

The Transfiguration: A Message for Us

Matthew 17:1-9

By Billy Dempsey

I'd invite you to open your copy of the Scriptures to Matthew chapter 17. We'll read verses 1 to 9 this morning. We want to look at the transfiguration. It's not always a passage we go to or one we think about much. We read it and we think, "Hmm, I wonder what's going on there?" and often pass along to other things that seem more plain to us. I think there's much for us to draw from these vent in the life and ministry of Jesus - what it means to Him, what it means to His disciples, and what it means to us. Before we read God's Word let's go to the Lord briefly in prayer.

Father, thank You for Your Word that speaks to us about You, about Your truth, about the Gospel of Your Son, that speaks to us of things that we would never figure out on our own, that speaks to us of life. Now open our eyes, open our hearts, indeed help us to do the good work of turning aside every stray thought and every distraction. Let our hearts be good soil to receive the Word implanted and to leave here and to go out and produce fruit in keeping with the truth of Jesus. Hear us, Father, as we make our prayer in Jesus' name and for His sake. Amen.

From Matthew chapter 17 verses 1 to 9:

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead."

All men are like grass and all their glory is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flowers fall, but the Word of our God stands forever.

Let's think about what's happening here in this part of the Gospel narrative. I want to make a couple of introductory comments but let me tell you after that where my outline's going to go. I want us to talk about the purpose of the vision, I want us to talk about the fact that it confirms an unwelcome message, I want us to talk about the fact - I'll just use this phrase - we live in a world that's not the "whole story," I'll tell you when we get there, and then I want us to think about what the vision tells us about the uniqueness of Christ.

The Context of Matthew 17

A couple of observations and an introductory frame of mind. What Peter, James, and John see is the glory of Christ. It's just a taste, though, of His boundless glory, such that they were able to comprehend. God has a way of doing that. We find it all through the pages of the Old Testament where He would visit His people in some form or fashion, never as He is in Himself, always in a fashion that they could comprehend and even endure to be in His presence. We saw that with Abraham as God being one of the three visitors that visited him in Genesis chapter 18. Joshua stood before the commander of the armies of heaven - pre-incarnate visitation of the Lord Jesus, veiled in a form that he could endure being in His presence. Certainly the angel of the Lord who visited Gideon, the angel of the Lord who visited Manoah and his wife to tell them about the birth of Samson to come - those are times when God comes to His people in a fashion that is something they can endure, something they can comprehend. This is what Jesus is doing here - giving them a glimpse, a taste, of the boundless glory that is His. Something they can comprehend and endure but also be pushed by.

The Difficulty of Spiritual Intimacy

Well there's that but here's another comment I need to make as we head into this passage. There is the difficulty the passage shows us of spiritual intimacy. Do you see it? Well in Luke you really see it because Luke says that Jesus draws these three disciples up to the top of the mountain to pray and they quickly go to sleep. It's not the last time we see that kind of thing happening. Don't we find that happening just a short time later in Gethsemane on the night He was arrested and Jesus was in much travail of soul and tumult of soul? Matthew says He was sorrowful. His soul was sorrowful and downcast and He urges His disciples to pray as they enter the garden. And then He takes Peter, James, and John and goes further into the garden and says, "Watch and pray with Me because I'm downcast of soul." And then He goes a few paces further and prays and then He comes back to find Peter, James, and John asleep. And then He says, He says,

“Watch and pray that you don’t enter into temptation. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.” And He goes further and finds the rest of the disciples and they’re asleep. Here’s this moment of such agony for Jesus. Here’s this moment that we’re reading about today that’s so significant in the life of Jesus. And then men that He’s gathered to Himself for help and support and to share this moment with for their good, they’re asleep!

Spiritual intimacy is hard. Let’s understand that. Spiritual intimacy, there’s something within us that works against it. We enjoy the benefit of it but we don’t want to give the effort, the transparency that it requires, the expression of need, the admission of our own fear or sorrow. And so like our first parents we protect ourselves. Just as Adam and Eve covered themselves out of shame and out of providing distance between one another, we continue to cover ourselves. We don’t want to be known. We don’t want to be known by our spouses; we don’t want to be known by our friends. We don’t want to be known by the people in our Sunday School class or our small group. We don’t want to be known by the people at work. Spiritual intimacy is hard and there’s something in us that takes a step back and says, “I’m not going there.” Now it can be overcome and we know that and the whole point is just to recognize that’s a default attitude for us. And so we find ways to work around it, to overcome it, to not let the obstacle limit us in our relationships. But just to understand, there’s something in our wiring that resists the kind of spiritual intimacy that Jesus is calling for from these three disciples right here. They go to sleep instead of engaging with Him at this most crucial time.

I. The Purpose of the Transfiguration Vision

Well let’s talk about some of the things that we learn from this portion of the Gospel narrative. What’s the purpose of this vision and this experience in the life of these three disciples? Well obviously Jesus intends for it to strengthen their faith. Obviously that’s what He has in mind. But if it’s only about strengthening the disciples’ faith, why not bring all twelve disciples to the top of the mountain? Why limit the blessing to these three? And even as the Gospel narrative plays out, would you say that if the transfiguration is all about strengthening the faith of these three men, would you say it’s failed in its purpose? Certainly it provided no inner strength or resolve for Peter. Peter still denied the Lord Jesus. Or for the others, they still deserted Him. John came back to bring Mary the Mother of Jesus to the cross for a time, but he did not stay. There were no heroes among the disciples and certainly these three men were not heroes because of what they saw and experienced on the top of the mount of transfiguration. They all hid away after Jesus’ crucifixion, as John says, “for fear of the Jews.”

But if we look further out we can see how Peter and John both profited from their experience that Matthew, Mark, and Luke relate right here. And they brought the benefit that they gained to the whole church. Listen to John from John chapter 1

verse 14, written decades later. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." Listen to Peter written in 2 Peter chapter 1 verses 16 through 18. "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father and the voice was born to Him by the majestic glory, 'This is My beloved Son with whom I am well pleased,' we ourselves heard this very voice, born from heaven, for we were there with Him on the holy mountain."

What they saw of Jesus' majesty He makes plain to them in what He taught them in John chapter 10 somewhat later. "For this reason," He says, "the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it up again. No one takes My life from Me but I lay it down on My own accord. I have authority to lay it down and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have from My Father." John Calvin in his commentary on this passage says this, very plainly. "I have no doubt whatever that Christ intended to show that He was not dragged unwillingly to death but that He came forward of His own accord to offer the Father the sacrifice of obedience. The instruction Peter, James, and John now received was intended to be useful at a future period to themselves and to us that no man might take offense at the weakness of Christ as if it were by force that He has suffered. He was subjected to death because He wished it to be so. He was crucified because He offered Himself." That's what Peter, James, and John relate to us, or Peter and John relate to us - the Lord of glory, boundless in His majesty, was crucified for sinners because He offered Himself. No man took His life from Him.

II. The Transfiguration Confirms an Unwelcome Message

Well there's another thing that we need to take away from this portion of the narrative and it's this - that the transfiguration confirms an unwelcome message. The message of the Gospel is welcome but how we get to the Gospel, as we find from Peter, is an unwelcome message. Luke's account of this event says that Moses and Elijah are talking with Jesus about His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Matthew, in his placement of these events, we find in Matthew chapter 16 Peter's fantastic confession of faith, really made for the whole group of the disciples, Jesus asking him, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." It was a marvelous profession of faith and Jesus says, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. You didn't receive this from flesh and blood but it was revealed to you by the Father in heaven." He goes on to say that it's on that confession that He will build His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. It's from that point that He says to Peter, to Simon, "Your name is Peter," because this confession is a rock; it's the rock. And so it's an amazing moment in the life of Jesus' ministry to His disciples and from that time, according to verse 21 of chapter 16, Jesus begins to

show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised.

Peter's response to that message is rejection. "Far be it from You, Lord! This shall never happen to You!" Peter doesn't want a suffering Savior. Peter doesn't intend to be a suffering follower. He wants to ride in victory with Jesus sharing His triumph over His enemies. That's the Messiah the rest of the Twelve are looking for. That's the Messiah the rest of the nation is looking for. That's why he finds it not so very difficult to deny Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest on the night of His trial, three times - before a servant girl. He wants nothing to do with suffering. In the Upper Room discourse, which took place on the night Jesus was betrayed, He says two separate times - one in John 15, one recorded in John 15, the other recorded in John 16 - "If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before it hated you." And in John chapter 16, "in the world you will have tribulation but take heart, I have overcome the world."

Suffering Followers of a Suffering Savior

Are we like Peter? Are we uninterested in being the suffering followers of a suffering Savior? Aren't we ready to welcome Him as He comes in glory, power, and majesty to judge sin and to receive His people to Himself? That's what we're looking for, that's what we're longing for, and that's not where we are. We will likely be called upon to suffer because of our identification with a Savior the world hates. Isn't that part of what's happening right here in this event in the life of Jesus and these three disciples? The Father is lovingly reaffirming His Son in preparation for the agony that awaits Him. "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." Jesus hears those words as well as Peter, James, and John. Jesus is lovingly affirmed by His Father, reaffirmed. He heard those words at the beginning of His earthly ministry; now as He faces the culmination of that ministry He hears them again. They will buoy Him up; they will carry Him forward. They will sustain Him in the worse agony man has ever faced. "This is My beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." Through Peter, James, and John He gives the church a glimpse of the transcendent glory that the Lord Jesus enjoyed before His incarnation and will return to following His passion, death, and resurrection - a glory that He shares with His church, a glory that He shares with His people, a glory that He invites His people into. The point is to sustain us too, to sustain us too when we endure scorn, hatred, rejection, ridicule.

Paul says it. Paul wasn't a participant but Paul certainly experienced the testimony and the burden of the testimony that Peter, James, and John make. He says in 2 Timothy chapter 4, "At my defense no one came to stand by me, all deserted me, but the Lord stood by me and strengthened me." That's our experience. That what's this testimony of the Gospel narrative is about - the Lord stands by us and will strengthen us. He strengthened His Son; He strengthened these three disciples. Through their testimony He strengthens us. It's an

unwelcome message; it's confirmed and we have the blessing of God even in it as He makes us strong to endure what Jesus endured when it comes our way.

III. The Transfiguration Teaches that There's More to the Story

There's another thing we see happening in this narrative and that is this, that there's more to the story, there's more to the story. In his distracted state of mind Peter suggests that he, James, and John should get about the business of building shelters for Jesus and Moses and Elijah. Luke makes the comment that Moses and Elijah were parting from Him, they were leaving their conversation with Jesus, and Peter wants to hold onto the moment. He's distracted, even terrified. Mark says that Peter didn't even know what he was saying they were all so terrified, but he doesn't want to let go of what's happening just the same. He's never seen anything like it before - I could understand that, you could understand that. Who would want to leave a glimpse of the glory of heaven? Who of us would want that to slip away? Wouldn't we be trying to hold onto it? Wouldn't we be trying to grasp it? Wouldn't we be trying to keep it? "Don't let this moment go!" And what really may be not more than a few minutes' time, probably not even an hour's time, Jesus is leading these three disciples back down from the mountain top into the valley and once they're there they will face head on all the realities of life in a fallen world. There's a demon to cast out and that reminds them of the reality of daily, spiritual warfare. Their friends are frantic because their best efforts have been insufficient. They're faced with the need to understand that prayer is a work and that much prayer is required, much labor in prayer is required to do the work that they are called to do. Then there's always nagging, persistent unbelief that's always there - it's always gnawing, it's always leading away, it's always letting us know are we really sure - causing us to ask the question. Grim realities; hard realities; real living that pushes thoughts of the mountain top far, far away to what happened there seems like a dream.

But you see, that's the point of the transfiguration. Life in the world as we live it every day is not the whole story. There's a reality beyond what we see or recognize and it's glorious beyond all words. Jesus lifted the corner of the veil and His three disciples saw unspeakable glory. Listen to this comment by J. C. Ryle, the bishop of Liverpool back in the 1860's. "It is good for us to have the coming glory of Christ and His people deeply impressed on our minds. We are sadly apt to forget it. There are few visible indications of it in the world. Remember Hebrews chapter 2 verse 8 that talks about all things being subject to Christ and yet we do not yet see everything in subjection to Him." That's what the writer of Hebrews says. "It does not appear what His people shall be - their crosses, their tribulations, their weaknesses, their conflicts are all plain enough but there are few signs of their future reward. Let us beware of giving way to doubts in this matter. Let us silence such doubts by reading the history of the transfiguration. There is laid up for Jesus and all who believe on Him such glory as the heart of man never conceived. It's not only promised, but part of it has

actually been seen by three competent witnesses - Peter, James, and John.”

Tim Keller says in his book, *The Reason for God*, “Jesus’ miracles are not just a challenge to our minds but a promise to our hearts that the world we all want, the world we were made for, a world of glory and perfection, a world not marred by sin, the world we all want is coming.” Isn’t that what happens when we gather for worship on the Lord’s Day? Isn’t it our opportunity to stand on tiptoe and peer over the wall of this world into the beauty of the world to come? Isn’t it our opportunity to come away from worship refreshed in the knowledge that “this is my Father’s world” and all things serve Him? Don’t we come away refreshed in the knowledge of His love for us, His faithfulness to all His promises, and the beauty of His purposes? Aren’t we strengthened in the Biblical affirmation, “Behold, He has done all things well”? Our worship here this morning even, as we have sung and been led in worship by our choir with that marvelous anthem, our worship here blasts beyond the ceiling over our heads and it rings in heaven as we join the church triumphant, the church that’s already surrounding the throne of grace singing, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” That’s what worship is. That’s where worship goes. That’s what we’re doing here this morning. This world is not the whole story and that’s what the transfiguration tells us. There’s glory beyond! There’s beauty beyond compare, beyond what we can see! It is what Jesus has won for us, it is what Jesus is inviting us into, it is what He has prepared for us! What we see is not just it. We don’t get to live on the mountain of transfiguration but we take that glory, we take that beauty, we take that understanding of the kingdom of God and the truths that form and shape the kingdom of God into life in the valley - create beauty and glory in some way there.

IV. The Transfiguration Tells of the Uniqueness of Christ

One more point. The narrative shows us something about the uniqueness of Christ. Peter’s still dashing about in his attempt to make tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. To Peter at this moment there is no distinction. All three are glorious, all three deserve honor. It is the engulfing bright cloud, the visible demonstration of the presence of God, and the voice from the cloud, the very voice of God that stop Peter in his tracks and reduces all three men to terror. The message from God shows us what’s wrong with Peter’s thinking. “This is My beloved Son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him.” God doesn’t say anything about Moses and Elijah; He never mentions Moses and Elijah. Well they’re not a mirage; they’re really there and they have come to serve Jesus in a specific way sent by the Father. How were they known to the disciples? I don’t know. No doubt God gave some sign or token by which they were recognized and that’s where we hit the wall. It’s not the Spirit’s purpose to reveal that information to us. We must keep our eye on their purpose. They’re there to serve Jesus. Christ did not come into the world without testimony. The Law and the Prophets points steadily to His

coming and to His work prior to His incarnation. It's appropriate that the human mediator of the Law, Moses, and the most prominent of the prophets, Elijah, should serve Jesus at this time. Peter's confusion is profound and must be pointed out. The three glorious ones he sees, he sees as equals and they are not. There's only one Son. All who preceded Him pointed to Him. All who preceded Him served Him. All who preceded Him spoke His Word.

Again from J. C. Ryle, "Moses and Elijah were great men in their day but in nature, dignity and office they were far below Christ. He was the Root; they were the branches. He was the Master; they were the servants. Let's honor Moses and the prophets as holy men, but if we would be saved we must take Christ alone for our Master and glory only in Him." This morning let me ask the question of us - Is Christ unique to us? Is Christ unique to you? Do you have any other one in whom you place hope that your sins are forgiven? Any other one in whom you place hope that His work makes you right with God? Is there any other one in whose work you place hope that it's enough for you to be not just at peace with God but adopted by Him and called His son or daughter? Do you have hope in any other one? If so, let's make it plain, your hope is vain. If you hope in Christ along with anyone or anything else and anything you might do, your hope is vain. The uniqueness of Christ is that He is the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. The uniqueness of Christ is that He is the only one who's done the work that God requires and He calls us to trust Him. He calls us to identify with Him. He calls us to own Him. He calls us to repent of all our effort and trust the effort of the one who is His Son. Is He your hope? Is He unique? If He's your hope then the hope of glory is yours. The hope that the transfiguration points to is your hope and it is your future because He's already said, "Those who trust in Me, I'm going away, and for those who trust in Me I'm going to prepare a place for them that they might come to Me to be with Me where I am." That is your hope is Christ is unique in your heart and life and your trust is in Him and Him alone. Your only hope in life and in death, Christ the Son of God, the Savior of sinners. But don't fool yourself; if your hope is not there you have no hope. If your hope is not in Him it is no hope at all. Trust Christ and honor His uniqueness in heart and life. Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, we thank You for this narrative. We thank You for the truth that we find here. We ask that You would help us to welcome the message even though it causes us suffering. Help us to be sustained by the vision of glory, these witnesses see and communicate to us. Father, thank You that what we see and live here is not the whole story. Feed our souls on the glorious promises of Your Word for the world to come. Hear us as we make our prayer in Jesus' name and for His sake, amen.

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