

NO ONE EXCEPT JESUS

Matthew 17:1-8 The Transfiguration

17 After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.

³ Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

⁴ 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.”

⁵ 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!”

⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” ⁸ When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

MESSAGE:

In the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night before he was crucified, Jesus told His disciples that He would soon be leaving them. Then he added: “*You know the way to the place where I am going.*” But Thomas said, “*Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?*” Jesus’ answer to Thomas has caused more controversy than anything else he ever said. He said, “**I am the way, the truth and the life: no one comes to the Father except through me.**” (John 14:4-6) Theologians have referred to these words as “the scandal of Christianity,” meaning that they have caused widespread offense—even among some Christians. They have led people to accuse Christians of being arrogant and indulging in “Christian triumphalism.” “*So you think you Christians are going to be the only ones in heaven?*” To which our proper answer is: “*No, we think we Lutherans are going to be the only ones in heaven.*” Just kidding, of course, but if we believe the Bible to be the word of God then there is no escaping the clear and unequivocal meaning of what Jesus said: the only way we can have eternal life is through faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And that’s what makes the things that took place on Transfiguration Mountain so important, for it was there that Jesus revealed to Peter and James and John that He—and He alone—was God. Let’s look at the text:

“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.”

Wow! A lot to happen in three short verses! First of all, to be “transfigured” means to be changed in form. The Greek word is *metamorphosis*, which means “*to change from one form into another.*” When a caterpillar changes into a butterfly, it goes through

metamorphosis. When a tadpole changes into a frog, it undergoes metamorphosis. Jesus changed his physical form in front of his disciples in order to reveal to them that the itinerant rabbi they had been following around for two years was actually God Himself. He didn't show them his full divinity because they would not have survived the experience. In his sinful flesh, man cannot be in the presence of a Holy God and live; he would be instantly vaporized. But he showed them enough of His divinity to get the point across: the brilliant white light they saw was a clear indication that God was present. God had appeared to Old Testament prophets in the same way. To Daniel he appeared in a vision, *"having clothing as white as snow, hair as white as wool, and a face like lightning."* To the Israelites at Mt. Sinai God appeared as *"a consuming fire on top of the mountain."* Even the reflection of this consuming fire on the face of Moses was so bright that he had to cover his face with a veil in order to avoid blinding the Israelites. The light which emanated from Jesus there on the mountain top was the light of God Himself, making it clear to Peter and James and John that in the flesh and blood of a Palestinian peasant they were beholding Yahweh Elohim, the God of all creation.

Then two other figures appear with Jesus: Moses, the great Lawgiver, and Elijah, the greatest prophet of the Old Testament. The Law prescribed what the Israelites had to do in order to live in harmony with God; the prophets proclaimed God's promise that He would send a Savior who would save men from their sins. And between the Lawgiver and the Prophet stands Jesus, who came to fulfill the Law and atone for sin. Jesus, the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of mankind. Matthew simply records that Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus, but in Luke's account of the transfiguration we're told what they were talking about: they were discussing Jesus' *ἔξοδος*, his departure which he was about to bring to fulfillment in Jerusalem.

Not surprisingly, the three disciples were stunned by what was taking place in front of their eyes. *"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.'"* The word that is translated as "shelter" is a Greek word which referred to the tent of meeting or tabernacle where the Israelites gathered to worship Yahweh during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Peter was suggesting that the disciples build booths or tabernacles so that they could worship Jesus, Moses and Elijah. This was an understandable response: when one finds himself in the presence of God, he has no alternative but to worship Him. But it reveals a major flaw in Peter's thinking: he was trying to force-fit Jesus into an Old Covenant way of thinking. In Jesus' words, he was pouring new wine into old wineskins which couldn't possibly contain it. He was thinking of Jesus as a prophet and perhaps even the Messiah but didn't realize that he was much, much more than both. By offering to enshrine Moses and Elijah in tents of worship along with Jesus, he was considering the three of them to be roughly equal. There on the mountain, Jesus was only one of three equals.

And then the unthinkable happened: the glory of Almighty God, Yahweh Sabbaoth, descended upon the mountain in a cloud, just as it had at Mount Sinai, and enfolded them all. Lawgiver, prophet, Messiah and disciples—all were covered by the glory of God! Then the voice of God came out of the cloud, saying: *"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. LISTEN TO HIM!"* Prophet—to be sure. King, yes, a king indeed. Messiah—oh yes, Jesus was surely the long-promised Messiah. But He was much, much more than all of these: JESUS WAS GOD HIMSELF!

Nowhere in the Bible is it made any clearer that God's salvation came to us through His Son and through his Son alone. Jesus is the way and the truth and the life. LISTEN TO HIM! Nobody comes to the Father except through Jesus. LISTEN TO HIM! For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16) LISTEN TO HIM!

At this point, Peter and James and John did the only thing they could do: they fell face down on the ground. What other reaction can sinful man have when he finds himself in the presence of a Holy God whom he has enraged with his sins? Peter and James and John felt the same terror the Israelites felt when they beheld God descending on Mount Sinai in lightning and thunder and with a loud trumpet blast. They were scared to death.

What God was saying was unmistakable—and incomprehensible: *"This is my Son!"* They had looked at Jesus through sin-blinded eyes for two years and seen only an itinerant preacher who said strange things and pulled off an occasional miracle. They had become comfortable with the idea of Jesus as a role-model and a rabbi, a teacher of God's word. But—the Son of GOD? GOD HIMSELF?

Then came the greatest miracle of all: *"...Jesus came and touched them. 'Get up,' he said. 'Don't be afraid.'"* The One who was God Himself, Who by all cosmic justice could have and should have struck them down where they lay and consigned them to hell, walks over to them and touches them gently and speaks the life-giving words: *"Rise up—don't be afraid!"* God had commanded them to listen to Jesus, and his first words are: *"Rise up—don't be afraid!"*

Rise up, all you who are weary and heavy-laden with sin! Rise up all you who are struggling with pain and sickness! Rise up all you who are filled with anxiety and fear of what the future holds for you! Rise up and look into the face of God without fear: it is the face of His Son who has come to fulfill all your hopes and meet all your needs. It is the face of Jesus Christ, the face of God's love which tames all of his wrath over your sins and sets you free.

And then, the final words: *"When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus."* Gone is Moses. Gone is Elijah. Gone is the shekinah, the cloud of God's glory. There is no one except Jesus. All of the old covenant is fulfilled in Jesus—the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

And so it is. The Law no longer has authority over those who have lifted up their eyes to Jesus. As Paul writes in Romans, *"...we have been set free from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code."* (Romans 7:6) And again, *"...you are not under law but under grace."* (Romans 6:14) Both the Law and the Promise have been fulfilled for all of those who have lifted up our eyes to Jesus. Moses and Elijah have come and gone, the New Age has dawned and the Kingdom of Heaven has arrived! The glory of God is no longer hidden in a cloud: it too has been transfigured into the person of Jesus Christ!

Lifting up their eyes they saw no one except Jesus!

Amen.