The transfiguration event- seeing Moses and Elijah, seeing Jesus in His divine state, hearing God's voice from heaven- all reassured them and gave them confidence in trusting and believing in Jesus, but they still wrestled with understanding exactly what Jesus was talking about concerning coming back to life. Perhaps they thought He meant rising from the dead into just the afterlife? It wasn't until after they witnessed the resurrection, that everything Jesus had said and done came together, and they were finally able to without any doubt, boldly declare their testimony of who He was.

And boldly declaring they did. John and Peter both later wrote of this transfiguration event as they each penned their New Testament letters, John says in [John 1:14](#) *“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”* John starts out his book by telling us “we saw it, we are convinced of His glory!” He is writing in order to convince the reader of the reality of what He himself eye-witnessed. In fact, near the end of his book he states that his words *“have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.”* ([John 20:31](#)) Peter tells us in [2 Peter 1:16-18](#), speaking of this transfiguration event, that *“...we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. 17 For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, “This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased”— 18 and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.”* And he goes on to tell the reader to thus pay attention to his words, that like words of prophecy, He is speaking directly from experiencing God’s prophetic word, a word not affected by human interpretation or by an act of human will. These men experienced divine glory firsthand, and they want you to know about it. This event affected these men profoundly, it forever changed their lives and served as an encouragement to keep doing what they were doing- proclaiming Jesus- no matter how hard it got, because they had witnessed God’s glory.

And that is what I want you to witness- God’s glory. I want you to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus is the solution to mankind’s problem of sin, injustice, death and decay. I want you to be reminded of His God-ness. To see Him as these 3 disciples saw Him, more than just a man- a man who embodied the very presence and glory of God. I want you to see that all of the law and prophets prepared the way for Him, pointed to Him, and are in agreement with His Lordship. As we are tempted to question God’s character in light of life’s events, I want us each to experience Him and know Him as Job did. Not necessarily experience life as Job experienced it, but experience God as Job experienced Him. May we behold His glory in such a way that we can’t help but say in similar Job-like fashion: *“I spoke of things I didn’t comprehend, your ways are too wonderful for me to understand, I shouldn’t have questioned your oversight and control, I repent and leave the answering of questions to you God.”* I want us to experience God’s glory as Moses did, and be able to soak in His presence and goodness in such a way that changes our appearance to the world. May we be shiny to this world, with faces beaming from spending time with God. May God allow you a glimpse of His glory that you will always be able to look back on and find reassurance, comfort, encouragement, and strength for living this life in complete confidence in Him.