

“Mountain Top Experience?”

Matthew 17:1-9

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Is there a time in your life when you were very unaware of God’s presence? Or when you felt closest to God? Now, for some of you that is an easy question to answer. A particular time stands out way above anything else as the spiritual high point of your life. Others would say, “Well, I have felt close to the Lord many times, but I cannot say one of them is more important than the others.” And some of you would probably say, “Well, I have never really felt anything like the presence of God. I would like to, but that’s never happened to me.”

Those who identify a particular time speak of a variety of experiences. “I felt closest to God when I first received Jesus as my Savior” or maybe, “I was looking at the stars one night and the Lord felt so close to me.” Others point to a Christian camp or conference or just worshipping the Lord here at Chisholm Baptist Church as the time they really experienced God’s presence.

And some of you would say you had a direct experience with the Lord, sort of a close encounter of the third kind. You heard a voice or saw a figure that you understood to be the Lord. Incidentally, I have become less skeptical of folks who make this type of claim. Oh, something like that doesn’t happen to all Christians. I have never, at least yet, heard an audible voice or had the Lord appear to me in a visible form. However, if God chooses to reveal Himself to someone this way, that is up to Him. And if He really does physically speak or appear to you, that is a wonderful thing.

Folks, today we will explore a very special encounter three men had with God. This was literally a mountain top experience. Our text is Matthew 17:1-9. It is here that Peter, James, and John see Jesus “transfigured.” As we look at God’s Word today, let’s pause and pray He will help us understand what this passage means and what lessons it has for our lives today.

Let’s look at what happened on what is called “the mountain of transfiguration.” This is Matthew’s account, inspired by the Holy Spirit, though obviously it is based on reports he received from those who were there that day. The setting is **Matthew 17:1 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by**

themselves.” Six days apparently refers to the time since Peter’s confession of Jesus as Messiah. Scholars are not sure whether the “high mountain” Jesus and the three disciples ascend was Mount Tabor or Mount Hermon. Most would say the latter, but it would have been quite a climb, since the top of Mount Hermon is over 9,000 feet above sea level.

Anyway, Jesus and his three friends climb to the top of the mountain, Peter, James and John are the men Jesus chose to accompany Him. They were three of His earliest followers and by this time are kind of the inner circle among the twelve. Peter and John become the leaders of the early church after Jesus ascends into heaven, while James (big James in The Chosen) is executed by King Herod Agrip in 43-44 A.D.

I find it a bit curious that Peter’s brother, Andrew, is not part of the group. After all, he was the one who introduced Peter to Jesus. This reminds us that God chooses people based on His criteria, not ours. Andrew was a faithful disciple of Jesus and will be honored that way throughout eternity. Yet, the Lord chooses to put in the spotlight on his brother Peter.

Next, Matthew tells of the amazing events the disciples witness. **Matthew 17:2a And he was transfigured before them.** The Greek word here is “metamorpho” which is from where we get the term “metamorphosis” which literally means “to change in form.” Apparently, what the disciples saw was Jesus reverting back to His pre-incarnate state, as God, the Son. Remember, they have known Jesus for some time. But they knew Him as a human being. He ate, drank, slept, and went to the bathroom *just like they did*.

Yet, now **Matthew 17:2b His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.** We cannot even imagine the magnificent splendor the disciples saw that day. It may be what John had in mind years later when he wrote. **John 1:14 And the Word (Jesus), became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen His glory** (they saw that on the mountain top) **the glory of the One and Only begotten who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.**

This experience certainly confirmed in the minds of Peter, James and John that Jesus was indeed God's Son and Messiah. It gave them a glimpse of the glory that Jesus left to come to earth to be our redeemer. It also enables them to imagine the glory that now belongs to the resurrected and ascended Lord in heaven.

Then two special guests appear. **Matthew 17:3 And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.** I love what Spurgeon says about this verse: "After condescending so long to His ignorant followers, it must have been a great relief for Jesus to talk with two masterminds like Moses and Elijah." Perhaps, although I don't think that is the reason why they appear. Moses and Elijah represent the entire Old Testament, the law and the prophets. Moses was viewed by the Jewish people as a model for the Messiah (Deuteronomy 18:18), while Elijah is the Messiah's forerunner (Malachi 4:5,6). To see these two meeting with Jesus is clear confirmation that He is indeed the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Now, I wonder how the disciples know these two guys are Moses and Elijah. They had not seen any photos of them. I also wonder if the two great prophets had glorified bodies or if they were spirits that just appeared human? Those are just speculative questions, but the bottom line is that Moses and Elijah were really meeting with Jesus, even though they had each been dead for hundreds of years.

Then **Matthew 17:4 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."** Other versions say shelters. The KJV says tabernacles, which are tents. The motive for building these tents is primarily to keep Moses and Elijah from leaving. Peter wants to prolong the moment, a normal desire in this type of situation. Yet, Peter's idea is a good one. He wants to honor each of the three, but Jesus is far above either Moses or Elijah. And this is not an event that should be prolonged. Peter, James and John are not supposed to stay on the mountain top. Their job is to go back and encourage the other disciples and everyone else to trust and follow the one who is clearly not just a carpenter from Nazareth.

Next, there is a voice from heaven **Matthew 17:5 He (Peter) 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."** The bright cloud is a sign of God's presence. And there is little doubt whose voice they are hearing. It is God. God the Father. The message is clear. First Jesus is God's Son. He is not only the Messiah, God's anointed one, but He is the only begotten Son of the Father. Second, the Father loves the Son and is pleased with everything about Him. And third, is the command, "Listen to Him."

An old commercial said, "When E. F. Hutton speaks, everyone listens." Here, the true God says, "When Jesus speaks, you need to listen. His words are my words." The implicit message to Peter, James and John is, don't get so excited about seeing Moses and Elijah. Don't get all enthused about honoring those men. Keep your focus on Jesus. He is the one worthy of your attention and honor.

The words God spoke to the three men had a powerful impact. **Matthew 17:6 When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified.** The sight of Jesus being transfigured and the appearance of Moses and Elijah did not impact them as much as the words they heard. *That* was truly an encounter with God.

Yet very quickly everything is over. **Matthew 17:7,8 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.** Jesus likely now looks pretty much the same as before they climbed the mountain. Actually, the glory revealed on the top of the mountain belonged to Jesus the whole time. The disciples had simply been given the privilege of looking beneath the surface and seeing what Jesus is really like.

They head down the mountain and Jesus gives what seem like rather strange instructions. **Matthew 17:9b "Tell no one the vision, until the son of Man is raised from the dead."** Why keep this a secret? I am not sure.

Yes, the resurrection of Jesus shows the world that Jesus is indeed who He claims to be. **Romans 1:4 says that Jesus, Was declared with power to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the**

dead. The transfiguration was a powerful experience for Peter, James, and John, but their report might have been met with a lot of skepticism by those who had not witnessed the event. After Jesus rose from the dead, the evidence was available to all that He was the Son of God. Then a report by the disciples of this experience would make total sense. The resurrection is proof of Jesus' identity. The transfiguration confirms that proof.

Now, you might be thinking, "Pastor Dan, that is an interesting story. It would have been cool to be there and see Jesus shining so brilliantly. But this doesn't really have much to do with my life today, does it?" Yes, I think it does. I see two lessons for us.

First, we must keep spiritual experiences in the right perspective. Now, unfortunately many folks don't have to worry about this because they have never had a spiritual experience. They may go to church most Sundays, but they seldom think about God the rest of the week. They may live a moral life and may even believe what the Bible says, but they never experience the reality of God's presence. Always someone out there, never someone close by.

There is an old story about a woman visiting a Presbyterian church for the first time. As the pastor gave his sermon she thought she made some excellent points, so she blurted out some "Amen's" and "Hallelujah's" and even a couple of "Praise the Lords" as the pastor was speaking. Eventually an usher came and whispered, "Ma'am if you cannot be quiet, I am going to have to ask you to leave." She replied, "I am sorry. I didn't mean to cause any problem, but since I met the Lord, I have been so excited about my faith that I can hardly contain myself." The usher replied, "Ma'am, you may have met the Lord, but you sure didn't meet Him in this church."

Now folks, I am not suggesting you shout, "Hallelujah," or "Praise the Lord," while I'm preaching. Frankly I prefer you do not, because I might find it distracting. Yet, when we come here to worship and listen to God's word, I pray we truly *do* meet the Lord. I hope you experience God's presence here every Sunday and I hope that happens during the week as well.

No, it is unlikely you will hear an audible voice, but I hope as you read the Bible you will not just read words, but deep in your soul you will hear the voice of God. No, you probably will not see any type of vision, but as we sing songs of praise, I hope you will realize that God is present in our midst, delighting in your worship.

You may never have a time when you feel spiritually overjoyed and can hardly contain yourself, but I hope there will be times, especially during difficult times, where you know that God is right there beside you, embracing you with His love. It is often hard when we cannot see or touch God, but through faith we can believe and experience the reality of His presence. That is an important part of being a Christian.

Yet, we cannot live on those spiritual experiences or for those experiences. We should not try to continually repeat the experiences and stay on the mountain top. Some folks evaluate their Christian life based on one criteria: "Do I *feel* close to God?" That is a fine question to ask, but other questions may be more important. For example, am I obeying the Lord? God is probably more concerned about our obedience than about how we feel. Or "Do I love my neighbor as I do myself?" Paraphrasing 1 Corinthians 13, "If I have the most spectacular spiritual experience one can imagine, if the Lord takes me to the top of the mountain to see Jesus transfigured, but don't have love, it profits me nothing."

And if your spiritual experience, the closeness you feel to God, causes you to be proud and think you are somehow better than other Christians, you need to repent. You have fallen into one of the devil's traps, where a good thing becomes too important and becomes an idol or even a demon.

Friends, one of the most dangerous trends in the church today is a separation of the spirit from the word, some folks, say, "I don't need to study the Bible because I feel so close to God and the Holy Spirit speaks to me personally each day. Friends, if you want the Holy Spirit to speak to you, you need to open your Bible and read what it says. You need to follow the example of the godly man of Psalm 1 "Who delights in the law of the Lord and meditates on it day and night." "To rely on the mountain top experiences to bring us or keep us close to God, is often a recipe for spiritual disaster.

The second lesson for us is this: Remember that Jesus is more important than anyone else. Peter was so impressed with Moses and Elijah that he almost forgot about Jesus. This happens to Christ today as well. We put good people, wonderful people on pedestals and they start to become the object of our devotion.

When that happens, we fail to give the Lord Jesus the honor that belongs only to Him. Folks, it doesn't matter who that person is. It can be Mary, Jesus' other, or it can be Martin Luther. It can be the Pope, John Piper, or David Jeremiah. It can be a pastor, a parent or just a Christian friend you look up to. It doesn't matter. When any human being begins to divert your focus from the Lord Jesus, it's a problem.

Paul addresses this in the book of 1 Corinthians. In that church some of the people said they followed Peter, some said they followed Apollos, and others said they followed Paul. The apostle Paul does not say, "Hey, I am a much better leader than Peter or Apollos, everyone should be following me." Instead, he asked, (this is my paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 1:13), "Was Paul crucified for you? No, the Lord Jesus is the one who was crucified in our place. Were you baptized in the name of Paul? No, you were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ."

Paul's point is that neither he nor Peter nor Apollos nor anyone else deserves the ultimate loyalty of any Christian. We belong to Jesus. He is the one we worship, and the one we serve. Yes, the Lord has blessed us with gifted pastors, teachers and others who help us follow the Lord. Yes, the pages of church history are filled with examples of faith and courage that can inspire us.

But the bottom line is that we, as Christians, belong to the Lord Jesus and only to Him. I like how Charles Spurgeon spoke of that truth. "I'm never ashamed to call myself a Calvinist. I don't hesitate to take the name Baptist. But if I am asked to whom I am loyal, my answer is Jesus Christ."

Incidentally, Spurgeon made a conscience effort to make sure people kept their focus on Jesus and not on him. During the 1800s he was the pastor of Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, England, and clearly the most popular preacher of his day. Hundreds of thousands of copies of his sermons

were printed and read around the world each week.

Perhaps the greatest tribute to his ministry is what happened one Sunday when a man visited the tabernacle and heard Spurgeon preach. When the fellow arrives home, his wife asked, "Well, what did you think of Spurgeon?" He replied, "I think nothing of Spurgeon, I think only of Christ."

Folks, that needs to be my goal as a pastor, to direct people attention off of me and onto the Lord Jesus. As Sunday School teachers, church leaders or anyone who lives out our faith before the world each day, that needs to be our goal. We want people to focus not on what good people we are, but on what a magnificent Savior Jesus is. The Lord is only pleased when He is the focus of our attention and the object of our affection. He is more important than anyone else.

A few years ago, Anne Graham Lots wrote a book called, "Just Give Me Jesus." That should be the cry of every Christian. Amid all the fads and formulas people get excited about, and all the programs and personalities that vie for our attention, Jesus is the one we really need. To just have Jesus is to have what our soul truly needs.

Now, He needs to be the real Jesus, the one described in the Bible, and not a figment of modern speculation. He is the eternal Son of God, who became human and died on the cross in our place as a sacrifice for our sin. The real Jesus is the one who three days after His execution conquered death and was alive as the risen Lord. He then ascended to heaven, and one day the real Jesus will return to this earth and reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Friends, when, by God's grace, our eyes are opened and we see the real Jesus, when we recognize He is not just some historical figure, but the living, eternal Son of God. When we understand that He desires to be our Savior, brother and friend, then the only response that makes any sense at all is to embrace Him as Savior and Lord. Then, when we truly see Jesus, we will love Him, seek to obey Him, and long to join the heavenly chorus in saying, **Revelation 5:12 "Worth is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"**