

Glory

JESUS FULFILLS GOD'S MESSAGE OF HOPE FOUND
IN THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS.

Years ago when the Southern Baptist Convention scheduled its annual meeting in Las Vegas, Nevada, a couple of my pastor friends and I decided to make the trip together. None of the three of us had ever traveled to Las Vegas, but we calculated that it would take between twenty-two to twenty-four hours to drive there from Denton, Texas. By leaving early on Monday morning, we determined that we could arrive to the convention site by the next morning. Our wives drove us to our meeting place. After we kissed them goodbye, we piled into the car and took off, taking turns driving, practically non-stop. We arrived on Tuesday morning completely road weary but ready for the convention.

I don't really remember much about what happened during the convention, but we enjoyed a memorable highlight on our drive back home. We decided that we could squeeze in a side trip to see the Grand Canyon. My wife and I had visited there several years prior so I convinced my two buddies that it would be worth stopping to see this magnificent sight.

We took out a road atlas to calculate a route that would not cost us more time than absolutely necessary. We finally reached the entrance to Grand Canyon National Park, but we still had a few miles to drive before we could view the canyon itself. When we finally reached the South Rim, we were greeted with a breathtaking view and our hearts swelled with awe. Just a glimpse of the beauty struck us so profoundly that we almost forgot about the hours of driving still ahead of us to return to Texas.

As we prepared to make our way back to the car, a busload of Asian tourists made their way to the rim. Suddenly they broke out in song. Though we could not recognize their words, we knew the melody as they burst forth their praise singing "How Great Thou Art." We stood in awe and joined them in singing our praise.

While it's not a perfect comparison, in some ways the experience mirrors the transfiguration; when Jesus was lifted high and revealed in glorious light. In our lives, we often face trials that cloud our vision, yet God invites us to those mountaintop moments where our spirits are renewed, just as the disciples' faith was strengthened on that day.



UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT



Matthew 17:1-27

In this chapter, Matthew recounted some key moments in Jesus’s ministry, emphasizing His divine authority, the importance of faith, and His mission to fulfill prophecy. The apostle included three significant events—the transfiguration (vv. 1-13), the healing of a demon-possessed boy (vv. 14-20), and the temple tax incident (vv. 24-27).

Matthew 17 underscored Jesus’s divine identity and mission while teaching critical lessons about faith, humility, and obedience. The Transfiguration revealed His glory and His fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. The healing of the boy highlighted the importance of faith and reliance on God’s power. The temple tax incident demonstrated Jesus’s humility and His commitment to living in harmony with societal expectations to a certain degree, even as He pointed to deeper spiritual truths. These events prepared the disciples for the challenges ahead as they followed Jesus to the cross and beyond.



EXPLORE THE TEXT



Transfigured (Matt. 17:1-3)

Jesus took Peter, James, and John on top of a high mountain. There, He was transfigured. They saw His glory, along with Moses and Elijah, who represented the Law and the Prophets. This event provided the disciples with a glimpse of Jesus’s divine glory and heavenly authority.

VERSE 1

After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and his brother John and led them up on a high mountain by themselves.

Matthew used the time frame of **after six days** as a striking anticipatory fulfillment of what Jesus predicted for “some standing here” (16:28). The reference to the time frame may also allude to Moses’s receiving the law on Sinai after six days of preparation (Ex. 24:16), and **Peter, James, and his brother John** may remind readers of Moses’s companions Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu (v. 1).

Apparently Peter, James, and John comprised the inner circle of His twelve disciples. Jesus revealed more to these three men than to the other disciples. They accompanied Him when He raised Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:37; Luke 8:51) and then met with them privately on the Mount of Olives (Mark 13:3). In the garden of Gethsemane as Jesus endured intense spiritual affliction, He told His disciples to "sit here while I pray," but took Peter, James, and John a bit further into the garden as He prayed alone (14:32-33).

By leading His disciples **up on a high mountain by themselves**, Jesus took them as far as possible from other people and from everyday life. Matthew did not specifically identify the "high mountain" to which Jesus and His disciples withdrew. Two mountains have been linked to the transfiguration site, Mount Tabor in lower Galilee and Mount Hermon at the base of Caesarea Philippi. However, Mount Tabor is not a particularly high mountain (1,886 feet) and inaccessible in Jesus's day due to its fortifications, making the taller Mount Hermon (9,100 feet) the more likely location. Whatever the location, the event was so significant to the disciples that Peter recalled it later in his life (2 Pet. 1:16-18).

VERSE 2

He was transfigured in front of them, and his face shone like the sun; his clothes became as white as the light.

That Jesus was **transfigured** meant that His appearance was changed or transformed so that his **face** and his **clothes** shone with dazzling brilliance and whiteness suggesting glory, purity, and sovereignty. Luke wrote that as Jesus prayed, "the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white" (Luke 9:29). Transfigured "does not imply that Jesus experienced any internal transformation . . . the term implies that the outer form now corresponded to Jesus's inner essence."¹

Two words, **sun** and **light**, characterized Jesus's transfigured appearance, indicating the unique nature of His countenance. Moses's face shone like this for a time with a reflection of the divine glory he had seen on Mount Sinai (Ex. 34:29-35). However, Jesus's face and clothes did not merely reflect divine glory but radiated with His own heavenly glory. "The visual 'transformation' is not so much a physical alteration as an added dimension of glory . . . with the dullness of earthly conditions temporarily stripped away, so that the true nature of God's 'beloved Son' (v. 5) can for once be seen . . . Here on the mountain we have at least a foretaste of the coming of the Son of Man 'in his Father's glory with his angels' (16:27), though the heavenly beings who accompany

him here are not angels but glorified humans.”² Mark described Jesus’s clothes as more intensely white than anyone on earth could bleach them (Mark 9:3). Jesus literally changed into a source of light before their eyes.

VERSE 3

Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with him.

By inserting **suddenly**, often translated as “behold” (ESV, KJV), Matthew drew special attention to the next element of the narrative. The nuance of the Greek word suggests shock or surprise at the appearance of **Moses** and **Elijah** who conversed with Jesus. Moses and Elijah symbolized Jesus’s connection to the Law and Prophets, and the Jewish people had long expected the return of both at the end of the age (Deut. 18:15; Mal. 4:5-6).

Both men climbed up Mount Sinai (Horeb) to meet with God and experienced His presence (Ex. 24:15-18; 34:2-8; 1 Kings 19:8-15). They were also often believed never to have died but to have gone directly to God’s presence. Elijah went up to heaven by way of a fiery chariot in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11-12). In the case of Moses, however, while rabbinic tradition held that Moses never died but had been taken directly to heaven, Deuteronomy 34:5-6 recorded that Moses died in the land of Moab and that the Lord buried him.

Moses and *Elijah* together represented a way of saying that the whole of the Old Testament revelation found its fulfillment in Jesus. Matthew did not report what the two prophets said to Jesus; although Luke indicates their discussion concerned Jesus’s departure (sacrificial death) which was about to be accomplished in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31).

Explore Further

Read the article “Transfiguration” on pages 1592–1593 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*.

How does the event of the transfiguration reflect the nature of Jesus as both fully God and fully man? What are some ways we can encounter God in our own lives? Pray that God would give you such encounters.

Overshadowed (Matt. 17:4-8)

While Peter suggested creating a memorial, the Father's presence overwhelmed them. As He had at Jesus's baptism, God affirmed Jesus as the unique Son of God and urged the disciples to heed His words. When the moment had passed, they found only Jesus was with them. This event emphasized Jesus's divine authority and the importance of listening to Him.

VERSE 4

Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it’s good for us to be here. If you want, I will set up three shelters here: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

With no indication that the prophets had intended to include any of the disciples in their conversation with Jesus, Peter impetuously interrupted them, awkwardly stating, **“Lord, it’s good for us to be here.”** He proposed setting up **three shelters** (probably little huts made of branches) to commemorate this remarkable event. His interruption revealed that while he had declared that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (16:16), his understanding of Jesus's messiahship remained shallow. Mark noted that Peter said this “because he did not know what to say, since they were terrified” (Mark 9:6; see Luke 9:33).

VERSE 5

While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased. Listen to him!”

The descent of a **bright cloud** and a **voice from the cloud** abruptly interrupted Peter's offer. Exodus notes concerning the Lord's glory, “The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days. On the seventh day he called to Moses from the cloud. The appearance of the LORD's glory to the Israelites was like a consuming fire on the mountaintop” (Ex. 24:16-17). Exodus also describes the presence of God coming down upon the tabernacle as a cloud covering the tabernacle as “the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (40:34). The same cloud also led the Israelites during the days of their wilderness travel to the promised land (vv. 36-38).

A bright cloud covered them. The Greek term for *covered* is a rare verb used in the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament) to describe the

glory of the Lord resting over the tabernacle (v. 35). The *voice from the cloud* interrupted Peter and reiterated the words spoken at Jesus's baptism (Matt. 3:17), adding a significant addition, "**Listen to him!**" The Greek verb for *listen* carries the idea of not merely hearing, but obeying what is heard. "Just as God publicly endorsed Jesus as the royal Messiah and Suffering Servant prior to the beginning of the main stage of his ministry, now at the beginning of the road to the cross he repeats his endorsement even more dramatically, though much less publicly."³

VERSE 6

When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown and were terrified.

The three disciples' enthusiasm to savor this amazing experience rapidly changed to terror when they **heard** the voice from the cloud. At the sound of the voice the disciples **fell facedown and were terrified**. The idea of falling prostrate was usually seen as an act of humility before God or sometimes powerful men. While the Greek term for *terrified* can have the sense of reverence, the disciples falling down at the sound of God's voice was not an act of worship, but because of their terror. They recognized the awesome power of the presence and voice of God. This is the only Gospel that records the disciples' terror and Jesus's response to them.

VERSE 7

Jesus came up, touched them, and said, "Get up; don't be afraid."

Peter, James, and John remained prostrate until **Jesus came up**, treating them with gentleness by touching them. Wanting to calm their fears, Jesus **touched them, and said, "Get up; don't be afraid."** He treated them with gentleness following their terrifying glimpse of the glory and power of heaven.

VERSE 8

When they looked up they saw no one except Jesus alone.

By the time Jesus told them to get up, everything had returned to normal. When the disciples **looked up**, Moses and Elijah had disappeared, and **they saw no one except Jesus**, who had returned to His fully human appearance as the Son of Man. Still, Peter, James, and John knew what they had seen. They never forgot the image of Jesus radiating the glory

of heaven, clothed in dazzling white with His face shining like the sun as He spoke with Moses and Elijah. Nor did they forget hearing the voice of God the Father declaring that Jesus is His beloved Son and commanding them to listen to Him (2 Pet. 1:16-18).

Explore Further

Christians worship Jesus as our Savior and Lord whose teachings we are to obey. What are some things that might hinder a believer from clearly hearing and obeying Jesus's commands? Are there any such things in your own life? If so, ask God to help you remove them from your life.

Instructed (Matt. 17:9-13)

Jesus ordered His three disciples not to speak of what they had seen and experienced on the mountain until after His resurrection. The disciples asked Jesus about the coming of Elijah. Jesus affirmed that Elijah had come as a forerunner for the Messiah in the person of John the Baptist.

VERSE 9

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Don’t tell anyone about the vision until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.”

Beginning their descent from the mountain, Jesus **commanded** Peter, James, and John to keep quiet about what they had just witnessed. He certainly wanted to avoid any confusion with people about His mission as the Messiah or to further inflame the enmity of the Jewish leaders. This marked the final time Matthew made reference to the motif of silence concerning His identity (8:4; 9:30; 12:16-21; 16:20), but here Jesus said that the disciples must not disclose His identity as the Messiah until after **“the Son of Man is raised from the dead.”** Jesus did not want the disciples’ words concerning His transfiguration to create or fuel misunderstandings concerning Himself with the people or even among His own disciples. Only after Jesus’s resurrection, when such misunderstandings concerning His identity would no longer be possible, could the disciples openly speak about this event.

VERSE 10

So the disciples asked him, “Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?”

Peter, James, and John wrestled with what they had witnessed on the mountain and what Jesus had just said about the Son of Man rising from the dead. However, instead of saying anything about the vision or their need for silence, they asked, **“Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?”** They had just seen Jesus talking with Elijah and Moses. However, they could not reconcile this with their understanding about Elijah coming before the Messiah to usher in the Messianic Age (Mal. 4:5-6). Why did Messiah have to suffer, die, and be raised (Matt. 16:21) if Elijah was to restore all things? They struggled with the idea of a suffering Messiah who would die. The disciples would express this nationalistic theme of a conquering Messiah even after Jesus’s resurrection (Acts 1:6-7).

VERSES 11-12

“Elijah is coming and will restore everything,” he replied. “But I tell you: Elijah has already come, and they didn’t recognize him. On the contrary, they did whatever they pleased to him. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.”

In verse 11, Jesus replied by using the scribes’ paraphrase of Malachi 4:5, **“Elijah is coming and will restore everything.”** The use of the futuristic present tense emphasized the certainty of Elijah’s coming.

Then Jesus corrected the scribes’ understanding of the prophecy concerning Elijah with the phrase, **“but I tell you,”** and adding, **“Elijah has already come.”** However, the religious leaders **didn’t recognize him.** Jesus had previously spoken of John the Baptist as “the Elijah who is to come” (11:14). While John was not the Old Testament person of Elijah returned, John went before the Messiah “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17). The prophet had come unrecognized and therefore did not receive the welcome he would have had if they had realized who he was. Israel’s political leaders, in the form of Herod Antipas, did to John **whatever they pleased.** Herod had John arrested and eventually had him executed (Matt. 14:1-11).

Jesus then explained to His disciples that just as the Jewish religious leaders had mistreated and killed John the Baptist, **“In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.”** Jesus would also

be rejected and suffer at the hands of the religious and political leaders of Israel (Isa. 53:3-6). Jesus did not disguise His words to the disciples about His approaching suffering, death, and resurrection.

VERSE 13

Then the disciples understood that he had spoken to them about John the Baptist.

The disciples understood that Jesus referred to **John the Baptist** as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Elijah's return. Jesus would suffer similar mistreatment, suffering and dying at the hands of the Jewish religious leaders and the Romans. But Jesus would rise from the dead (v. 9).

Explore Further

Reflect on the revelation of Jesus's glory and the fulfillment of God's promises in Matthew 17:9-13. Begin by praising God for sending Jesus, the promised Messiah. Pray for the ability to see and understand how God works in your life, even in unexpected ways. Ask for the courage to turn away from sin and align your heart with God's purposes, as John the Baptist called people to do (Luke 3). Reflect on how Jesus prepared His disciples for the journey ahead and commit to trusting Him even when the future seems uncertain. Close your prayer by thanking God for His ultimate restoration of all things He promises through Jesus (Rev. 21-22).

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1. Charles L. Quarles, *Matthew*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022), 429.
 2. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 647.
 3. Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 264.