

Sermons on Matthew

The Transfiguration

Matthew 17:1-13

With Study Questions

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Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; ⁻²⁻ and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. ⁻³⁻ And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. ⁻⁴⁻ Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, “_Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, _let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah._”

⁻⁵⁻ _While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, _“_This is My beloved Son, __in whom I am well pleased. __Hear Him!_” ⁻⁶⁻ _And when the disciples heard *it*, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. ⁻⁷⁻ But Jesus came and __touched them and said, “_Arise, and do not be afraid._” ⁻⁸⁻ When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

⁻⁹⁻ Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, “_Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead._”

⁻¹⁰⁻ And His disciples asked Him, saying, __“_Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?_”

⁻¹¹⁻ Jesus answered and said to them, “_Indeed, Elijah is coming __first and will __restore all things. ⁻¹²⁻ __But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they __did not know him but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise _the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their hands._” ⁻¹³⁻ __Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist (Matthew 17:1-13).

Now _after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; ⁻²⁻ and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light (Matthew 17:1, 2).

A High Calling from a Glorious God

It had been six days since Jesus had instructed His disciples that He must suffer and die in Jerusalem. It had been six days since Jesus had called His disciples to the ultimate commitment of denying themselves,

taking up their own crosses and following Jesus even if it meant the expense of their own lives (Matthew 16:21-26). It had been six days since Jesus had revealed that He would come in the glory of His kingdom and that it would be the height of folly to be on the wrong end of the judgment of God. If they had previously questioned whether the call of Jesus to give up everything and follow Him was worthwhile, that ambivalence would end here.

The high calling of being a follower of Christ is unambiguous. Jesus had earlier taught, **“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. __You cannot serve God and __mammon (riches).” (Matthew 6:24)**

Now the disciples would more fully discover that the words of Christ were not empty of power; Jesus would be transfigured (metamorphομtheμ, he was metamorphosed) before their very eyes. His face shone like the sun and His very clothing became as white as light. This event was staggering and would bring Peter, James and John to a condition of such fear that Mark records they didn't know what to say (Mark 9:6).

Shock and Awe

There is a military doctrine, created by retired United States Naval Commander Harlan K Ullman, called *Shock and Awe*. It's designed for rapid dominance through the use of spectacular displays of power designed to paralyze an enemy's will to engage in battle. It also, naturally, would be a source of great encouragement to those who find themselves allied with it.

Matthew records Jesus as transfigured in such a way that they, who had been walking the territory with Jesus for probably about two years by now, saw a glimpse of His glory. The followers of Christ are to know that they follow no mere man in some earthly crusade. To Peter, James and John are revealed the glory of Christ. The words of His impending death, and perhaps theirs as well, gain a proper perspective in light of the glory of God. God powerfully and graciously emboldens those whom He calls.

Peter, James and John

It may be asked, why Peter, James and John? We're not given the answer in the text but it is not unreasonable to surmise that Jesus was working within the boundaries of the Old Testament law which teaches

that assertions are deemed reliable “on the testimony of two or three __witnesses.” (Deuteronomy 17:6b)

**And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him.
-4- Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, “_Lord, it is good for us
to be here; if You wish, _let us make here three tabernacles: one for
You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” (Matthew 17:3, 4)**

Moses and Elijah Speaking of Jesus’ Death

Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus. Again, we are not informed as to why *these* two appeared. We know they are prominent figures in the Old Testament: Moses, who gave the full presentation of the Law, and Elijah, as a premier prophet.

These Old Testament saints died in the faith and were alive, basking in the glory of Christ. Luke tells us they spoke of the death Jesus would soon accomplish in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31). Heavenly conversations revolve around the cross of Christ; how wise for us to devote our hearts and lives to grasping whatever we can of it. We wonder if Moses and Elijah were anticipating the new song of heaven:

**Now when He had taken the scroll, __the four living
creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the
Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense,
which are the _n_prayers of the saints.**

**-9- And __they sang a new song, saying: “_You are
worthy to take the scroll, And to open its seals; For You were
slain, And __have redeemed us to God __by Your blood Out
of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, ¹⁰ And have
made __us __kings __and __priests to our God; And __we
shall reign on the earth_” (Revelation 5:8-10).**

Nervous Peter

One would think that this would be a good time for Peter, James and John to say nothing; such would not be the case.

The way Mark records this it would appear that Peter spoke out of a nervous fear of sorts.

Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, “_Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah_” — ⁶ because he did not know what to say, for they were greatly afraid (Mark 9:5, 6).

Peter’s offer to build three tabernacles may have had a reference to the Feast of the Tabernacles (which was the season they were likely in—Leviticus 23:33-43). Either way, it would behoove us to consider our company in terms of how much time we spend offering opinions versus listening or asking questions. Peter gets interrupted.

While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “_This is My beloved Son, _in whom I am well pleased. _Hear Him!” ⁶ _And when the disciples heard *it*, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid (Matthew 17:5, 6).

A Voice

The nervous fear of Peter which caused him to speak out of turn now becomes the kind of fear which casts him down on his face. It is truly a gracious activity of God to reveal Himself in such a way as to instill fear into the hearts of men; especially when the fear, as we shall soon see, is quelled by the tender touch and words of Christ.

The glory of the effulgence of God’s light appears to be secondary (at least here) to the power of God’s voice. And what is God saying?

His Well-Pleasing Son

Similar to the unique endorsement He gave Jesus as His baptism, He proclaims His pleasure with His Son. It is Jesus and Jesus only who always did that which was pleasing in the eyes of God. God is declaring that Jesus is a **“Lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Peter 1:19b)** through which sinful man is redeemed.

Mark well the company that Jesus is keeping when the Father utters the words of commendation. Not Moses nor Elijah nor the entire pool of humanity—even Christian humanity—is the Son the way Jesus is the Son. Nor do the most notable saints of the Old or New Testaments receive the acclamation which belongs to Christ alone; the pleasure of the Father rests on Christ and Christ only.

The prophets of the world's false religions would do well to answer if they are willing to take the full moral responsibility for all who rest their souls on their words. The distinction between Jesus and all others is fully pronounced here.

Hear Him

"Hear Him!" the Father commands. Prior to his death Peter would bring this event to bear as he sought to nurture and bless the sheep Jesus had commissioned him to feed (John 21:17).

Every culture has its fables, myths and folklore. In today's secular mythology we live under the irrational hypothesis that truth, justice, morals, meaning and beauty can be determined and embraced in a godless society. Prime-time abstractions are flung at us like so many arrows and their only foundation is the popularity of the soon-to-be out of work blathering entertainer.

The reality of the Transfiguration would form the basis of Peter's call to reason and spiritual integrity among the people of God. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Father's **"Hear Him!"** would play its very significant role in Peter's second epistle. Peter knew he must soon **"put off (his) tent"** (that is, die: **2 Peter 1:14**) so he would not be negligent to remind them of things he wanted them remember after his death (2 Peter 1:15), specifically, that Christ is no fable (2 Peter 1:16). Speaking of the Transfiguration Peter says they were **"eyewitnesses of His majesty"** (also **2 Peter 1:16**).

"And so," Peter writes, **"we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a __light that shines in a dark place (2 Peter 1:19).** Peter continues in this context to explain that **"_no prophecy of Scripture is of any private _interpretation, -for __prophecy never came by the will of man, __but _holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20, 21).**

The **"Hear Him!"** given to Peter then becomes the **"Hear Him!"** given to us. The Transfiguration, like so many of Jesus' miracles and teaching, was a public event. It was not done in a vacuum. Men may claim their private miracles and private interpretations of Scripture, but the faithful are called to hear Christ and trust in Him; trust that peace with God is found by faith in Christ as the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8).

But Jesus came and __ touched them and said, “_ Arise, and do not be afraid.”⁻⁸⁻ When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only (Matthew 17:7, 8).

Here is a much repeated theme, the loving command of Jesus not to fear. It is the authority of Christ and Christ alone that warrants a fearless heart.

The __wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion (Proverbs 28:1).

Belshazzar’s knees knocked against each other when the mere hand of God wrote upon the wall of the king’s palace (Daniel 5), but the brethren are told to have boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 10:19). Let us avoid the short-sightedness of thinking this fear and courage is speaking of earthly things (as if it is a sin to be afraid of tight places or water or public speaking). It is the fear of God and the encouragement of knowing that we will not fall under His judgment. And this comfort, as the text seems to emphasize, is given by Jesus only.

Immanence and Transcendence

May we be profoundly refreshed through a meditation of the immanence (“here-ness”) and transcendence (“out there-ness”) of God. Kipling wrote:

**If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
We have a Savior who is the King of kings and yet touches His
subjects with His hand of comfort.**

Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, “_ Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead.”

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about to suffer at their hands.”⁻¹³⁻ __Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist (Matthew 17:9-13).

Elijah

Since it was prophesied that Elijah would precede the Messiah (Malachi 4:5), the Apostles naturally ask about what the scribes, no doubt, had been using as an argument against Jesus; namely, that Elijah had not yet come. Jesus points out that Elijah (literally) “indeed comes”. He then reveals that the prophecy of Elijah is fulfilled in John the Baptist.

The hypocritical clergy were confronted by “Elijah” and they cut off his head—Jesus reminds them that He is about to suffer at their hands as well. Had Peter, James and John after this glorious incident, temporarily forgotten what Jesus had said six days earlier—that He would suffer and they as well? They are now reminded that the glory of God does not immediately eliminate that passions and travails of this broken world. But this new light would significantly alter the way they might view earthly events for the remainder of their lives?

God graciously grants us to spy on heaven through the lens of Scripture. May the glory of Christ ever transform the way we live and think as we are confronted with the mundane and sometimes painful occurrences of the lives which God has given us, that we might be encouraged by the ultimate joy of the glory of Christ.

Questions for Study

1. Can you think of reasons the Transfiguration might be connected to the events of chapter 16 of Matthew (pages 2, 3)?
2. What might be some reasons why Jesus brought Peter, James and John with Him (pages 3, 4)?
3. What did Jesus, Elijah and Moses speak of (page 4)?
4. What did the Father say about Jesus (pages 5, 6)?

5. Why was it important for Jesus to be pleasing in the eyes of the Father (pages 5, 6)?
6. Discuss Peter's use of the Transfiguration in his second epistle (pages 6 7).
7. How does Christ deliver us from fear (page 7)?
8. What is immanence and transcendence and how do these things affect our relationship with God (pages 7, 8)?
9. Does the glory of Christ mean we will not have to suffer in this life (page 8)?