

# The Transfiguration of Jesus

Lift Up Your Eyes and Look to Jesus Only

**Scripture:** Matthew 17:1-13

**Sermon Series:** *Matthew*

**Topic:** Jesus, Transfiguration

## Introduction

As we continue our journey through Matthew's gospel, he now takes us up on a high mountain where Jesus was transfigured.

For a brief moment, the previously hidden glory of Jesus is revealed and three of the twelve disciples were allowed to see this.

We find Moses and Elijah are there too and they are speaking with Jesus.

Then, God the Father speaks audibly and approvingly of Jesus. This is the second time he has done this. He spoke first at the beginning of the public phase of Jesus' ministry, at his baptism, and now he speaks again as the final phase of Jesus' ministry begins, as Jesus journeys to Jerusalem to die and be resurrected.

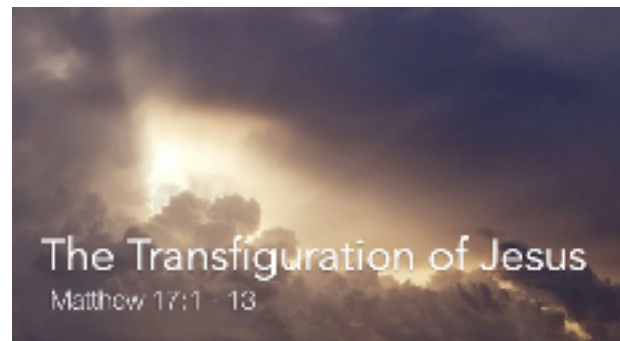
Finally, Jesus teaches us that the ministry of John the Baptist fulfilled the prophecy of Elijah's return.

The scene easily breaks into two sections; the first takes place on top of a high mountain, while the second, unfolds as Jesus and his disciples are descending the mountain.

## Up on a High Mountain (v.1-8)

We begin with Jesus taking his three closest disciples up on top of a mountain.

**Matthew 17:1 (ESV)** And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.



*“After six days”* is incredibly specific. This necessarily connects what is about to happen with that which has already happened. Matthew wants us to make the connection with what Jesus just said at the end of chapter 16 with what he is about to say. We ought not allow the chapter divisions to interrupt the flow of the story. Matthew did not insert the chapter division.<sup>1</sup>

- After Jesus asked a provocative question, *“Who do you say that I am?”* (Mt 16:15). This question hangs in the air over all that follows.
- After Peter’s powerful proclamation, *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (Mt 16:16).
- After Jesus, for the first time, has told them that he must suffer, die, and be resurrected on the third day (Mt 16:21).
- After Peter’s problematic pronouncement, that he would not allow such to happen (Mt 16:22).
- After Jesus rebuked Peter for *“not setting his mind on things of God”* by saying, *“Get behind me Satan”* (Mt 16:23).
- After calling them to follow him down this path of suffering and death. As Ben mentioned last week, all but one of the Eleven did in fact follow him in dying for the gospel (Mt 16:24-27).
- After promising that some of them would not die until they had seen a glimpse of the great glory of the *“Son of Man’s coming kingdom”* (Mt. 16:28).



ESV Study Bible

Then, we have this account of the glory of Jesus revealed. This is what they saw on top of the mountain. Jesus pulls back the curtain and allows three of his disciples to have a brief glimpse of the glory that will be displayed by the Son of Man when his kingdom comes.

*Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John... by themselves* (v.1). Jesus did not take all twelve disciples with him, but rather he took only three with him. Matthew does not explain why he did this, but there is a clue later, which will consider.

However, one thing is clear, this marks a transition in Matthew’s gospel. What transpires on this mountain is not for the world to see. The end of chapter 16 and the beginning of chapter 17 marks a transition in Jesus’ primary attention away from the crowds and to his

<sup>1</sup> Chapter divisions used in the Bible today were introduced by archbishop Stephen Langton (1150 - 1228). See G.F. Moore, “The Vulgate Chapters and Numbered Verses in the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1893), pp. 73-78. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3259119?seq=1> accessed 10 August 2024.

disciples. This mountain top disclosure was not something Jesus wanted the whole nation of Israel to see at that time. This was a revelation on for these three “*by themselves.*”

*He led them up on a high mountain.* There has been much speculation about which mountain this way. There are two primary options.

The traditional site is **Mt. Tabor** at the southern end of the Sea of Galilee, near Nazareth. Against the location of Mt. Tabor is the fact that it is not “a high mountain,” but more like a large hill, having an elevation of 1886 feet.



The other option is **Mt. Hermon** in the north in the region of Caesarea Philippi, which is where Jesus was when he was seeking to be alone with his disciples (Mt 16:13ff). In favor of Mt. Hermon is that it indeed is a high mountain, being the highest peak in the mountain range that borders Israel and Syria and reaches an elevation of 9,232 ft.



### Focus on the Obvious, Not the Obscure

We ought not give this too much time, since Matthew cares nothing about **where** this happened—since he does not name the mountain—but, he does care much about **what** happened on this mountain, since that is what he does write about.

This gives us helpful guide in how to study the Bible. Focus on what the author does say rather than on what he does not. In our Bible reading it may be tempting to run off onto peripheral details, but rather keep your eyes on what the Holy Spirit through the author is revealing and not on what you wish was revealed.

### He Was Transfigured Before Them (v.2)

Matthew tells us what happened in v.2.

**Matthew 17:2 (ESV)** And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.

*He was transfigured before them.* The ‘*transfigured*’ is the Greek *metamorphoō* (μεταμορφώω) and means “to be changed; be transformed; become changed in outward appearance or

expression as manifesting a change in nature or essence."<sup>2</sup> This transfiguring to Jesus happened "*before them*." These three disciples witnessed Jesus being changed before their eyes. They were *allowed* to see this. This transformation was for them to see.

***His face shone like the sun.*** Something glorious and heavenly is happening. Something great and marvelous is unfolding. God had just a few days before this revealed to Peter that Jesus was both "*the Christ and the Son of the living God*,"<sup>3</sup> and now God was here visibly confirming that fact before their eyes. The glory of God was shining through Jesus. Jesus was the physical manifestation of the holy glory of God the Father. Both John and Peter would later write about this glorious sight.

**John 1:14** (ESV) 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.

**2 Peter 1:16-18** (ESV) <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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," <sup>18</sup> we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.

***His clothes became white as light.*** Brilliant white and shining clothes are elsewhere seen of angelic beings, who also reflect the glory of God.<sup>4</sup> Before his incarnation, Jesus enjoyed the full radiance of God's glory,<sup>5</sup> but when he put on human flesh, that glory was concealed. Now, here on this mountain, that eternal glory was allowed to shine fully through.

## He Was Talking Moses and Elijah (v.3)

As they were watching this transformation of Jesus, suddenly two other men appeared and began conversing with Jesus.

**Matthew 17:3** (ESV) And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

***Moses and Elijah.*** This is unexpected. Imagine what a shock this must have been. Imagine seeing visual confirmation that neither of them were dead. There were standing in front of them alive and well and talking to Jesus. Why were those two there? There may be several reasons.

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<sup>2</sup> Rick Brannan, ed., *Lexham Research Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, Lexham Research Lexicons (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 16:16.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 28:4; Acts 1:10.

<sup>5</sup> John 17:5, 24.

First, both of them were *connected to the coming of Messiah*. Moses had spoken of “a prophet like me whom God would raise up from among you—it is to him you shall listen” (Dt 18:15-16). Elijah was considered to be a forerunner of Messiah and was spoken of by the prophet Malachi (3:1, 3; 4:5-6).

Second, both of them *suffered greatly* for their obedience to God’s plan for their lives. Both of them experienced rejection by their own people, the nation of Israel.

Third, through them both God did *mighty and unrepeatable miracles*. Through Moses God delivered Israel from slavery and through Elijah God raised the dead.<sup>6</sup>

Fourth, perhaps these two represent the fact that Jesus stands in harmony and agreement with both “*the law and the prophets*.” If Moses represents the law and Elijah represents the prophets, then their presence with Jesus here on the mountain may indicate that Jesus is the fulfillment of all to which each pointed.

**Talking with him.** Moses and Elijah were having a conversation with Jesus. Matthew does not reveal to us what they were saying, however Luke tells us they, “*spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem*” (Lk 9:30). The word for ‘departure’ in Greek is ‘exodos.’ Thus, they were talking about his death, resurrection, ascension. They were talking about Jesus fulfilling God’s will for his life.

Furthermore, “both Moses and Elijah had an unusual ‘exodus’ or departure from this world.”<sup>7</sup> Moses died, but God alone was with him and he alone knows where he laid his body. Elijah didn’t die, but instead was taken alive up into heaven on a chariot of fire.

Moses and Elijah are seen here serving Jesus. They came conversing with him about his death and resurrection. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to accomplish all the will of the Father. Surely Jesus is greater than them both. Jesus is the fulfillment of all that Moses and Elijah represented during their lives and ministries. Jesus will accomplish great glory through great suffering.

## Both Peter & God Speak (v.4-6)

Peter is amazed at all he is witnessing as well as slightly confused. As he is almost always the first to speak, he opens his mouth, but before he finishes his sentence, God interrupts him.

**Matthew 17:4-6 (ESV)** <sup>4</sup> 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.” <sup>5</sup> 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.” <sup>6</sup> When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified.

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Kings 17:22.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Doriani, “Matthew,” in *ESV Expository Commentary: Matthew-Luke*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., Jay Sklar, Vol. VIII (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 171 electronic edition.

**Make three tents here** (v.4). Peter can't keep quiet. He's caught up in this glorious moment and he states the obvious, "**It's good that we are here.**" Yes, Peter, it is quite good that you are there.

Perhaps Peter knows that something momentous is taking place, but he does not know exactly what is happening. He offers to build three '**tents.**' The word is the same word that describes the temporary 'tabernacles' or 'booths' the people of Israel built during the Feast of Tabernacles, which commemorated the Exodus. These were "temporary shelters made of branches"<sup>8</sup> and whatever else could be found.

Perhaps Peter wrongly assumed they would be staying for a few days or maybe he wanted to construct some kind of memorial. Whatever his thinking was, it appears Peter views Jesus as equal with Moses and Elijah. God intends to correct that mistake.

**He was still speaking** (v.4). God interrupted Peter's construction plans. How embarrassing would that be to have God interrupt you. Surely he ought to have been focusing on something else that he presently was not. God redirects his thinking.

**Behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them** (v.5). This evokes memories of the Exodus and the birth of the nation of Israel. God appeared to Israel in the form of a cloud after leading Israel out of Egypt<sup>9</sup> and during their wandering in the wilderness, God overshadowed<sup>10</sup> them with a bright cloud.<sup>11</sup>

**A voice from the cloud said** (v.5). It was from within a cloud atop Mt. Sinai that God spoke the Ten Commandments to the nation of Israel (Ex 19:9, 16, 18). It was also from within a cloud that God spoke to Moses in the tabernacle (Ex 33:9-10). It was a cloud that indicated God's presence in the tabernacle and by which he lead them to set up and tear down camp throughout the forty years of their wilderness wandering (Ex 40:35-38). The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob revealed his presence in the form of a cloud, and here he was doing the same, revealing his presence to these three disciples.

**This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him** (v.5). God, for the second time, speaks audibly concerning Jesus. The first time he did this was when Jesus was baptized, and he said almost the exact same thing. However, what is different here is that he adds, "**Listen to him.**" This is exactly what Moses said about "the prophet" whom God would raise up after him (Dt 18:15). Perhaps God is saying to Peter, "Stop talking, and listen to my Son."

Notice that **God here elevates Jesus above both Moses and Elijah.** God does not speak audibly about either of them, but he has now twice spoken in this way about Jesus.

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<sup>8</sup> R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 267.

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 13:21-22.

<sup>10</sup> Numbers 10:34.

<sup>11</sup> Exodus 14:20.



Jesus is not simply a new Moses, but he is God's Son, rather than merely a servant of God like Moses. And God's voice was mighty.

*When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified* (v.6). The disciples do what everyone does when God speaks. They fell on their faces. They were absolutely terrified. This is exactly the same response of the children of Israel when God spoke the Ten Commandments to them. When they heard God's voice, they were so terrified that they trembled and feared they would die (Ex 20:18-19). They Moses to go talk to him and they would remain far off, lest they die.

There are many similarities here on this high mountain with what took place at Mt. Sinai through Moses. What happened on Mt. Transfiguration and on Mt. Sinai are very similar.

	Moses	Jesus
<b>On a mountain</b>	Mt. Sinai	A high mountain
<b>Three friends</b>	Aaron, Nadab, Abihu (Ex 24:1,9)	Peter, James, John
<b>Radiant glory</b>	His face shone (Ex 34:30-35)	Face shone like sun
<b>Six days</b>	Cloud six days on mtn. before God spoke (Ex 24:16)	after six days (Mt 17:1)
<b>Law</b>	God spoke law to Moses	God spoke about Jesus
<b>Cloud</b>	God spoke from cloud	God spoke from cloud
<b>God's voice</b>	Terror in people	Terror in disciples
<b>Assurance</b>	"Do not fear" (Ex 20:20)	"Have no fear" (Mt 17:7)

As God began a great redemptive work in Israel through Moses, so now he is about to *accomplish* that redemptive work through Jesus.

**Matthew 17:7-8** (ESV) <sup>7</sup> But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." <sup>8</sup> And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

*Jesus came and touched them* (v.7). The voice of God devastated them and sapped them of all strength. They had no ability to even lift their heads until Jesus came and *touched* them. Jesus touched them and poured strength into them. He encouraged them to *"Rise and have no fear."* Jesus touched them and assured them they were safe. Only then did they look up and when they did they discovered that Moses and Elijah were no longer with Jesus. They were alone with him. Just as they were before. When they lifted their eyes, they saw only Jesus.

This is the point: *all eyes on Jesus!* This is the point. Keep your eyes on Jesus. Moses

and Elijah were there only for Jesus. God is talking about Jesus. And now these three disciples *"lifted up their eyes and they saw no one but Jesus only."*

## Coming Down from the Mountain (v.9-13)

The next scene unfolds as Jesus, Peter, James, and John are descending the mountain.

**Matthew 17:9** (ESV) 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."

**Tell no one.** This is the last time in Matthew's gospel that Jesus will give such a command. From this point on, Jesus will no longer seek to conceal himself.

At least here it also comes with a qualification. **Until the Son of Man is raised from the dead**, then they are free to tell what they had seen. Here again Jesus mentions this death and resurrection. This is a theme that Jesus wills them to embrace.

The reason for the silence is most likely due to the common misunderstandings about messiah. No one believed that Messiah must die. If news were to get out that Moses and Elijah had coffee with Jesus, then certainly Jewish nationalism and Messianic confusion would create an unruly scene much too soon. They've already once tried to force Jesus to be king (after feeding the 5,000 Jn 6:14-15). The time and place of Jesus' death was to be at Passover in Jerusalem, and this was not yet that time. It seems the issue of timing is what was on the minds of these three disciples.

**Matthew 17:10-13** (ESV) And the disciples asked him, "Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" <sup>11</sup> He answered, "Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. <sup>12</sup> But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands." <sup>13</sup> Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

**Elijah... will restore all things** (v.11). The scribes say that Elijah must appear before Messiah comes. Elijah's role, according to the concluding verses of Malachi, is to *"restore all things."* This refers to restoring right worship, right family relationships between children and parents, and establishing true justice. If he were to do this, then how could it be that Messiah would be killed in such a restored environment? The disciples are confused and we understand why?

**Elijah has already come and they did not recognize him** (v.12). Jesus affirms the teaching of the scribes is correct. Elijah does come before Messiah. However, the restoring work that he was to accomplish would not be a complete and universal work. Elijah came and did his work of restoration, but he was not recognized by the leaders. *"They did to him whatever they pleased,"* meaning they killed him. Jesus explains again, *"So the Son of Man will certainly suffer..."* Just as Elijah suffered, so the Son of Man will certainly suffer.



*Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist* (v.13). The ministry of John the Baptist fulfilled that prophecy of the return of Elijah. We must remember what the angel Gabriel said to Zechariah, John's father. He said, "

**Luke 1:16-17** (ESV) <sup>16</sup> And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, <sup>17</sup> and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

John the Baptist would conduct his ministry "*in the spirit and power of Elijah.*" He would turn many to God, but not all. John was received by the people but rejected by the religious leaders. His work of restoring was effective among the people, but not among the leaders.<sup>12</sup> In the same way, Messiah must also suffer as John suffered. Messiah will die just as John died.

The disciples are gradually understanding more and more. The truth of this strange work of redemption is little by little beginning to settle in on them. There is a gradual work of revelation that the Spirit is working in them and they are being to understand what Jesus has come to do and the usual way the Father intends to complete his plan.

## Conclusion

For the first time, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has begun to speak about the necessity of his suffering and death. And as he does, his disciples reject this. How can dying be part of the plan? This can't be part of the plan. And yet it is. This is overwhelming to take in.

Jesus not only speaks of his own death, but he looks his disciples in the eye and says, "*Take up your cross and follow me. If you want to gain your life then you must lose it for my sake.*" This is overwhelming. Jesus, are you quite sure? How can this be? How can dying lead to glory?

Jesus then takes his disciples up on this mountain and pulls back the curtain of the kingdom. There is a great and glorious heavenly kingdom that awaits all who follow Jesus. Yes, dying is part of the plan. If you want to enjoy the glory of the kingdom of heaven, then you must die to your sinful desires and live to godly desires. God in heaven descends in a cloud to confirm this. "*Jesus is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; Listen to him.*" Jesus has the words of eternal life. Listen to him. Hear him! Follow him.

If you are thinking, "I can't do this." Then, you're right. But allow Jesus to touch you. To stand alone in the presence of God is terrifying. We would each of us fall on our faces. But Jesus

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<sup>12</sup> Luke 20:5.

would come and touch you and pour strength into you. So lift up your eyes and look to Jesus alone. In him, rise and have no fear.

Jesus has fulfilled and accomplished all of God's great redemptive plan. Jesus died, not for his own sins, but for the sins of all who will put their faith and trust in him. Lift up your eyes. See his glory. See his death for you. Believe that he can cleanse you of all your sins and can give you victory over them all.

Jesus is the glorious Son of God and Savior of mankind. In him God is well pleased.

Listen to him.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What might be the reason Jesus took with him only three of the twelve disciples?
2. Why did Jesus "shine like the sun?" What does this teach us about Jesus?
3. Why were Moses and Elijah there?
4. About what were they conversing?
5. How does the transfiguration show Jesus' glory?
6. How did the disciples miss the point? How do we miss the point in our own lives?
7. What facts about this story does Matthew emphasize and what does he not? How does this help us understand the author's main point? How does this affect our study of Scripture? Do you ever feel tempted to focus on peripherals when studying Scripture? What helps you discover the author's main point?
8. What do you sense the Lord may be saying to you through this passage?