

Matthew 17:1-13

Jesus, LORD and Messiah

Have you ever had the experience that you thought you knew someone quite well, and then were surprised to learn of something in their past, a skill, or a talent that you found remarkable? As we come to know people we see best that part of them that they want us to see. We may also limit our perception of others by what we expect to see. This is an important concept when we develop meaning relationships with those we hold closest to us, particularly those who we marry. Honest and open communication between us can serve to build relationships that are based upon trust and confidence in one another.

The period of Jesus' preparation of the Apostles was rather short, about three years. Even after most of this time of teaching was over, the Apostles and disciples still did not entirely understand the nature of Jesus, and it was (and is) very important for them to have a true and clear understanding of Jesus' nature so that they could relate to Him appropriately, and so that they could share the truth of His identity after His death and resurrection.

In the previous chapter, Peter proclaimed his sincere belief that Jesus is "The Christ and the Son of the Living God." Also, it is likely that his profession of belief was shared by most of the other Apostles and many of the disciples. However, their understanding was still incomplete. "Peter was correct as to Jesus' person. But it was soon manifest that he was all wrong as to His work. As soon as his Master began to sketch the program, with the dark prospect of death in the foreground, Peter recoiled at the picture."¹ The Apostles still misunderstood the purpose of the Messiah, having been taught from childhood that He would be a military leader. It was necessary that their understanding of who Jesus is would be complete, true, and without doubt.

Matthew 17:1. *And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart,*

Just as the Tabernacle of the LORD is divided into three ascending parts, the outer court, the Holy Place, and the Holy of Holies, the fellowship of Jesus' disciples was also divided into three ascending parts. Those who make up the "outer court" include the disciples. Those who make up the Holy Place include the Apostles, save Peter, James and John. Peter, James, and John represent the "Holy of Holies, those three Apostles that Jesus kept closer to Himself for

¹ Harrison, Everett Falconer. The transfiguration. *Bibliotheca sacra*, 93 no 371 Jul - Sep 1936, p 316.

more in-depth preparation. These three would become the three primary leaders in the early church.

The event that is about to take place is noted as “after six days.” The different gospel narratives testify to varying periods of time. Consequently, we do not have a finite start time for this stated period, but we may infer that it was sometime within the events described in the previous chapter. However, it is significant to note that this event takes place prior to Jesus’ last journey to Jerusalem. With such a short time left to prepare the Apostles and disciples, they needed to come to know Jesus for who He truly is.

Jesus and the disciples had left a debate with the Pharisees and Sadducees when they demanded that He perform a sign, only to be told that they would be given none, save the “Sign of Jonah.” Jesus contrasted their misunderstanding of who He was with the belief of the Jews and the belief of the disciples. This was when Peter testified to his belief in Jesus’ as the Christ. Jesus and the disciples were walking northward along the western side of the Sea of Galilee, so it is likely that they were in that region when the following event took place.

There has been much speculation as to the identity of the “high mountain,” as none of the gospel narratives include its name. Many have identified the location as Mount Horeb. However, there is no reason to attribute the location to a mountain that is otherwise described in scripture. There is no shortage of high places in the region. However, the attribution of the “high mountain” implies more than simply elevation. The ancients often considered mountain peaks to be holy places because they would be closer to their gods who they believed were up above them in heaven. Consequently, it was common to build altars of worship on mountain tops. The word rendered “high mountain” alludes to a holy place.

Matthew 17:2. *And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.*

Certainly, the Transfiguration of Jesus is one of the more well-known events in the New Testament, yet it is described here in a single sentence, and it is presented with very few details, indicating that it was the impact of the event that was important, not its content. Matthew provides only two descriptions of the event, the first being the appearance of Jesus. The Greek word rendered *transfigured* is the root for the English word, *metamorphosis*. We now make common use of the abbreviated form of the word, *morph*, to refer to something that changes from one appearance or shape to another. Jesus’ appearance entirely changed into a form where He was shown in His glory, literally luminesced, where His skin and His clothing shone brightly. One commentator

almost poetically writes, “It is the one occasion in which the bright beams of His divine glory blazed through the sackcloth covering of His humanity.”²

It is clearly indicated that Peter, James, and John were watching this metamorphosis of Jesus from its very beginning. One can envision Jesus talking with them, stepping back, and transforming into His eternal, glorified form, much to the amazement of the Apostles. It is imperative that they come to know who Jesus is; who the Messiah is; and through this experience the three Apostles would better understand the eternal nature of the Messiah, His true position as the Son of God, and His identification as the one true Jehovah, YAHWEH. “The Transfiguration is a confirmation from God Himself, which further reveals the nature of Jesus for the sake of the disciples, who so often doubted or misunderstood, even after giving such a confession.”³

Matthew 17:3. *And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him.*

The second description of the Transfiguration is the appearance of Moses and Elijah. There is no record of the conversation that was held between the three, though we might speculate that it concerned Jesus’ coming passion. It is evident that the three Apostles instantly knew the identity of the two who were talking with Jesus, either through a form of theophany, or more likely, though the content of their unrecorded discussion.

It is important to note the identity of these two visitors to the High Mountain and how they would be received by Peter, James, and John. These two Old Testament Patriarchs were together considered the primary source of their identity as Israelites. Moses represented the Law, and Elijah represented the prophets. Matthew frequently uses this combination of the Law and the prophets as a formula to represent the entire Old Testament, its significance, its context, and its message.⁴ This is an appropriate vehicle to do so since Matthew is focusing his gospel message to the Jews who share his knowledge and understanding of Jewish history. This illustrated relationship between Jesus and the Patriarchs demonstrates the unity between the person of Jesus and the Law and the prophets, and shows that the Old Testament bears witness to Him.⁵

² Johnson, Samuel Lewis. Transfiguration of Christ. *Bibliotheca sacra*, 124 no 494 Apr - Jun 1967, p 133.

³ Penner, James A. Revelation and Discipleship in Matthew's Transfiguration Account. *Bibliotheca sacra*, 152 no 606 Apr - Jun 1995, p 201.

⁴ Matthew 5:17, 7:12, 11:13, 22:40.

⁵ Meier, John P. *The Vision of Matthew Christ, Church and Morality in the First Gospel*. New York, NY: Paukst Press, 1979, p. 122.

As they watched, they were witnessing Jesus in conversation with the most respected Patriarchs that had died long ago, verifying for them the voracity of an eternal heaven, clear evidence of life after death, and the unity of Jesus with the entire history and message of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible. Now what would be needed would be for the Apostles to understand Jesus' relationship to it.

Matthew 17:4. *Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias.*

The purpose of the transfiguration was not to meet any need of Jesus, Moses, or Elijah's. It was to meet a need of Peter, James and John as they struggled to understand the true nature and identity of Jesus, a struggle that is still common today. It is not surprising that Peter spoke with boldness and impetuosity, doing so without a great deal of consideration of the import of his words, or even the fact that he was interrupting this magnificent dialogue between Jesus and the Patriarchs. The words, "then answered" infers that Peter, by speaking directly to Jesus, interrupted the discussion between the three eternal beings.

As much as the Apostles desired to know Jesus, there was simply nothing that could break through their presuppositions that would convince them of the deity of the Messiah. Where Jesus was trying to teach them of His true nature, calling upon them to accept His person by faith, they still could not understand. Even after witnessing the Transfiguration of Jesus into His glorified form, they still lifted Him no higher in their understanding than they held Moses and Elijah.

Peter's statement mimics much of the misunderstanding that people have today concerning the eternal nature of the LORD, Christ. Where the word, *tabernacles*, is often used to refer to booths or small dwellings, in this context it refers to the building of a tabernacle (dwelling place) as an altar of remembrance. Peter was now equating the person of Jesus with Moses and Elijah, and in his limited understanding, he likely believed that his statement would be a great compliment. After all, Peter was stating that Jesus was as important as Moses and Elijah, the two greatest Patriarchs in Jewish history. Peter's utter misunderstanding and misinterpretation (and arguably that James and John also) would be quickly, and firmly, corrected.

Matthew 17:5-6. *While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him. ⁶And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid.*

One cannot separate the identity of Israel from the historical experience of their Exodus from Egypt. Writing to Jews, Matthew makes use of several allusions to this history in the imagery of the Transfiguration of Jesus such as the mountain,⁶ the glowing face,⁷ the bright yet overshadowing cloud with the voice coming from it,⁸ and the disciples' fear.⁹ Also, as Moses ascended Sinai, a cloud descended, and the LORD "stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD."¹⁰ In the Transfiguration the voice of God descended from a cloud and proclaimed Jesus' identity.¹¹

In only a moment the three Apostles found themselves thoroughly humbled, literally groveling on the ground in astonishment and fear. Just as there was a context whereby the Apostles understood that the visitors were Moses and Elijah, they understood what they just heard was the voice of God. Having referred to Jesus as "Son," we also may infer that this is the attribution of God, the Father.

Furthermore, the words were not directed at Jesus or the Patriarchs, but rather they were spoken directly to the three Apostles. Without any introduction, they were words of correction, interrupting Peter's sincere but ignorant words much like His interruption of the Son of God. God made clear to them that Jesus is the "Son of God," a traditional name for the deified Messiah, that Jesus is accomplishing exactly what He is intended to do (including the suffering of the Passion which so vexed the Apostles), and that they are to focus on Jesus and His message rather than draw their ideas and beliefs from their own presuppositions.

The proud and confident words of Peter were suddenly silenced. Those who deny the deity of Jesus Christ still do so with pride and confidence in their sincere rejection of His true nature. People face the same issue today. Most of the people of this world do not understand the true nature of Jesus Christ. God's Word, as expressed in the New Testament narrative, repeats the same message that God's voice did from the cloud. Still, short of hearing the voice of God themselves, they will not believe.

Matthew 17:7-8. *And Jesus came and touched them, and said, Arise, and be not afraid. ⁸And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, save Jesus only.*

⁶ Exodus 19:24, 34.

⁷ Exodus 34:29-35.

⁸ Exodus 13:21-22, 14:19-20, 24:15-18, 33:10, 40:35.

⁹ Exodus 20:18-20.

¹⁰ Exodus 34:5.

¹¹ Ibid., Penner. p. 206-207.

Jesus' response to the frightened and humbled Apostles was one of compassion. This act of compassion is not mentioned in the parallel gospel presentations. Having just been elevated to the position of a Moses or Elijah in the Apostles initial understanding, and now elevated to deification as the Son of God, Jesus, whom they now understood to be God with them, gently walked over to them, lightly touched them (as they were probably not looking up at this time), and commanded them to arise, calming their fears in so doing.

The Apostles, and certainly Peter, probably felt quite foolish for their inane and somewhat ignorant behavior prior to hearing God the Father speak to them from the cloud. As they lifted their eyes the Transfiguration had ended. Moses and Elijah were gone, and Jesus had returned to the mortal flesh they had come to know and recognize. By His gentleness, Jesus brought a gentle denouement to the admonishment that they had received from God, the Father, teaching them and reminding us that the admonition of the LORD is always to be taken seriously, yet we also know that He always treats us with love and compassion with the purpose of guiding us towards His purpose of increasing our faith in Him, and blessing us in the process of doing so.

Matthew 17:9. *And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead.*

Prior to the Transfiguration event, the Apostles refused to accept the idea that Jesus would suffer and be killed rather than live to raise up Israel against Rome. A primary reason for the Transfiguration was to correct this misunderstanding. With such a short time between this event and the coming Passion, the Apostles needed to be prepared for it so when it does eventually take place, they would remember Jesus' teaching and be in expectation for the fulfillment of His promise to be resurrected from the dead after three days.

As Jesus did following Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus commanded the Apostles to refrain from sharing this experience with anyone, and in this case this also included keeping the experience from the other Apostles. This necessitated the others to accept the nature of Jesus by faith, and not by sight as these three had been allowed. We may recall the experience of the Apostle Thomas who refused to believe in Jesus as the risen Messiah without seeing for himself.¹²

¹² John 20:24-29.

This event also brought the Apostles another mortally important understanding of the nature of Jesus. Prior to the Transfiguration the Apostles were convinced that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. As a result of their experience on the High Mountain the Apostles now knew of Jesus' status as LORD. Their profession of faith in Jesus would now be complete. Just as Jesus had drawn Peter, James, and John closer to Himself than He did the other Apostles, these three now had this tremendous experience that would further strengthen their personal spirit as the LORD would call upon them to lead the other Apostles, and eventually, to lead the first-century church.

Matthew 17:10. *And his disciples asked him, saying, Why then say the scribes that Elias must first come?*

This question reveals at least two things concerning the understanding of the Apostles. The answer is important to them, as it is important to every Jew who will hear of the coming of the Messiah. First, we find that the Apostles were sufficiently trained in Jewish history and tradition to know the prophecies. The prophecy that they refer to is one that all the knowledgeable Jews would also be aware of: The coming of the Messiah will be ushered in by the return of Elijah. That is, the return of Elijah will come first. Second, we find that the Apostles were now thoroughly convinced by their witness of Jesus' glorified form, that He is indeed the Messiah, the Son of God.

This seemed to be an unresolvable paradox to them, as it would be for every Jew who knew of the prophecies. So, the answer for them is very important. Where is Elijah?

Matthew 17:11. *And Jesus answered and said unto them, Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things.*

The first part of Jesus' response is almost a commendation for their demonstrated knowledge of the prophecies. Jesus basically is saying, "You are absolutely correct. Elijah will come first." Jesus' statement that is rendered "restore all things," is a direct and clear reference to the one who will "prepare the way" for the coming Messiah. Just these few words would bring to remembrance the prophecy of Isaiah:

Isaiah 40:3-5. *The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: ⁵And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.*

Since the Apostles now fully believe the testimony of Jesus Christ, and they fully believe the voracity of the prophecies, they need to resolve this seeming paradox. However, the Apostles have already borne witness to the Spirit of Elijah.¹³

Matthew 17:12-13. *But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them. ¹³Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist.*

This entire chapter of Matthew's gospel has never wandered far from the message and certainty of the coming Passion of Christ. By citing the 40th chapter of Isaiah Jesus provided the link between Isaiah and the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. They already knew that the ministry of John the Baptist was to prepare the way for Jesus, and Peter was particularly familiar with this truth. They were also familiar with the imprisonment and execution of John the Baptist by Herod, the Tetrarch of Rome.¹⁴ Jesus not only made it clear that John the Baptist fulfilled the prophecy of the return of Elijah, but He also stated that it would be the same people who would treat the Son of Man, the Messiah, Himself, the same way.

Just as the Apostles had not recognized John the Baptist, neither had the Jerusalem Jews who persecuted him and eventually led him to his death. Likewise, just as the Apostles had not recognized the Messiah, neither had the Jerusalem Jews who would persecute Him and eventually lead Him to His death. Those same Jews who missed recognizing the prophecies represent every son of Abraham from the time of the birth of Jesus until today who have also missed the prophecies and refuse to recognize John the Baptist as the return of Elijah, or the birth of Jesus as the birth of the Messiah.

"The transfiguration with its wealth of symbolism is a central story in New Testament theology, standing at the heart of biblical faith, it is not just one event in Jesus' ministry, nor is it out of place within that ministry; indeed, it possesses a wider function that goes beyond any episode in the Synoptic portrait of Jesus. Taken together with John's theology of the divine glory manifest in the flesh of Jesus, the transfiguration rightly stands at the heart of New Testament Christology. As both an epiphany and an apocalyptic vision, it articulates both the

¹³ John 1:27-42. Andrew, Simon's brother, was a disciple of John the Baptist who, upon hearing John's message introduced Simon to Jesus who at this very early point in Simon's experience was told by Jesus that a time was coming that he would be called, Peter.

¹⁴ Matthew 14:1-12.

identity of Jesus as the divinely human Son and anticipates God's future, eschatological transformation of the world in Christ.”¹⁵

Like no other event in human history, the Transfiguration bridges the gap between the Creator and His creation. It unifies Jewish history, the coming of the Messiah, and its purpose for people today as the people from these periods of time, like Peter, James, and John have a true need to understand that Jesus is the Christ, that His purpose was, not to free Israel from bondage to a foreign government, but to free Israel and all who would join her from the bondage to sin's condemnation. By the “stripes”¹⁶ of the cross we are eternally healed of sin's devastating power.

A review of the Transfiguration of Jesus can serve to remind us of His true nature as Savior and LORD, a Savior who came to provide us with the means of salvation from the condemnation for sin that we deserve, and a LORD who is worthy to be worshipped, followed, and obeyed. Many people have missed the signs, rejected the fulfillment of the prophecies, and rejected the person and purpose of Jesus Christ. Peter, James, and John needed to see Jesus in His glory before they would understand and believe.

Let us not be faithless, requiring visible proof of Jesus' deity before we will believe. Let us embrace Jesus for who He is, the Son of God, the Messiah, YAHWEH who came from His glory in heaven to the depths of earth's sinful culture to lead us to salvation. Let us find peace with God by placing our faith in Him so that we might realize His promise that whosoever would place their faith in Him would approach Him at the time of judgment with their sins forgiven. Let us find blessing in God as our faith informs our choices, placing us in a position that God can bless our lives.

Let our knowledge of and our confidence in the Transfiguration of Christ serve as a comfort, proving that our faith is not in vain.

¹⁵ Lee, Dorothy A. On the holy mountain: the transfiguration in scripture and theology. *Colloquium*, 36 no 2 Nov 2004, p 159.

¹⁶ Isaiah 53:5.