

We've been going through the book of Matthew; the first book in the New Testament and one of the "Gospels" or books that survey the life of Christ. Matthew is revealing Christ a bit at a time. As I have studied this book, it is as if I am following the GPS in a city that has exploded in growth. I know where I am going and I thought I knew what the route would look like, but everything has changed this time.

Matthew has been showing that Jesus is the expected Messiah, the expected King of Israel, but as we have seen more and more, he is different than what they are expecting. In last week's chapter 16, we saw how Jesus was not living up to expectations - and that it got him rebuked.

First, in a flash of supernatural insight, Peter, in response to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?", said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." But how quickly the pendulum swung in the other direction. Next, when Jesus told them some new news, it broke Peter's expectations so much that he actually thought that he had to give God some advice.

### **Previously in Matthew 16,**

**21** ... Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

[And this is where Peter felt that God needed his advice]

**22** And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you."

**23** But he [Jesus] turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

And that brings us to this week’s passage, which I will read.

## READING

**Matthew 17:1–13 (ESV)**

**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.

**2** And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.

**3** And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

**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.”

**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.”

**6** When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified.

**7** But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.”

**8** And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

**9** 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.”

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

11 He answered, “Elijah does come, and he will restore all things.

12 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.”

13 Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

THE STRANGEST MIRACLE

To review what happened, Jesus took the disciples to a mountain top and his glory was revealed. Really it was as if they were just able to see who he really was; the veil was just removed.

The book of Luke provides a few more details about what happened.

**Luke 9:28–32 (ESV)**

28 ... after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain **to pray**.

29 And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white.

30 And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah,

31 **who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.**

32 Now Peter and those who were with him were **heavy with sleep**, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.

Luke tells us first that he went to pray. Next, he tells what they were talking about; it says that they were talking about Jesus's departure from the earth that would be accomplished in Jerusalem. If we were not familiar with the events of the Bible, but were observers of Jesus and his crucifixion, we would not say that Jesus "accomplished that." We would say that he was a victim of it. But God doesn't see the crucifixion of Jesus as something that "happened to Jesus," but rather as something he "accomplished." God determined from eternity past that Jesus would be crucified to die for the sins of the world.

Thirdly, we learn the disciples were asleep for part of this momentous occasion.

It seems that all of the times when God's glory is revealed it is on a mountain top. God appeared to Moses on a mountain top; he appeared to Elijah on a mountain top. Others like Isaiah and Ezekiel and Daniel the prophets had visions, but they were in their minds or in dreams and were not actual physical manifestations.

So only five people have ever experienced this unveiled vision of God's glory in the earthly realm: Moses, Elijah, Peter, James, and John. And strangely enough, all of them are together here - for a reunion of sorts with Moses and Elijah here with the disciples. And they see Jesus in his glory again.

Jesus is "Transfigured." He is seen in his glory: "and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light." The word in the original Greek of the New Testament is *Metamorphoo*. You recognize that as something that caterpillars do to turn into a butterfly.

To me, this is one of the strangest miracles. I suppose that the reason is that it is not like the other miracles. There is no apparent human need for

it. There are no suffering lepers, there are no hurting or paralyzed people, no one has died, there are no disciples desperately flailing on the sea in a storm. There are no apparent beneficiaries, it is just a matter of the disciples waking up and catching Jesus doing something supernatural!

So, the question I have always had, and did not have to articulate until I preached this passage, “is why is this here?” “Why is this in the Bible?”

I have realized that I ask that question because I am looking at this from a point of view that miracles need to have recipients and need to have some utility value. It's easy to see why a miracle like healing a paralytic or raising a dead girl is needed. It's easy to see why calming the sea when the disciples are about to be tossed from the boat is necessary. It's easy to see why feeding 5000 is necessary - people were far from food and tired and getting hangry.

And so, my view of God is sort of revealed. Is God just there to fix problems or meet human needs, or can he do something simply because he wants to? This is what we are not used to seeing in the Bible, God doing something where the main purpose is not known or partially known and is not necessarily about people.

When we look at this transfiguration, there are some various options to understand **the why**. Was the point because Jesus wanted or needed to talk to Moses and Elijah to accomplish some purpose? Or was the whole point for the disciples to sort of drop in and see that conversation?

Let's look at these options.

DID JESUS HAVE A NEED OR DID HE WANT TO TALK TO MOSES AND ELIJAH?

**Did Jesus have a need to talk to Moses and Elijah or did he just want to, or was it just for the disciples to see him talking to Moses and Elijah?**

Because of the way that we think about God, we tend to think that the whole reason for the transfiguration was for the disciples sake; after all he brought the disciples. But the thing is, they did not ask to see his glory like Moses and Elijah had. The disciples were actually asleep for part or most of the conversation.

So, did Jesus initiate this conversation because of some desire or need of his own? It seems unlikely to me that Jesus would be praying and suddenly, he would look up and see Moses and Elijah and say, "Hey guys, why are you here! So good to see you again." By whatever means it was that Moses and Elijah were there, it certainly was at the bidding of Jesus.

Did Jesus need to talk to them? We don't usually ever think about Jesus having a need. It is heretical to say that God has any needs or any needs that we can know about or that are met by any created thing.

But, we do need to remember that Jesus was fully man and fully God. At the incarnation, Jesus became fully human. He did not lose any of his attributes as God. The doctrine of the church since the 5th century has recognized that Jesus has two natures; one fully human and one fully God. These two natures are not co-mingled together to make a third kind of thing; for example, taking sodium (a soft metal) and putting it with chlorine (a gas) to get salt. The two natures are not comingled, nor are his two natures ever in opposition to each other, but operate separately and in union with each other. We can hardly imagine this fact that Jesus was fully human and fully God; but he is and will be forever. We cannot conceive of having two natures any more than we conceive of the Trinity: One God in three persons.

There were various heresies that arose in the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries over this issue. Some still persist in various cults. Some teach that "the Christ" came upon a man, a good man at that, named Jesus and inhabited him and

I guess left him at his death. This is a heresy. Jesus was not a man that the Christ inhabited. Jesus as a man was indivisible from the divine nature. They cannot be separated and never will be, even in eternity. The Bible also says that Jesus is our forerunner; his resurrected body that was sown from human form, will be the same kind that we have, because we are both human.

So, since Jesus was both human and God at the same time, he opened himself up to have needs. When Jesus walked 20 or 30 miles in a day, his feet were sore; he was tired; he had to eat. It was necessary for him to identify with us completely as humans. That is why we can have comfort that God knows us and has compassion on us; He always has, yet he chose to identify fully with humanity and become human in the incarnation.

After Jesus's temptation in the desert, Mark says this,

**Mark 1:12–13 (ESV)**

**12** The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. **13** And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

They were ministering to him because he had needs.

When Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane before he was to be crucified, it says he was praying passionately. He prayed, "Lord let his cup pass from me, but not my will but yours" and he sweated, "great drops of blood." He was also asking his disciples to pray with him, which they never did because they were overcome with sleep.

Did Jesus want to talk to Moses and Elijah for the sake of some encouragement or ministry that they might have toward him, like the angels had when they ministered to him in the desert? We can't say, but

maybe. The Bible says they were talking about his departure, meaning his coming death and suffering and resurrection for the sake of all men in all times. **The reality of this momentous event began to weigh on Jesus.**

Jesus had needs, but his focus was always on meeting the needs of others.

**Matthew 20:28 (ESV)**

28 even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

That is one of the reasons that I think we can sort of treat Jesus as a vending machine, “hmm I think I’d like K3” Cha-chung. He is always there for us, but that does not mean that we are everything to him.

The Bible says in **Psalms 50:12–15 (ESV)**

12 “If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine. 13 Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? *[like the false God of other nations]* 14 Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High, 15 and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.”

God is self-sufficient, yet he opened himself up to need and suffering in the incarnation.

But aside from “need” to meet some sort of deficit, there is “need” in the sense of a requirement. Was there something that Jesus wanted to communicate to Moses and Elijah for their sake, or something that needed to be done? Perhaps.

Maybe Jesus just “wanted” to talk to them. We don’t think of God as wanting things either. We don’t think of him doing something for the

“pleasure” of it, but the Bible is clear that God does take pleasure in his creation. We are so shortsighted that we don’t imagine that God gets pleasure from anything other than humanity or meeting our needs.

**Genesis 1:31 (ESV)**

**31** And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

God took pleasure in what he made. The sunrises, the squirrels in the trees, the trillion galaxies, the whales and jelly fish too.

And God does take pleasure in his people.

**Psalms 147:10–11 (ESV)**

**10** His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man, **11** but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.

As a kid, your mom might say, do you want to get something for dad for Father’s Day? This creates a dilemma for a kid, of course, “I do, but what could I possibly get dad?” “I make \$2 a week, and dad makes a gazillion times more than that!”

Or maybe you can imagine your mom saying something like this...“do you know what I want for Christmas? I want you kids just to be grateful for all that you have and stop fighting with one another!”

God does have desires and a will for us, it involves us loving one another and learning to live like Jesus did.

The point is, we don’t know all of God’s own reasons for the transfiguration. But we also need to see that he did bring the disciples

along for a reason and it was not so they could get some mountain air and catch a few z's. Because this event is in the Bible, we can know that it is meant for our building up and edification. It happened to the disciples; they were part of the reason, and it had a profound effect on them, and they wrote about it in the Bible for us and others to benefit from.

Usually at some point in preparing a sermon, I will read a commentary about the passage. It may help me in forming the big picture of the sermon or bringing in some relevant points.

But there is something we need to realize that when it concerns these appearances to these five men, the Bible also offers some commentary. Moses and Elijah and John and Peter wrote about their experiences of seeing God in his glory. James did not have a chance since he was the first martyr among the Apostles killed by Herod's order.

#### WHAT GOD WANTED TO TELL THEM

Peter babbled on about building a tabernacle for Jesus and Moses and Elijah – maybe he thought, let's keep this party going and hang out here awhile. But at this point God the Father moved in to give a commentary:

#### *Verse 5*

*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." 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." 8 And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.*

**God told them, "listen to Jesus."** Maybe Peter was sort of making them equal in wanting to make a tabernacle for each of them. But God said, my Son is here; something new is here. Listen to him.

Years later when John wrote his account, the gospel of John, he wrote these words in the introduction. Notice how much he speaks of Jesus as light and glory.

**John 1:1–5 (ESV)**

**1** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was in the beginning with God. **3** All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. **4** In him was life, and the life was the light of men. **5** The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

**John 1:9–10 (ESV)**

**9** The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. **10** He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.

**John 1:14 (ESV)**

**14** 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.

John certainly was using light as a metaphor, but I wonder how much of that was because he saw Jesus as the literal light. He saw the heavenly glory of Jesus, but knew that he was completely humble and full of grace and truth.

The transfiguration had a deep impact on Peter too. When he wrote 2 Peter years later, he said this about the transfiguration,

**2 Peter 1:16-18 (ESV)**

**16** 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.

And what was his conclusion? Verse 19

**19** And we have the prophetic word [right now] **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,

**20** knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation.

**21** For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

When he speaks of “prophecy of scripture” he means the word of God; the Bible. He is saying that what we have right now, more fully confirmed than even the vision and voice from heaven, is the Bible. It was not made up by men, as one’s interpretation, but they were carried by the Holy Spirit to write what is in the Bible.

In other words, the words of the Bible are more sure than the face to face vision that he saw.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO US?

### **So, what does the transfiguration mean to us?**

First of all we recognize that in the transfiguration, there were things that God was doing for his own purposes. We got a glimpse into God doing something for his own purposes. The Temptation of Christ and Christ's prayer in the garden of Gethsemane are a couple of other examples of that.

But we also saw that John and Peter's life was altered by that experience. God used it to reinforce that Jesus was the divine Son of God, and that their primary job was to listen to him. You've heard it said, "don't just stand there! Do something!" Well, it was as if God was saying, "Don't just do something, stand there!" – and listen.

When we think of the fact that just five people on earth had seen a vision of God's glory, we might get Jealous, but what Peter is saying to the recipient of his letter, and us too, is that we have something more certain than even this momentous vision of God. We have the word of God and we ought to be listening to it.

I remind you too, that every believer has the Holy Spirit living in them. The very same word that was used of Jesus' transformation, metamorphoo, is used of you as a believer in Christ.

### **2 Corinthians 3:17–18 (ESV)**

**17** Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. **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.

Jesus has appeared to you in his glory, and it is not him that is being transformed this time, it is you.

That is the hope that we have in our relationship with Christ. We pursue belonging, believing and becoming. We are becoming transfigured into his image and we give God thanks.

Please pray with me.