

The Beauty of a Beloved Son

Matthew 17:1-13

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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 (Matt 17:1-13).

Last week we learned a very important summary that is central to the life of Christ and the whole of Christianity: **the cross before the crown, suffering before glory**. This is an enigma to most people because it is completely backwards as to how human beings naturally think. Humility, hardship, and suffering do not seem like the typical paths that lead to exaltation, power, and victory. So it makes sense that this was not the disciples' view of the path of the Messiah either. Their longing for the spiritual restoration and glory of Israel was so strong and so right, but they had categories in their minds that Jesus is busting. Jesus is unfolding the plan of God which involves suffering on the cross, death, and only then does victory come.

The plan, however, is not just about him; it is also about them. Jesus' path must be their path too if they will be his disciple. They must deny themselves, take up the shame of their own cross, and follow him. This is the path – the only path – of victory and glory.

Gratefully, Matthew not only identifies this path of suffering, he also gives his readers a stunning account of a moment in Jesus' life where his glory is clear to three of the disciples. It is almost as if he wants us to see a foretaste of his coming glory, and as if he wants us to catch a glimpse at the beauty of Jesus that is cloaked in his humanity and suffering.

Our text this morning gives us a window into the radiant beauty of who Jesus really is. His humanity hides the full picture of his glory, and the shame of cross will seem even more tragic after seeing this other-world display. We will behold the beauty of a beloved son, and I think we will be amazed by what we see and what it means for our lives.

Dynamics of a Beautiful Savior

I want to begin our treatment of this text by first looking at the meaning and the details of this event that is called the transfiguration of Jesus. It is loaded with meaning and significance.

1. The beauty of who he is (vv 1-2)

Chapter 17 introduces this moment in Jesus' life by setting the context of what we are about to see. We learn that six days after the discussion about the centrality of the cross, Jesus took Peter, James, and John away by themselves to a high mountain. This is the first time in Matthew that these men will be identified together as a group, and it is clear from other places in the New Testament that Peter, James, and John were Jesus' inner circle (see Matt 26:37, Mark 5:37). According to Luke 9:28 Jesus took them to the mountain for a time of prayer.

At some point in the evening (Luke suggests that it was during Jesus' prayer time) an amazing and glorious display takes place. Matthew 17:2 says, "And he was transfigured before them." Now this word "transfigured" is a difficult word. We really do not have an English word to adequately describe what happened in this moment. The Greek word is metamorphoo, and it basically means to transform or to change. The word is used as it relates to believers in two very important places:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom 12:1-2).

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 (2 Cor 3:18).

These verses point to a transformation or a change into something that we have yet to become. This is not what takes place in the transfiguration of Jesus, and that is precisely why translators do not use words like changed or transformed.

Jesus' transfiguration was not a change in essence but a change of disclosure. Jesus was not fundamentally different on that mountain; his glory was simply unveiled. In other words, for a few moments these three disciples caught a glimpse at who he really was. Philippians 2:6 tells us that even though Jesus was fully God he took upon himself the form a servant, "being born

in the likeness of men.” So Jesus walks the earth as the God-man with a glory that was concealed. But in this moment, the veil comes off.

The result of this unveiling is a beautiful and symbolic display of the glory of the Son. We find that “his face shone like the sun” and his clothes “became white as light.” The disciples catch a glimpse of the real glory of who Jesus is. He is fully human, but his humanity hides the powerful, radiant glory of his divinity. They had caught glimpses of this glory when Jesus did miracles or when they heard his powerful teaching. But this is divine beauty on display at a new level. They are able to see Jesus from the inside out.¹ To the disciples Jesus was radically different – his face and clothes were blazing light – but Jesus was not fundamentally changed. In that moment, they simply were able to see the full picture. So this event was not about alteration; it is about revelation. Peter James and John saw him for who he really was.

2. The beauty of what he fulfilled (v 3)

The second thing that happens in the text is that in the midst of this radiant display of glory suddenly (behold!) Moses and Elijah appear, and they begin talking with Jesus. Luke 9:31 tells us that they talked about the events that he was about to experience in Jerusalem. This is a remarkable moment in Biblical history as Jesus, Moses, and Elijah talk.

However, the appearance of Moses and Elijah has great significance. These two men were the most well-known, beloved, and influential prophets in the Bible. Moses was known as the great law-giver, the one who had received the 10 Commandments, and who had mediated on behalf of the people of Israel to God (Exodus 19-20). Elijah was the preeminent Old Testament prophet whose ministry involved calling the nation back to true worship, courageously fighting against the paganism of his day, and famously calling for fire from heaven on top of Mount Carmel (1 Kings 17-18). Moses represented the Law, Elijah the prophets. Moses was the mediator of God’s law; Elijah the guardian of God’s honor.²

In a word, this gathering is about fulfillment. In Matthew 5:17 Jesus had said that he did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them. Therefore, the presence of these two heroes is a beautiful picture of the validation of Christ’s ministry. Moses and Elijah pointed to him. In fact, Moses said something very interesting especially in light of what comes next in the text in Deuteronomy 18:15 – “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers – it is to him **that you shall listen...**”

Moses and Elijah’s appearance here is to demonstrate to the disciples and to us that everything in the Old Testament was pointing to Christ. After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to a few of his disciples, and Luke 24:27 gives this important summary: “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he {Jesus} interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning

¹ Fredrick Bruner, The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 167.

² Bruner, 169.

himself.” As one writer put it: “The Old Testament and New Testament sing a duet, but the New Testament carries the melody. Moses, Elijah, and Jesus are in conversation, but Jesus is Lord of Moses and Elijah.”³

The transfiguration not only shows us the glory of Jesus; it shows us the beauty of the divine fulfillment in the person of Jesus.

3. The beauty of the father’s approval (vv 4-8)

This event is truly remarkable, and it will become even more amazing. Peter is caught up in the excitement of the moment – “Lord it is good that we are here.” He then suggests that he could build three tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Now we are not sure what is going on inside Peter’s head at this moment. Mark’s account (9:6) says that Peter suggested this because he didn’t know what to say since he was afraid.⁴ Peter, in characteristic pattern, allows his thinking and his mouth to get ahead of him.

Apparently Peter is still talking (v 5) when the Father interrupts! A bright cloud enveloped all of them. In the Old Testament a cloud symbolized the presence and the glory of God. When the tabernacle was set up and dedicated by Moses in Exodus 40:35, a cloud descended upon the center of worship. The same thing happened in 1 Kings 8:10-11 when Solomon dedicated the temple. So God’s glory and his presence are often identified by the presence of this kind of cloud. The parallels here are not coincidental. However, in the past the cloud prevented people from being there, but this glorious cloud envelopes them.

But there’s even more here. While Peter is still speaking, a voice interrupts him. The Father speaks: “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” This is yet another moment loaded with meaning and significance. The Father doesn’t say “a wonderful son of mine” or “my most wonderful son of all.” Rather he says “This is my beloved Son,” which means that Jesus is the dear son. Luke records that God said that Jesus is the Chosen One. Further, he is the son with whom the Father is well-pleased. Now you’ve heard this before in Matthew. At Jesus’ baptism (Matt 3:17) the Father said the same thing.

This is a critically important event since the Father only speaks directly to people on earth twice in the entire gospel of Matthew and both times he says the same thing about Jesus. What is he saying here? It is the Father’s endorsement, approval, and affirmation of his Son and his mission on earth. It is the Father placing his son front and center as the full revelation of the Divine Word. It what Paul talks about in Colossians 1:19 – “For in him all the fullness of God was please to dwell.” And if Jesus is like this, then people should listen to him.

³ Bruner, 168.

⁴ An interesting side note: some suggest that Mark wrote his gospel with the help or editing of Peter. It is intriguing to consider that perhaps Peter provided this explanation to Mark since the other two gospels do not offer this explanation.

This is the climax of the transfiguration. This really is the point of this entire passage. Namely, that the glory of Christ is unveiled, his place in biblical history is identified, and he is validated by God himself. Jesus is the full disclosure of what God is like. Therefore, listen to him!

Whenever someone is confronted with the glory of God there is fear, and the three disciples are no different. Verse 6 says that when they heard this voice they fell on their face and were terrified. It is only when Jesus comes, touches them, and says "Rise, have no fear" that they feel safe. Verse 8 wraps up this powerful section with a statement that is more than just the details about this story: "when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only."

Again, this is the point of the transfiguration. It clearly identifies Jesus as the single focal point of God's redemptive plan. No one else was transfigured; no one else was validated; no one else is there for the disciples to see. Why? Because the gospel is not just about faith alone and grace alone but also Christ alone. There is no one like him! That is what the transfiguration is all about!

4. The beauty of an obedient son (vv 9-13)

The final element here reflects the conversation between Jesus and his disciples as they make their way down the mountain from this amazing moment in all of their lives. Jesus gives them clear instructions as to what they are to do with this information (v 9): "Tell no one the vision until the Son of Man is raised from the dead."

You might wonder why Jesus would tell this to his disciples. It seems Jesus does not want to give any more fuel to the misconceptions about his role as Messiah. There has already been enough misunderstanding; talking about what they had just seen would only make things worse. Jesus was intent on fulfilling his calling as prescribed from God, not meeting the false expectations of others.

The disciples then end this dialogue by asking him about the connection between Elijah's return and the Messianic fulfillment. Malachi 4:4 said, "Behold, I will send Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes." And to this Jesus simply says that Elijah had already come, the people did not recognize him, and they did whatever they pleased to him. His disciples in verse 13 finally understand that Jesus is referring to John the Baptist who came in the spirit and the power of Elijah (Luke 1:17).

However, the point of this exchange is what Jesus says in verse 12b: "So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands." Once again Jesus is showing them that the ministry of the Messiah is going to be different than what they anticipated. Jesus has his sights set on the suffering before him; he is an obedient Son and Messiah.

Reflections on the Beauty of Jesus

Now that we understand what happened at the transfiguration, let me draw out some personal reflections or applications of why this is important and what it means for our lives.

1. Jesus is beautiful to behold; long to see him.

Something amazing happened on the mountain. Peter, James, and John were able to behold the real beauty of Jesus. They were given the gift of that moment where they were able to see him for what he really is. They were there by invitation; they didn't deserve to see him like that; and no doubt it impacted them for the rest of their lives. John, writing years later said, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory, glory as the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14) (see also 2 Peter 1:17).

The disciples saw him in a new way. Jesus said something parallel to Nicodemus. He said, "...unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). In other words, you cannot see the beauty of the kingdom of God unless you are born again or regenerated. This is what happens at conversion: God grants you spiritual eyesight to see who Jesus is – the savior of your soul – and you would not see this without God's grace. But it doesn't stop there. Here is what Paul prayed for the Ephesian Church:

18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might 20 that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places... (Eph 1:18-20).

Jesus is beautiful to behold. I pray that God gives you the grace to really see him.

2. Jesus is the center of everything; don't miss him.

I love the fact that despite the fact that Moses and Elijah are present, the Father personally endorses his Son – "Listen to Him!" And I also love that when the cloud of glory lifts that there is no one there but Jesus. I love this because it is good to be reminded that Jesus is the center of everything. Just listen again to the power of the centrality of Jesus from the book of Colossians:

- He is the image of the invisible God (1:15)
- By him all things were created (1:16)
- He is before all things and in him all things hold together (1:17)
- He is the head of the church (1:18)
- In him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (1:19)

- Through him was the reconciliation of all things (1:20)
- In him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:3)
- In him you were circumcised, baptized, and raised (2:11-12)
- You died with Christ (3:3)
- Your life is hidden with Christ in God (3:3)
- When Christ, who is your life appears, you will appear with him in glory (3:4)

Therefore

- Seek the things that are above, **where Christ is.**

You see, it is all about knowing him; it is all about learning more about him; it is all about falling more in love with him. Christ, Christ, Christ – he is the center of everything, the center of everything we'd ever want or need.

3. We are to reflect his glory; make him known

Beholding the beauty transforms the beholder now! Listen to what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:16-18 –

But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. 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.

And the effect of this is stunning!

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart...For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. 7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. 8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies (2 Cor 4:1, 5-10).

The hope and the joy of the beholder of the beauty of Jesus is that others would see him in us!

4. One day we will see him in all of his glory; don't miss out.

The beauty of heaven is the complete and continual beholding of the beauty of Jesus. It was the very request of Jesus in John 17:24 – “Father, I desire that they... {may} see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.” Jesus wants us to see him like this.

And that is why Revelation 21:22 is so beautiful, and I pray that you will not miss out. You see the only ones who behold Jesus like this are those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life, a divine record of those who have placed their faith and trust in Christ.

Oh, I pray that you can see what is here! It is so beautiful if you know what you are seeing:

22 And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. 23 And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, 25 and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. 26 They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. 27 But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life (Rev 21:22-27).

So what is heaven all about? It is about the beauty of a beloved Son - a son who is seen for who he is; a son who fulfilled everything that was promised; a son who is exalted because of his obedience; a son who has the approval of the Father.

There is something eternally beautiful about beholding this level of glory.

No wonder Peter wanted to stay there!

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