

Glory On The Mountain

Matthew 17:1-8

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I want to read the whole passage, Matthew 17:1-8.

Matthew says, “Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. 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.’ 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!’ And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. But Jesus came and touched them and said, ‘Arise, and do not be afraid.’ When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.”

It’s amazing that a lot of the great stories of the Bible took place up on the tops of mountains. I think of the time when Moses went up to Mount Sinai. There was lightning and thunder, the mountain was shaking, and God’s presence came down upon that mountain. Moses went up to commune with God face to face, and God gave Moses the Decalogue, what we call the Ten Commandments, for us.

I think of the time when Elijah went up on Mount Carmel. It’s a beautiful mountain that overlooks the Mediterranean Sea on the coast of Israel. He had the contest with the prophets of Baal. While he was on the mountain, he called down fire from heaven that consumed the altar in answer to his prayer of faith. I believe that the expression “mountaintop experience” comes from these Bible stories.

But I believe the mountaintop experience to top all mountaintop experiences is the one in our text. It’s commonly called the Transfiguration. It occurred when Jesus took His disciples, Peter, James and John, to “a high mountain,” the Bible says. Jesus was transfigured before them, and His remnant “became as white as the light.” The glory of the Lord shone there on that mountain. It is one of the most astounding of all the Lord’s experiences on earth. John, also speaking of this, said, “We were with Him on the Mount, and we beheld His glory.”

Why was Jesus transfigured on that mountain? Let me give you a couple of reasons. Number one, to show us the glory of His person. When Jesus came the first time, He came incognito. By that I mean that He was God, But He was veiled in flesh. He didn’t glow, He didn’t speak with vibrato in His voice, He didn’t walk levitated above the ground, so He didn’t have anything about His countenance that indicated He was God in the flesh. He was actually God incognito, God veiled in flesh. He took on humanity.

In this story, He pulls back the veil of His humanity and allows His deity and His glory to be

manifested. What we see in this mountaintop experience is the deity, the glory and the splendor of Christ. I like to say it's the glory of His person.

Secondly, the Transfiguration teaches us that His suffering at Calvary would lead to glory. In the context of this experience on the mountain, Jesus had just been talking about His death on the Cross. Jesus wanted His disciples to know that, yes, He was going to Jerusalem to be crucified, but the Cross would lead to the crown, the suffering would lead to glory.

Peter, who was with Him on that mountain, spoke of the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow. I like to call this story "A Preview of the Second Coming." Peter, James and John got a preview of the coming again of the Lord.

For us, it's also a reminder that our suffering will be transformed into glory. The Bible actually teaches that we're being transfigured. As we behold the glory of the Lord right now, we're being "changed from glory to glory." One day it will culminate when we are "caught up to meet the Lord," our bodies are transformed and we'll be with Him to share in His glory. There is suffering now, but it points to the fact that there will be glory to follow.

There are three dramatic occurrences in this story that I want to touch on. There is the vision, the visitors and the voice.

Let's look at the vision, verses 1-2. "Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light."

The story opens with the phrase "after six days." What does that mean? You have to go back to Matthew 16:28 to find out. "Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom." That is a description of the Transfiguration. Some of them would not die until they see the kingdom coming in His glory.

There are a lot of mistaken views about the coming of the Lord based on this verse. There are those who believe that Jesus came within their lifetime. It's called the "preterist view" of the coming of the Lord, that Jesus came back prior to 70 AD and that He's not coming back in the future. But that's not what the text is all about.

Now I want to back up in this story to chapter 16, starting at verse 21. I want you to see it in context. "From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day. Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him..."—think of that, Peter rebuking the Lord!—"...saying, 'Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!'" No doubt Peter and the other disciples didn't want Jesus to be crucified. "But He turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.'"

So at this point, Jesus is speaking of His Cross. He came into the world to die upon the Cross.

The whole reason for the Incarnation, that Jesus took a body on Himself, was so He could suffer and die. It was impossible for God to die, so God became a man while maintaining His deity. He was fully God and fully man. So He became man so He could die for our sins. He also was the perfect sacrifice, laying His hand upon God and bringing us back to God, speaking of His Cross.

Then He begins to speak of the cost of discipleship, starting in verse 24. “Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.’” Now Peter had just said, “No, no, Lord! You’re not going to be crucified! Lord, be that far from Thee.” Jesus had said, “Get behind me, Satan! You’re saying the things that are not of God but of men.” So Jesus wants these disciples to know—and He wants us to know—that to follow Jesus is to live the crucified life.

Then He continues, “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” So Jesus moves from the Cross to the cost.

What does it mean to follow Jesus Christ? You die to yourself—to your dreams, your goals and your ambitions—and you take up your cross and follow Him. Anyone bearing a cross in the Roman world at this time was destined to die; it meant certain death.

In verses 27-28, leading up to our text, He moves to the crown. “For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels...”—this is the Second Coming—“...and then He will reward each according to his works.” Jesus is not only coming back to judge, but He’s coming back to reward. Then He says, “Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here...”—the “some” is specifically Peter, James and John—“...who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.” The term “Son of Man” is a Messianic title for Jesus, the Messiah, taken from the book of Daniel.

A preview would be given these three individuals of the coming kingdom. Some translations actually render that last statement “the coming of His royal splendor.” I like that. They won’t die but will see the glory of “His royal splendor.”

Now to our text, in chapter 17. We move right along from chapter 16; there is no chapter break. Verse 1 says, “after six days.” So Jesus was referring to the end of chapter 16.

There are three things I want you to note in verses 1-2. First, the men who saw the vision. What a group—Peter, James and John! They were out on the mountain—Peter, James and John. It’s what you call “a mountaintop experience.” These three were often singled out and separated from the others. They’re called “the inner circle.” Many times Jesus would separate them out from the others and reveal to them things that were not given to the other disciples.

References to that are found in Jairus’ daughter being raised from the dead; there is the episode in Gethsemane, when He took them deeper into the garden; and now on the mount of

Transfiguration. It's interesting that there is a central theme that runs all through these three episodes, when Jesus separated out these three disciples. They all have to do with death. Jairus' daughter speaks of victory over death, Gethsemane speaks of surrendering to death and now the mount of Transfiguration speaks of glorification through death. How interesting that is. So this inner circle was with Jesus and had this revelation that there will be victory over death, that Jesus must surrender to death and that we will be glorified through His death.

Now we move from the men who saw the vision—Peter, James and John—to the mountain. Verse 1 says that they went “up on a high mountain.” We don't know what mountain it was. Some think it was Mount Hermon, but some deny that. But it really doesn't matter. Luke's Gospel, which emphasizes the prayer life of Jesus more than any other, because it focuses on the man Christ, tells us that they went on the mountain “to pray.” That's where they had this glorious and amazing experience.

Now we have the master, verse 2. “He was transfigured before them.” The word “transfigured” means “metamorphosized.” It wasn't something imposed on the outside; it was something that came from the inside. “His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light.” This metamorphosis is actually a reference to the fact that, in His essence, Jesus was divine. What He was in essence was now shining through the veil of His humanity.

The same word is used in Romans 12 where Paul says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed...”—that's our word “metamorphosized”—“...by the renewing of your mind.” So God starts a work in our hearts by His Spirit, and He transforms us into His image and glory.

So what took place in this transformation, this metamorphosis? As I said, I believe Jesus pulled back, temporarily, the veil of His humanity and allowed the disciples to see His pre-incarnate glory. Think of that! Jesus allowed them to see it. It's almost as if I were to stage this in a sanctified, humorous way, Jesus would say to Peter, James and John, “Hey, let's split from the other guys! I want to show you something kind of cool!” They would say, “Okay, cool!” You feel kind of special because you get invited by the master to go do something that the other guys aren't invited to do. So He takes them up on the mountain and says, “Now watch this!” Then He pulls the veil of His humanity aside and allows the essence of His true deity to shine forth.

Why did Jesus do that? He did that because He is going to go to the Cross to suffer and die and Jesus wants them to know who He really is. What a glorious truth that is! So Jesus was revealing His divine essence.

In John 17, we read what is commonly called Jesus' “high-priestly prayer” in the upper room. It was the night before He was crucified. Jesus said, in verse 5, “O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.” Jesus was praying to His Father and saying, “I want to be restored back to the glory I had with You before the world was.”

Paul, in Philippians 2:6-7 says that Jesus, “who, though He was in the form of God, did not

count equality with God a thing to be grasped...taking the form of a servant." He laid aside His majesty, the signet of His divine essence. He came in humility. Not only was he veiled in flesh, but He was veiled in the flesh of a little baby. How innocent and humble that is! "God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man." So remember that Jesus has two natures: fully God and fully man.

But here is Jesus on the mountain saying, "Yes, I'm going to the Cross. Yes, I'm going to be crucified. Yes, I'm going to die. Yes, you're going to be devastated. But there is glory on the way." It's almost like He is saying that the Cross will lead to the crown. They wanted the crown right now, and so do many believers today who want to have health, wealth, prosperity and always to be happy. But Jesus tells us in the Bible that "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." The Transfiguration is, indeed, a revelation of that.

Now how was this meant to encourage the three disciples and us? Let me break it down. Number one, it was a preview of the Second Coming. Simply stated, "You're not going to die until you see the coming kingdom and the glory." He gave them a preview. It's another indication of how glorious and wonderful it's going to be when Jesus comes back at the Second Advent. They saw the glory of His coming kingdom.

Secondly, the Transfiguration was a confirmation that they would share in His glory. The Old Testament promise to David, the Davidic Covenant, was that through David's line, his son would sit upon the throne forever; it was through that line that Jesus would come. For us, we will also share in His glory. In Romans 8:18, Paul says, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." So the suffering will lead to glory. The suffering is diminished when we realize the weight of glory that is awaiting us when we will go to be with the Lord. Abraham "waited for the city...whose builder and maker is God." Isn't that what we're supposed to do?

Now we move from the vision of the Transfiguration to the visitors who showed up, verses 3-4. "And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him." Think about this. They're on the mountain with Jesus, He pulls back the veil of His humanity and allows His deity to shine forth. Then two more people show up, just to blow your mind and wow you. This is amazing! It was Moses and Elijah! Verse 4 says, "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.'"

The Transfiguration is recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke. The other Gospels tell us that Peter didn't know what to say. Have you ever been around an important person, and you felt intimidated? So you just blurt out something, it's really dumb and you're embarrassed. The rule of thumb is if you don't know what to say, don't say anything.

So Peter said, "It's great to be here! Let's build three tabernacles." The Transfiguration took place just before the Feast of Tabernacles, when the Jews would move out of their homes and

live in little booths to celebrate their wandering in the wilderness and out in the elements. He said, "Let's build three tabernacles; one for You, one for Moses, one for Elijah."

Some scholars feel that Peter was mistakenly putting Jesus on the same level as Moses and Elijah. But Peter was basically saying, "Let's not go home! This is just too good, Lord! It's amazing! We're here on the mountaintop with You. We see your glory, and how wonderful and marvelous that is!"

By the way, when Jesus started to be transfigured before them, Peter, James and John were asleep. We still have their descendants in the church today; people come to church and fall asleep.

How marvelous this is that they were visited by Moses and Elijah. Moses and Elijah both had other mountaintop experiences. Moses had his experience on Mt. Sinai, and Elijah had his experience on Mt. Carmel. So they were both "mountain men." They represent the Law and the Prophets, which are the categories in the Old Testament given by the Jewish people. Both pointed to Christ and His Cross. It is the red line of redemption running through the Bible. Both the Law and the Prophets spoke of the coming Messiah, who would suffer and die. Isn't it interesting that in Matthew 5:17, Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill." So we have Moses, who pointed to Jesus in the Law, and we have Elijah, who pointed to Jesus in the Prophets. How beautiful that is.

What were they doing? They were talking with Jesus. This passage in Matthew doesn't tell us what they were talking about. If I were there on the mountaintop, and Moses, Elijah and Jesus were talking, I would be eavesdropping. I would want to hear that conversation to find out what they were talking about. The Bible tells us that they were talking about His death, His "exodus" or His departure.

This tells us a couple of things. It tells us that the Cross of Christ is the central theme of the Bible. Cut the Bible anywhere and it bleeds with the red blood of redemptive truth. It tells us that when Moses spoke, he prefigured and spoke about Messiah's suffering. The Prophets did that, as well.

It also tells us, as one commentary I read said that "Heavenly conversation centers around the Cross." If you're out with friends, and you want something to talk about, talk about the Cross of Christ. So if Moses and Elijah are going to show up, they're going to talk about the death of Messiah upon the Cross.

It's interesting that the Cross would not prevent the kingdom from coming; it would make it possible. Christ's death was not incompatible with the Old Testament; the Messiah would come, suffer and die.

The Transfiguration is also evidence that there is life after death. Moses had been dead for 1,400 years, and Elijah had been dead for 900 years. There are a lot of people who teach reincarnation, but nowhere does the Bible teach reincarnation. There is nothing in the Bible

that would support the doctrine of reincarnation. What the Bible does teach is that when you die, you go on living; the soul and the spirit of man is immortal. When you die, your body goes back to the ground, from where it came, but your soul and spirit live on. When you die, you're still going to be you. Ten billion years after you die, you'll still be you. You are an eternal being. So it speaks of life after death. Death is the separation of the soul and spirit from the body.

But it also reminds us of the glory that we will be reunited with our loved ones. That is another point that can be drawn from this story. That's why this story is so cool! When we get to heaven, there is going to be a reunion. We have been separated for some time now because of this coronavirus, but there will come a day when we will never be separated again. All of our loved ones who have died in Christ and gone before us will be reunited with us in heaven.

Isn't it interesting that there on the mountain they knew it was Moses and Elijah. How did they know that? Did they have name tags on? Did they say to Peter, James and John, "Hi, I'm Moses. Hi, I'm Elijah." I believe that when we get to heaven, we'll know our loved ones. One of the most common questions I get as a pastor—actually it blows my mind that so many people have asked this question over so many years—is that when we get to heaven, will we know one another? I like what Charles Spurgeon once said. He said, "Do you think we are going to be dumber in heaven than we are here on earth?" I doubt it. So when we get to heaven, we will know one another instantly and perfectly and completely. You will see your loved ones again and be reunited with them.

The Transfiguration also speaks of the two pictures or the two ways that believers go to heaven. This is one of my favorites. Moses died and went to heaven, and Elijah was caught up to heaven by a fiery whirlwind in a chariot. The Bible says that there will be those who die and are resurrected, 1 Thessalonians 4:16: "The dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up..."—"harpodzoed"—"...together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." You might say that Moses pictures the believer who dies and goes to heaven, and Elijah pictures the believer who is alive and is caught up or translated to go immediately to heaven. Some feel that the two witnesses in Revelation 11 will be these same individuals, Moses and Elijah.

Now we move from the visitors to thirdly, the voice, verses 5-8. "While he..."—Peter—"...was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud..."—which, I believe, is the shekinah glory of God—"...overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice..."—an audible voice that they literally heard out loud—"...came out of the cloud, saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!' And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid." That's King James for "totally freaking out." "But Jesus came and touched them and said, 'Arise, and do not be afraid.'" I love that; they were afraid and the Lord touched them. When we are afraid, we need the Lord to touch us. "When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only."

So first of all, there is the "bright cloud." God's presence many times is manifested in a bright cloud, the shekinah glory. In the Old Testament, over the Tabernacle that lead the children of

Israel during the day, was a bright cloud of the glory of God. It was the presence of God that dwelt in the Holy Place.

Then there was “a voice.” This was God the Father speaking. This supports the doctrine of the Trinity—God the Son is transfigured, and God the Father is speaking from heaven. This is one of the favorite statements that God the Father utters concerning God His Son. He said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” Some translations say, “in whom My soul delights.”

Remember when Jesus was baptized? He was in the water, to be baptized by John the Baptist, and when He came up out of the water, the heavens opened, the Spirit descended in the form of a dove and the Father spoke audibly from heaven saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” or “in whom My soul delights.” What a blessing that is! But there is one element in our text that is not added elsewhere. It is, “Hear Him!”

So the Father speaks about the Son. Jesus is better than the prophets. You never want to put Jesus on the same level or plane as a prophet or the prophets. Jesus is to have pre-eminence; no one is higher than Jesus Christ. He is not just a prophet; He’s the Son of God. So don’t just listen to Moses and the prophets, but “Hear Him!” Jesus is better than the prophets.

Hebrews 1:1-3 is so apropos. The writer of Hebrews said, “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who...”—that is, “Jesus Christ”—“...being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” So in ages past, God spoke “to the fathers by the prophets,” but “in these last days...”—catch this phrase—“...spoken to us by His Son.”

God is speaking, but some people ask, “If there is a God, why doesn’t He say something?” He is speaking. He is speaking in His Son, Jesus Christ, whom we discover and find in His written Word. “Hear Him!” God is speaking. It’s almost as if God is saying in the book of Hebrews, “If you don’t listen to the Son, you’re not hearing the Father. If you don’t acknowledge the Son, you don’t have the Father. If you don’t trust the Son, you don’t have God.” God is speaking, but He is speaking only in one place and that’s through His Son. Yes, He’s speaking through creation; that’s the general revelation. Yes, He speaks in our conscience, but that can be resisted and hardened. But He does speak very clearly in His only Son, who is written in His only Word. The vision faded, but His voice still speaks. It speaks in the Bible, God’s written Word. It’s the unchanging Word of God.

Peter talks about being on the mountain in 2 Peter 1:16-21. He said, “For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty.” He said that they didn’t tell them fables or “cunningly devised fables”; they were there and saw and heard. Verse 17 says, “For He

received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory; 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.' And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain."

"And so we have the prophetic word confirmed..."—or "made more sure"—"...which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation." When men wrote the Word of God and spoke prophetically, it was the work of God and not their own ideas. "For prophecy..."—or "Scripture"—"...never came by the will of man..."—it wasn't just their own will—"...but holy men of God spoke as they were moved..."—or literally, "carried along"—"...by the Holy Spirit."

Peter tells us in this epistle that he was on that mountain and saw what he saw and heard what he heard. But more dependable, more reliable and more trustworthy than what they saw and heard is God's immutable, unchanging, rock of Scripture or God's prophetic Word. So our experiences can deceive us, but God's Word is true. God speaks through His Word. And His Word points to one person, Jesus Christ. The Bible is all about one person, Jesus Christ.

The Bible is not about you. It's for you, but it's not about you. It's about Jesus, the Redeemer. From Genesis to Revelation, it has one theme: Jesus Christ. In every chapter, in every verse, on every page, there is a red line somewhere that leads to Jesus Christ.

That's why at the end of this beautiful story, when God the Father spoke from heaven, He said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" In other words, He said, "Peter, stop talking and start listening. Hear My Word. Hear about My Son. Focus on Jesus Christ." So it's all about Jesus.

To remind you, as to Christ Himself, He's the Son of God. His Cross would lead to the crown. As to the disciples, if they decided to take up their cross and follow Him, they would share in His glory. As to us today, if we die, we'll be resurrected to glory. If we don't die when the Lord comes back, we'll be raptured to glory. So either way, it's a win-win situation.

What a glorious experience it was on that mountain! But one day it will be ours. The Bible says that we will behold Him in His beauty. We will look upon Him.

I love in the book of Job where he says, "I know that my Redeemer lives...And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh, I shall see God." Job had that hope, and we have that hope. So this story reminds us that the Cross leads to the crown.

Amen.