

The Transfiguration: a preview of Jesus' glory

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[0 : 0 0] The reading is from Matthew chapter 17, verses 1 to 13, and it's found on page 984 of the church Bibles.

So that's Matthew chapter 17, starting at verse 1. After six days, Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John, the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.

There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then, there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, This is my son, whom I love.

With him I am well pleased. Listen to him. When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them.

[1 : 3 0] Get up, he said. Don't be afraid. And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, Don't tell anyone what you have seen until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.

The disciples asked him, Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first? Jesus replied, To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things.

But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him. But I have done to him everything they wished. In the same way, the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.

Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Thanks so much, Catherine, for reading.

And let me add my welcome to Derek and Martin's. It's good to see you today. And I guess most of us here are probably fed up with hearing corny jokes from our Christmas crackers over the last few weeks.

[2 : 4 7] But have you heard the one about the magic tractor? It turned into a field. Sorry, terrible joke.

It does grow in you, can I assure you. But we're thinking today about Jesus' transfiguration. It's a word we never use except in this passage in the Bible.

To transfigure just means to change or alter something. So Jesus' transfiguration just means that Jesus' appearance changed. And the tractor joke for which I profusely apologize is basically a play on words, obviously.

Two different meanings of turn into. And the fact that I've had to explain the joke just reinforces how bad it is. It's obviously not transfigured in that the tractor did not morph or change into a field.

And so as we think about the significance of Jesus' transfiguration in our lives, we're going to need to pray and ask for God's help. So let's join together in prayer. Father, would you lead us up this holy mountain today, this mount of transfiguration.

- [4 : 01] And would you help us by the Holy Spirit to behold something of the majesty of your glorious Son, the Lord Jesus. To behold him and listen to him.
- And by beholding him and listening to him, may we also be transfigured and equipped and moved and motivated to take up our cross and follow him.
- In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, if you're going to set out on a journey, wherever that may be, you want to be sure where you're headed. If you're going to be going somewhere, you want to know that it's going to be worth your while.
- Well, I was catching up with somebody earlier this week, not from St. Silas, and they'd been away on holiday for two or three weeks over Christmas. And as he described the journey to me, it sounded like a total nightmare.
- More of a 24 hours journey door to door, including delays and a stopover in Dubai. Two small boys, one of them was kind of okay.
- [5 : 08] He was happy to be plugged into the laptop and watch some Pixar movie five times over. He was fine. But the other one got really bad travel sickness. He was sick six times, even just on the way out.
- And I was thinking to myself, that's total madness. Why would you do that? Complete nightmare. And I asked him, what on earth were you thinking doing that, setting off on a journey like that?
- He just pulled his phone out of his pocket and showed me this, a picture of this beach in the middle of the Indian Ocean, a stunningly beautiful beach in Sri Lanka.
- I thought to myself, okay, you've weighed this up. You've counted the cost of getting there and decided it's gonna be worth it. Well, friends, we need to know where we're headed and that we're on the right path.
- And that's true. If you're someone and you're here this morning, here today for Back to Church Sunday, maybe you're exploring the Christian faith for the first time, maybe you're finding yourself drawn back to it after some time away.
- [6 : 19] Or maybe like Andy shared earlier on in the interview, maybe you're somebody who's finding that your faith has just been stagnating this past while and you're looking to get back stuck into it like that.
- Whoever you are, you wanna be sure about it. You wanna be sure what you're getting yourself into. You wanna be counting the cost. But maybe you're here, as I know that many of us are, and you've already started out on the journey of following Jesus.
- We need reminding too, don't we, that it's all gonna be worth it in the end. And following Jesus is the most exciting, the most exhilarating and fulfilling and thrilling adventure that we can be on.
- But it's not always easy. And the Christian life doesn't promise, doesn't guarantee that your life is gonna be a bed of roses.
- And some of you here today will know that only too well these past few weeks, this past while. Christian life isn't always a bed of roses.
- [7 : 31] And if you were here last week, you might remember what Jesus said in chapter 16, verse 24, if you just flick back a page. In chapter 16, verse 24, not only did Jesus tell them that he himself would suffer and be killed before being raised from the dead, but in 16, 24, Jesus then said to his disciples, whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.
- And for the disciples that Jesus was with then, the road ahead meant witnessing Jesus on the cross, his face not transfigured there, but disfigured.

And it meant for themselves a life of suffering, often hardship, and persecution. And so the purpose of the transfiguration was to remove something of their stumbling concerning the cross, the suffering of saviour, and the cross-shaped life.

And if we're going to follow Jesus, if we're going to follow Jesus, we need that confidence that Jesus is who he says he is, especially when he doesn't look very glorious.

And we need surety that we're on the right path, especially when it doesn't feel very glorious. And the transfiguration gives us that assurance.

[9 : 15] It's like a guarantee. And the transfiguration tells us it's going to be worth it, though the path ahead may be hard. And it gives us a kind of audio, visual, cinematic, almost preview of Jesus' glory.

So that's how we're going to break it into two parts today, the visual and the audio. So the first part of it is, look. Look at this glorious sight.

Behold this sight. So this has to be one of the most dramatic, the most extraordinary scenes in the whole of Matthew's Gospel.

So let's read from verse 1 of chapter 17 again. After six days, Jesus took with him his inner circle of Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain.

And there he was transfigured before them. So it's a dazzling, dramatic scene. Let's face it, downright strange and weird.

[10 : 20] Just think about it. Jesus goes up on a mountain with three friends and is transfigured before them in front of two dead prophets.

What's going on here? Well, transfigured translates the Greek word metamorpho from which we get the word metamorphosis. And if any of you have ever studied any biology, you'll know that metamorphosis is a process by which a creature like a caterpillar turns into a beautiful butterfly, undergoes a radical transformation like that, a transfiguration, you could say, and comes out as a beautiful butterfly.

Well, up the mountain, Jesus' appearance radically changes. And his transformation is quite astonishing.

You could say he is having a bona fide literal glow up on the mountain. See what it says in verse two. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light.

What a glorious sight that must have been to behold. And Matthew, the gospel writer, struggling even for words to describe it. A blindingly beautiful sight. Jesus is glorified.

[11 : 42] His face is beaming, shining forth like the rays of the sun and his white clothes radiance like that as well. What's the significance of it?

What does it mean? It's not an advert for some new detergent, not a Dazz Ultra doorstep challenge for Moses and Elijah to come along and see how to get their clothes as white as that.

What's the significance? Well, three things, at least three things. Three things we're going to consider today. First thing, it makes sense of a really puzzling statement that Jesus has just made.

It makes sense of a puzzling thing that Jesus just said. So if we look at the first verse again, it's easy for us to skip over the first part of verse one, but those three little words after six days come immediately after Jesus speaking in verse 27 of chapter 16 of the Son of Man returning in glory.

And Jesus is referring here to the future end time when Jesus has promised to come back, which is why it's so curious, so puzzling when Jesus immediately goes on to say in verse 28, truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in glory.

- [13 : 16] I mean, who could possibly live that long? The answer is Peter, James, and John. See, the puzzling statement makes sense if it's referring to the transfiguration six days later.
- And that, I think, helps us to see the transfiguration, helps us to see the transfiguration as a foretaste, as a preview of the end of the age when Jesus will return in his Father's glory.
- So not everyone there that day would see it. Not everyone standing there, not all the twelve of the disciples, but Peter, James, and John did see it. And they'd never forget this experience.
- Peter would go on to write about it in his second letter, talking about being eyewitnesses to Jesus' majesty at Jesus' transfiguration. And the references to the Son of Man in Daniel chapter 7, one like a Son of Man, he's referred to there.
- In other words, Jesus, comes to the Father who's described in that chapter as the Ancient of Days and is given an everlasting kingdom.
- [14 : 30] It's no accident that the Ancient of Days in Daniel chapter 7 is described as having clothing, white as snow, just as Jesus' clothes are described here in verse 2, white as light.
- And you can come back this evening to see how this description matches up to the risen, glorified Jesus in Revelation 1, which Martin's preaching to us from this evening.
- Well, that's the first thing. The transfiguration gives us a preview of Jesus' future glory, a future when Jesus will surely return to consummate his kingdom.
- Second thing, Jesus' face, Jesus' shining face, echoes Moses' shining face. And the presence of Moses and Elijah here is fascinating.
- You can hardly scratch the surface of it here, but both these Old Testament prophets had significant mountaintop experiences with God. And Moses' experience is especially relevant because it results in his own transfiguration.
- [15 : 37] And in the evening services before Christmas, we were looking at the book of Exodus in the Old Testament and we'd just got to chapter 24 when we finished the series back at the beginning of December.
- But you can look it up in page 82, Exodus 24, because the parallels are just striking. So Exodus chapter 24.
- At the transfiguration, Jesus takes three friends up the mountain. We're told in Exodus 24, 9 that Moses takes with him three friends up Mount Sinai, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu.
- And in Matthew chapter 17, verse 5, we're told that a bright cloud covered them. Likewise, in Exodus 24, 15, it says, when Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai.
- Just as Jesus went up the mountain after six days, we're told in Exodus chapter 24, verse 16, that for six days the cloud covered the mountain, for six days.
- [17 : 02] And on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses and Moses went on up the mountain. And then later on in the book of Exodus, we find out that Moses' experience up Mount Sinai in the presence of God resulted in his own transfiguration with his face shining so brightly that they had to cover it with a veil.
- The difference is Moses' face shined with the reflected glory of God. Moses' face shined with the reflected glory.
- But Jesus' face shined with his own intrinsic glory. So that's the second thing. Both Jesus and Moses go up a mountain after six days taking three companions, meet with God and are transfigured.
- The third thing, the transfiguration is in stark contrast with the cross. It's in stark contrast with the cross and the disciples needed to see that.

It happens six days of course after Peter confessed that Jesus is the Messiah and the son of the living God and it's six days after Jesus told them, yes, but I'm not the kind of Messiah that you think I am.

[18 : 17] I'm the kind of Messiah who first must suffer and die before being raised. I think we are meant to see the contrast between the two scenes, between what they see previewed in the transfiguration of Jesus' future glory and what they're about to witness at the cross.

So note the following. Here at the transfiguration, it's up a mountain. It's a scene of radiant brightness. Jesus is flanked by two great prophets, his face gloriously transfigured.

At the cross, it's on another high place, the hill of Calvary, but darkness covers the land. Jesus hangs on the cross between two criminals, his face scandalously disfigured, beaten and bruised, his head pierced with a crown of thorns.

The contrast is stark. The transfiguration is a preview of Jesus' future glory. This future can only come through Jesus' death and resurrection.

This is why Jesus warns the disciples, the three disciples in verse 9, don't tell anyone what you've seen until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.

[19 : 41] There's a reason why art galleries are filled with portraits of people because the portrait of a person, the face of a person reveals something of a person's identity.

Similarly, in the transfiguration, one of the few places in the Bible where we get a description of Jesus' face, the shining face of Jesus reveals his glorious identity.

That's the visual part of it. we'll go on to think about the hearing part of it now. So listen, this is the glorious saying. The Fly is a 1986 David Cronenberg film featuring Jeff Goldblum playing the main character who is transfigured into a horrific giant fly.

And as much as anything else, the film is famous for its tagline, Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid, which seems to have entered our cultural conscience.

But by changing the tagline just a little bit, we could adapt it for Jesus' transfiguration. So instead of Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid, we could do it Be Assured, Be Very Assured.

[21 : 00] That's what Matthew is trying to show us here. So, so far, we've been assured in what we've seen that Jesus is who he says he is, the Messiah who will die first, suffer and die before being raised to glory.

Now, in what we hear, we're to be very assured that we're on the right path if we're following him, even if that path at times doesn't feel very glorious.

So, okay, at this point in the story, Peter is absolutely loving it at the Mount of Transfiguration, verse 4. He says to Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here.

And of course, it is good for them to be there. He recognises that this mountaintop is a scene of true glory. He's in the presence of glory.

He's in the presence of God. He's totally buzzing to be there. He's glad to be there. This is more like it, Jesus, he's thinking. More glory, less suffering, less dishonour.

[22 : 11] This is the kind of Messiah he has in mind. And Peter doesn't want it to end. He wants them to stay there, right there where they are. He doesn't want to leave this place. He doesn't want to go back down the mountain and see Jesus go through with what he's been talking about, about suffering.

He doesn't want to take up his own cross and follow him. But before we're too hard on Peter, we might examine ourselves. And if we're totally honest with ourselves, this is the kind of Christianity that sometimes we prefer.

The kind of Christianity that we saw last week Jesus described as satanic, kind of shortcut to glory, kind of distortion of Christianity.

Christianity. And we're attracted by the glory of Jesus, of course. But we could do without the trials and tribulation.

We could do without the strife and the hassle. And so Peter thinks this is it. And he gets it into his head that somehow he's going to fabricate three tents.

[23 : 19] But before he can get too carried away with his ideas, a bright cloud descends and a voice thunders from the clouds like a giant kind of PA system from the cloud in verse 5 and it's kind of divine megaphone diplomacy to get through to the disciples.

This is my son whom I love with whom I am well pleased. So far this is an almost identical repeat of what the same voice from the cloud said at Jesus' baptism.

But here in verse 5 the voice adds a vital instruction. Listen to him. Listen to him. The crucial question for us to be asking is listen to him about what we to listen to him about.

Of course Jesus doesn't say anything in our passage apart from Moses and Elijah which isn't recorded. Of course listening to Jesus is generally good advice for people who are trying to follow him.

I think there's more to it. I think it's more specific than that and there's two aspects to this I want us to take note of. The first thing is we're to pay attention to what Jesus is saying about suffering we're to pay attention to that.

[24 : 53] There's no way of getting around this. This command to listen to Jesus is bookended by two predictions that Jesus makes about his own suffering and death in 1621 and then again in verses 20 to 23 of our chapter which we'll come on to next week.

Jesus plainly tells us that first he must suffer and die before being raised from the dead. If we are to follow him that means we're to follow that same cruciform pattern.

Let's hear what Jesus says again about that. Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it.

But whoever loses their life for me will find it. So in the surrounding context of the narrative around the transfiguration the command listen to him concerns Jesus' prediction about his own suffering and death his predictions of the looming cross and the cross shaped life.

And sometimes our struggles in the Christian life sometimes our struggles our perceived lack of success in evangelism perhaps or being shunned by friends and colleagues at work for our Christian faith sometimes our sense of failure can make us feel that we've got something wrong we're not on the right track.

[26 : 36] Listen to what Jesus is saying our suffering and struggles are part and parcel of the Christian life. So if you've been feeling under the cautious past while the going's been tough if your walk with the Lord at the moment just feels like a bit of a drudge feels like you've been down in the valley or struggling with loneliness or discontentment or disappointment if your walk with the Lord has been difficult this past while struggling to overcome addictions or battling with besetting sins isn't what Jesus is saying stick with it this is the pattern this is the way but it's the way of the cross that leads to future vindication and glory so that's the first thing listening to

Jesus concerns the relationship between suffering and glory and the second thing the command to listen to him is a command to listen to him in particular and the command is a striking allusion to an incredible promise God made to Moses and I won't get you to turn to this one but in Deuteronomy 18 Moses says the Lord your God will raise up for you one day the Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you from your fellow Israelites you must listen to him exact words in our passage and then he goes on to say the

Lord says the transfiguration this long since promise is finally fulfilled a new prophet like Moses a new greater than Moses prophet is fulfilled and has arisen in the Lord Jesus and Elijah and Moses are merely the witnesses he's the one there to listen to he's the one that they point forward to so here is an unqualified commendation from the father of the teaching of the son the greater than Moses prophet now when the disciples hear this voice in verse six of our passage they fall down to the ground they're terrified they know that they're in the unapproachable presence of the living God I wonder did you notice how gentle Jesus is in verse seven he touches them he says get up literally be raised and he adds do not be afraid back in

Mount Sinai the people couldn't stand to be in the presence of the father's voice or see his great fire but here at the mount of transfiguration we behold God in the face of the Lord Jesus Christ and hear the father's affirmation of the son and when the disciples look up they're alone with Jesus again verse eight in other words the preview of Jesus future glory is over for a permanent experience of this glory glory of Jesus they must wait we must wait there's one more thing they have to get back down the mountain they have to get back to reality back down to earth with a bump and to say nothing of it until Jesus has been raised from the dead it won't make sense until after that but this prompts a further question from the disciples in verse 10 why then do the teachers of the law say that

Elijah must come first and they've perhaps understood something of what must happen first before the coming of the Lord in glory but why hasn't Elijah come with him why did he disappear well Jesus replies in verse 11 that they're right that Elijah must come first but he adds in verse 12 that Elijah has indeed already come and now they get what he's been saying verse 13 the disciples understand that Jesus is talking about John the Baptist who got his head chopped off and so he answers their question Jesus drew them back to what remains to happen before they can see his glory he Jesus is a son of man must suffer as John suffered and die as John died that's the pattern that's the way and the transfiguration gives us assurance of that it's like a guarantee and the transfiguration tells us that this is where we're going and where we're going

[32 : 06] Christians is a person the Lord Jesus the road ahead may be hard may be full of obstacles but here we have a glimpse of that future glory to be assured be very assured and stick with it let's pray heavenly father we've seen just a glimpse of the preview of the future glory that awaits us in the Lord Jesus we know that the reality will be better by far and so we pray that you would imprint on our minds and hearts this vision of Jesus glory and may your words ring in our ears listen to him and would you help us then by your spirit to commit to taking up our cross and following our crucified and risen savior would you help us to persevere in the days ahead and lead us on to eternal glory for we ask in the name of your glorious son amen and amen amen well we ask all story and we ask to

Gang we ask something■ and come say that amen then Yok Ihnen daughter about it so some have