

The Transfiguration

Please open your Bible to the book of Matthew 17, or turn to page _____ in the Bible under the chair in front of you. We have come to the story of Jesus being transfigured on a mountain.

It's an unusual story. We rarely even use the word 'transfigured' outside of this event. But it's a significant story. There's some rich theology in this passage.

There is a lot packed in to this account, references and allusions to other people and parts of Bible. And I'll try to explain some of that. But there is a reason that this story is in the Scriptures for us in this particular place. There is purpose in Matthew telling us about it here.

So what's going on? Well, part of the answer is found in the flow of the text. There's an unfortunate chapter break between the end of 16 and the beginning of 17. Those chapter and verse divisions were not a part of the original manuscripts – they were added later. And that can be really helpful. But they can also be unhelpful at times. And so here, the story is really just continuing on from the end of sixteen.

And in chapter 16, Peter has just made this confession that Jesus is the Christ. He's the Messiah. And He's right about that. And then Jesus begins to explain that He must suffer and be killed and on the third day rise again. And Peter doesn't like that – that won't happen, he says. But Jesus rebukes Peter and gives this word – whoever would come after Him, must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Him. He is going to suffer and die, and so His followers must be willing to take that path as well.

And Jesus gives this puzzling statement at the end of sixteen – surely, some of you will not taste death until you see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom. What is that about? And we said that it's a prediction that the disciples will not themselves all be martyred until they see Jesus raised from the dead and the kingdom of God expand through the church.

In other words, you will suffer for my sake as my disciples, but there is glory coming. And with that promise, Matthew moves right into this account – the glory of Jesus revealed in the transfiguration. And it's very intentional – both for Jesus and for Matthew's account of it in this book for us.

Read **Matthew 17:1-13**

Intro

Our culture loves a good transformation story. There have been all kinds of TV shows and movies in which a person undergoes some kind of transformation and is then revealed in dramatic fashion.

At one time there was a whole genre of reality TV shows centered around this idea of a makeover – everything from a person’s room or their entire home being completely renovated. And there was often some story about how the person or family has been through a really hard season, and this would be such a gift to them.

And this kind of transformation story shows up in shows like American Idol or America’s Got Talent. At one point several years ago, some of the most popular videos on YouTube were about singers like Susan Boyle or Paul Potts who were contestants on one of those shows. They each have these amazing voices, but they were just working normal jobs. They aren’t the typical Hollywood look – they weren’t conventionally attractive.

But then, they would sing these operatic songs and just blow people away with surprise. I have to admit that I’ve watched some of those kinds of videos several times. It’s just fun to see a person’s true talent finally be on display.

Something about those kinds of stories is just really cool. We like to see the reveal, when the person’s true talent is uncovered. When it’s like everyone gets to see what’s really been true the whole time.

And I think one of the reasons that stories like that resonate with us is because deep down, we have this sense that this must really be true of us. That our true self, our best nature is somehow hidden. We feel like we’re Susan Boyle or Paul Potts.

In fact, the world as we know it now seems a bit off – like it’s broken and not the way it’s supposed to be. The apostle Paul says that creation is groaning in anticipation of the day when the fullness of God’s kingdom will arrive. But now it’s waiting in futility.

And this story in Matthew touches on that same sense. Here the true nature of Jesus is put on display, if only for a brief time. So far in Matthew’s account of Jesus’s life and ministry, we’ve seen Jesus teach with authority and perform miracles that amaze people. But we’ve also seen that many oppose Him, including the religious leaders of the day. And even His own disciples argue with Him, as Peter does when Jesus tells him that He must die.

And so here, the transfiguration or transformation of Jesus is going to confirm for both His disciples in that day and us today who Jesus truly is. He’s going to show us His glory.

What I want us to do this morning is first walk through what happened and consider the meaning of this event. What is going on and why did this take place?

And then we'll consider the message of the transfiguration for us. What does God intend for us to do as a result? How should this affect our lives?

The Meaning of the Transfiguration

In order to get that the meaning of this event, we need to notice first the context. In the three gospels that record this event, it comes near the middle of the book and just after the confession of Jesus as the Messiah who must die and rise again on the third day.

And now, Matthew says, it's been six days. They're on their way to Jerusalem, and Jesus stops and takes with Him, three of His disciples up a mountain. And so they walk, and they walk, and they climb up this mountain.

And then something utterly astonishing happens. Jesus is transfigured. The word there is only used a few times in the Bible, and it means transformed or changed. He was noticeably and dramatically changed. It's the same Jesus, but now with this incredible brightness. It's not reflecting off of Him but rather coming from Him. And His clothes become white as light.

What's happening here is amazing. It's unlike anything we've experienced. And it's not so much a miracle that Jesus suddenly gains this new glory; it's more that His glory is now allowed to shine through.

We know that before Jesus took on flesh, He enjoyed perfect unity and love with the Father in eternity past. Jesus prays in **John 17:5**
And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

Jesus has always been glorious because He is the exact image of God and the radiance of His glory, the writer of Hebrews says. And looking forward, John sees the glory of Christ as the Son of Man with white hair, eyes like flaming fire, and His face was like the sun shining in full strength (Revelation 1:12-16). That's who Jesus truly is.

Our culture is really into superheroes and all of that. And it's been said that for most superhero's – they put on a costume when they take on their alter-ego and power-up. Think of Batman or Iron Man. But for others, they truly are super all the time, and they need an alter-identity to go around in the real world.

So Superman, for example. He wakes up as Superman, and he has to put on the glasses and dorky demeanor in order to convince people that he's normal. But when danger comes, he takes off the costume and reveals who he really is – Superman.¹

That's a silly example, but it gets at the sort of thing happening here. Jesus truly is God. All the fullness of God dwells in Him, in His human body. And here, He is transformed such that His true nature is being revealed.

For Jesus, the real miracle is that all throughout His life, His true nature is hidden from view. As we sing at Christmastime, "Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see, Hail the incarnate Deity!" But here, for who knows how long, the veil is removed and at least some of His true glory is seen.

His face shone like the sun. I don't know how to picture that. They could still see His face, but try looking at the sun. (Actually, kids, don't do that...) And His clothes were just dazzlingly white. It was incredible.

Friends, there is just no experience that we could have which might compare to this, no person we could encounter with this kind of glory. No president, no celebrity, no super-star athlete, or Hollywood actor. No one could have this effect.

And while Peter, James, and John are seeing this, behold! Now there appears Moses and Elijah with Jesus – talking with Him.

And we need to be careful about how we imagine this. These are not ghosts here. They're not apparitions. No, this really is Moses and Elijah themselves.

Which, by the way, is a wonderful indicator that people retain their identities in heaven. We don't cease to exist or become absorbed into the 'oneness of God' or get reincarnated. We remain ourselves for all eternity.

And so here with Jesus, in all of His brilliance, are now Moses and Elijah. How do we know it's them? We're not told. There's apparently more being said than Matthew gives us.

But Peter is there. And he's sensing that something big is happening. And he doesn't quite know what to do, but he's going to do something! And so he makes an offer.

¹ Quentin Tarantio seems to have taken some dialogue about this from Jules Feiffer: <https://www.tcj.com/the-great-comic-book-heroes-intro-afterword-by-jules-feiffer/>

Matthew 17:4

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’s like, Hey, it’s good that we’re here. (don’t you love that?) Hey, all of us being here – this is good. And here’s what I’ll do – I’ll make three tents, one for each of you.

What’s he doing? Maybe he’s trying to extend this moment for as long as possible. Let’s just stay here in this time on the mountain. Let’s just keep this going. I’ll make some shelters. It’s like, yes, this is what I imagined following Jesus would be like – moments of miracles and glory, not self-denial and suffering and death on a cross. Let’s stay here.

And while Peter is talking, in that very moment – a cloud comes. Verse 5..

Matthew 17:5

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.”

So this cloud comes, and it’s not just a weather cloud. It’s not just fog. No, this cloud has appeared many times before in the Old Testament. It’s the cloud of the fire and glory, the cloud that led God’s people in the wilderness and protected them from the Egyptians. It’s the cloud that settled on Mount Sainai when Moses received the Law, the cloud that filled the tabernacle and then the temple with the very presence of God.

And while Peter is still speaking, this cloud comes. It’s like the Lord is putting His hand over Peter’s mouth. And then out of the cloud, a voice comes. And it’s the voice of God speaking, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him.”

In contrast to Moses and Elijah – you need to listen to my Son Jesus. It’s not time for you to talk. You need to listen. And He’s the one you need to listen to.

And when the disciples heard this, they are terrified. They fall to the ground in fear. But Jesus, He sees this. And He comes to them and touches them. And He lifts their faces and says to them, “You don’t need to be afraid.” And now, when they look up, it’s only Jesus again like they’re used to seeing Him. Things are back to normal.

They gather themselves, and head back down the mountain. And as they’re making their way, Jesus tells them, “I don’t want you to be talking about this until after I’ve been raised.” The disciples are still just trying to process all of this. And they have a question...

Matthew 17:10

And the disciples asked him, “Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?”

And indeed, Malachi predicted that Elijah would come before the Messiah. And that's true, Jesus says. But Elijah did come and they didn't recognize Him, and they did whatever they pleased. And then they understand – oh, he's talking about John the Baptist. And I imagine that Peter is once again a bit disheartened to hear Jesus speaking about suffering and dying.

So that's what happened. Now, what's the point? What difference should this make in our lives?

The Message of the Transfiguration

I'm going to make a statement, and then we'll talk about some implications that flow out of that. Here's the statement:

The transfiguration of Jesus confirms His glory.

Jesus wants His disciples then to know this back then, and He wants us to know it today. Peter has made this confession with his mouth, but it doesn't seem like he's fully grasped it yet. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

And with His transfiguration, Jesus puts on display the fact that He is God. And not just that He is glorious, though that's certainly true. But that He is also the Lord over history.

And what, then, should be our response? What should we do in light of this truth? Let me give us three implications of the glory of Christ...

Worship Jesus alone

One of the reasons that this all unfolds this way, with Moses and Elijah and the setting on a mountain is to underline the fact that Jesus is better and He alone deserves worship.

How is that? Well, first, we can ask why did this take place on a mountain?

In the Bible, important revelations take place on mountains. Moses receives the Law on a mountain. Elijah interacts with the Lord on Mount Carmel and again on Mount Horeb. They both received revelations of the glory of God. They both suffered rejection and persecution as they delivered God's Word. Moses' life ends on a mountain with the Lord burying him. Elijah is taken by chariots of fire.

And all of these associations would have been in the minds of the disciples. Moses and Elijah were a big deal. And their presence matters not because of who they are in themselves, but because they are there pointing to Jesus. They are just supporting roles; Jesus is the main character.

Moses and Elijah likely stand in as key figures for the Law and the Prophets – the whole Old Testament and the entire history of God’s people. And their presence points to the fact that all of that is anticipating Jesus.

And He is not just the latest in a line of prophets – He is better than all that came before. If you think of the Bible as a collection of individual stories, telling what happened to Abraham and Joseph and Moses and King David and the prophets, and so on...if you primarily think of the Bible like that, then you might miss the fact that Jesus isn’t just the last one of those stories. No, He has always been the point. It’s all been leading up to Him.

What’s more, Jesus is better. If you remember from the book of Exodus when Moses goes up on the mountain to receive the Law of God and the 10 Commandments? And when he comes back down his face is shining because he has been with the Lord. It’s shining so bright, he has to wear a veil so that he can be around other people. His face is reflecting the glory of God, just because He’s been with the Lord. But not so here. Here, Jesus is radiating glory from Himself. He is the source, not just a reflection.

He’s like the sun (s-u-n), not the moon. The moon only reflects. The sun is the source.

And that’s also why God’s voice says, ‘Listen to Him.’ He’s my Son (s-o-n). Not, ‘listen to Moses’ and do what he tells you. Not listen the prophets like Elijah. No, listen to Jesus.

You need to hear a better word. You need something better than what Moses taught. Yes, the Law is good. But you need a word of grace. You need a new and better covenant.

That’s why later, the author of Hebrews will say that Jesus is a better priest who brings a better covenant. He says,

Hebrews 8:6

But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.

The New Covenant brings the promise of eternal redemption, and the forgiveness of sins through His death on the cross. He isn’t just another prophet like Moses or Elijah, Jesus is far better.

That’s also why when Peter wants to honor Moses and Elijah and Jesus with three tents, as though they’re equal, that God stops Him. And then they disappear, leaving only

Jesus. The point is clear – Jesus isn't equal to Moses and Elijah, He's far superior. He's not just a human Messiah; He's God in the flesh.

So this account of the transfiguration of Jesus is meant to help us see and worship Jesus alone, far above everything and everyone else. The climax of God's salvation is in Jesus.

And the question for us is – are you worshipping Jesus alone? The human heart is always worshipping something, and people try to find salvation and deliverance in all kinds of things, whether that's money or status or the approval of others or security or some other created thing. The question is who has your worship? Where are you looking for your salvation?

The Bible is clear that salvation is found in no one else. There is no other name, given among men by which we must be saved. Jesus alone is both God and man. He alone lived a perfect life without sin. He alone died for the sins of mankind. He alone was raised on the third day. Salvation is found only by trusting in Jesus.

And so the question is – who has your worship today? Has there been a time when you've put your trust in Jesus alone for your salvation? That you've turned from seeking all of those other things and committed yourself to following Jesus? Friend, you can do that today. Turn to Christ and worship Him alone.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus alone deserves our worship. It's as if Christ is shining forth on that mountain over all of human history – back into the past and stretching out into the future. He brings the revelation of God to its culmination, clearly and completely. And He is Lord over it all. He's in a category by Himself, so He deserves all the glory.

And that brings us to the second implication for us...

Listen to Jesus

The voice of the Father speaking to Peter, as He tells Him to stop talking and just listen, that's a voice that we need to hear ourselves as well. We should listen to Jesus.

And once again, this command rests on a rich background in the Old Testament. It's a direct allusion to Deuteronomy 18. There Moses is giving the Law of God to the people, and he gives a prophetic word about future prophets who will come to declare God's Word to the people. Here's what he says,

Deuteronomy 18:15

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen

God's people were to listen to and obey the Word of the Lord. To listen doesn't just mean to read the words or to show up on Sundays and hear them read – though it certainly doesn't mean less than that. But to listen to Jesus means that you submit to Him. You listen to Jesus when you treat Him as He rightfully is – your Lord.

And that means that we ought to know what Jesus has said, what He has commanded, how He intends for us to live, and what it means to be His follower. And that means that we need to know His Word. We need to know our Bibles.

The Bible is the primary way that God speaks to us as His people. Some years after Peter saw Jesus transfigured on the mountain, he wrote about it in a letter to some believers facing persecution. Listen to what He says...

2 Peter 1:16-19

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. **17** For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," **18** we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. **19** And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts,

Peter says, "I saw the majesty of Jesus. I was an eyewitness. And you know what's more sure than my memory of that incredible experience? The prophetic word – the Scriptures. That's the light in the darkness, that's how God guides and teaches us.

Friends, isn't that incredible? Maybe you'd say – I would just love to have been there. If I had just seen the transfigured Christ, then I'd know for sure. Then I'd be able put away my doubts and fears.

But Peter, the one who was there, he says – you know what's better than that experience? The word of God. And that's what we have today. Don't chase after religious experiences. Don't try to live on the mountaintop all the time, like Peter once wanted to do. No, he's learned – the more sure foundation is the Scriptures. It's there that we hear the voice of Jesus.

So are you listening to Jesus as He speaks in His Word?

The author Trevin Wax was reflecting on the transfiguration account and listening to God in the Scriptures, and what he said I found really helpful. So I want to read a section – it's a bit longer than I normally pull for a quote. But here is what he says...

It's said that "most works of art yield their secrets slowly."

If that's true of art, how much more so of Scripture? The Bible isn't an easy book. Saying it's not easy doesn't mean we can't grasp its main message—Scripture clearly reveals salvation. But the Bible makes demands of us. It calls for thought, patience, and devotion. The path to truly internalizing and digesting Scripture is rugged, intentionally so, for this is how the Spirit does his work in our lives...

Consider Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration. There he was, beholding Jesus in radiant glory, flanked by Elijah and Moses. And what was his first reaction?

Talking. Planning. Suggesting. Strategizing. Rushing to do something—until the Father's voice interrupted: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to *him!*"

The command isn't to start doing anything, much less to say anything. Not in that moment, no. It's to listen. When you encounter God's transcendent glory in the face of Jesus Christ, religiosity is stripped away. Good intentions melt. Spiritual disciplines shrink. Our task is to listen."²

I think that's well said. Our task is to listen to Jesus. So are you doing that?

In my own devotional time, I've literally been listening to the Bible. I use an app called Dwell. I ask God to help me understand what I hear, and then I listen to the Bible as I stretch try to move my body. And then I spend some time in prayer.

So if you find it hard to make the time to sit down and read the Scriptures, then I would encourage you to listen. We have been so blessed to live in a place with an abundance of resources that can help you read or listen and understand the voice of Jesus in the Scriptures.

If you want to worship Jesus alone, and you want to listen to Him, then you must be regularly hearing from and meditating on who He is and what He has said in the Bible.

And then finally, because the transfiguration of Jesus confirms His glory, then we can...

Trust that We will be Transformed

Because the glory of Jesus was revealed on that mountain 2,000 years ago, we know that one day we ourselves will be transformed as well. We won't become gods, as some other world religions claim, but we do have a future awaiting us that is glorious. And in some mysterious way, we will have new, glorified bodies, untainted by the curse of sin.

The word for 'transfigured' used here is only used four times in the New Testament. Twice it's in the gospels, talking about Jesus. And then Paul uses it twice in his letters.

² Trevin Wax, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/listening-that-hurts/>

The first is in Romans 12:2, where he says that we are to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. The process of growth in Christ is a process of transformation through the mercies of God.

And then it's also used in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. It's a fascinating passage. And there, Paul is speaking about how the glory of the New Covenant is far better than the Old Covenant, the Law of Moses. And even Moses had to put a veil over his face because of that lesser glory that was a reflection of God's glory. And now, when we turn to the Lord, we don't have a veil between us and God. And here's the key verse...

2 Corinthians 3:18

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

So here's what that is saying. In the New Covenant, which includes the promises and commands of Christ on us today in the church – in this New Covenant, we behold the glory of the Lord in a far better way than even Moses did. Because we have God's Spirit in us.

And as we behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, we are being transformed (or transfigured – same word) ourselves into that same image. That is happening from one degree of glory to another. It's slowly happening.

I had learned about metamorphosis in school growing up. And I was told that when a caterpillar goes into a cocoon and it turns into this soupy goo, like it totally dissolves and then almost magically it forms itself into a butterfly. And there's some truth to that.

But now, entomologists tell us that it's not true that the whole caterpillar just dissolves into goo. They still have their tracheal tubes for breathing. Their digestive 'guts' don't change. And even the cells that will become the antennae, wings, and legs are in a specific location in a sort of 'pre-developed' state.³ In other words, things are happening, slowly but surely before one day the process is completed.

And friends, this is what is happening to you. As you seek to follow Christ, as you behold Him in the Scriptures and commune with Him in prayer, the Spirit of God is transforming you too. Your character is being refined, the worldliness and sin is being put off, and you are being conformed into His image. You're like a butterfly, waiting to be revealed, but still in process, even now.

³ <https://askentomologists.com/2015/01/14/what-happens-inside-a-cocoon/>

Brothers and sisters, seeing Jesus for who He truly is will prove to be a compelling force in your life to change you into His image.

I can tell you that this study in Matthew has been helpful for me in my own spiritual life as I have been able to study and learn from Jesus in this book. And it's a great privilege to stand before you and talk to you about what God has said. But it's also hard, particularly when I feel my own limitations as a preacher, not to mention as a Christian just trying to follow Christ myself. Because I want to show you the glory of Jesus each week. My task is that we would behold His glory together.

And I am convinced that these things go together – that as we behold Him, that we ourselves will be changed. So do you see the connection?

And this truth also gives hope for the future. Because Christ was transformed, we will also be in heaven. On that day, when we see Jesus in all of His glory, we will be changed fully and finally.

1 John 3:2

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

When Jesus returns and ushers in His kingdom, we will be transformed in that moment.

Patrick Schreiner is a scholar who wrote a whole book on the transfiguration, and he says, "The transfiguration guarantees that we will not only be **where** he is but **as** he is."⁴

One of the joys of heaven that awaits us is that we will be renewed. What we may have always longed to be true of our broken bodies and souls will be finally true! It'll be better than seeing Susan Boyle surprise everyone.

Brothers and sisters, the transfiguration of Jesus confirms His glory as the Christ and the very Son of God. So let us worship Him alone. Let us listen to Him. And let's trust in hope that we will be transformed ourselves.

Let's pray...

⁴ Patrick Schreiner, *The Transfiguration of Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Reading* (Baker Academic, 2024), 12