**Matthew 17:1-8**

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Jesus fulfills the prophesy He told His disciples about a week earlier when He said that some of them would not see death until they saw the Son of Man coming in His kingdom. Jesus takes three of His disciples: Peter, James, and John up on a high mountain and is terrifyingly transfigured before them.

The parallel gospel accounts of this event are found in Mark 9:2-8 and Luke 9:28-36.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all report that about a week after Jesus revealed His identity and mission as the Messiah to His disciples, and prophesied that some of them would see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom, Jesus took three disciples with Him up on a high mountain (Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36). Matthew and Mark say this event took place six days later (Mark 9:2). Luke says it was “some eight days after…” (Luke 9:28). The word translated as “some” in Luke 9 means “about.” So far as we know, Luke was not an eyewitness to Jesus’s ministry, as were Matthew, and Peter (who was likely the source of Mark’s gospel.) This might indicate to us that when Luke compiled his gospel, he got various sources so approximated the time.

The three gospel writers say that they were up on a mountain (Mark 9:2; Luke 9:28). This high mountain was most likely in the district of Caesarea Philippi where Jesus brought His disciples to teach about the Son of Man (Matthew 16:13-28). This mountain is believed by many to be Mount Hermon located to the northeast of the city. But others think that is was Mount Tabor located southeast of the Sea of Galilee, near Nazareth was where Jesus led them.

Luke relates that they went up the mountain in order to pray (Luke 9:28). Matthew and Mark both point out that Jesus and His three disciples were by themselves. The three disciples were the fishermen, Peter, James and his brother, John. These three appear to be Jesus’s closest disciples. Not only did Jesus choose to reveal Himself to them at this moment, He also would summon this trio further into the garden to pray with Him during His distress the night before His crucifixion (Matthew 26:37).

While Jesus was praying on the mountain He was transfigured before them. The Greek word that is translated as transfigured is “metamorphothé.” The English word metamorphosis comes from this word. It means to undergo a radical change.

The gospel writers seem to grope for words to accurately describe the dramatic change in Christ’s appearance. The disciples still recognized Jesus for who He was, but they were amazed and terrified at the overwhelming brilliance of His unrestrained glory.

Luke describes how “the appearance of His face became different” (Luke 9:29). Matthew says it shone like the sun. A somewhat similar phenomenon occurred when Moses came down from Mount Horeb after his encounter with the presence of God (Exodus 34:29-35). This is another allusion in Matthew’s Gospel to the fact that Jesus is the prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15-19). But Moses, who was God’s prophet, merely reflected divine brilliance. Jesus, who was God’s Son, radiated divine brilliance.

The three gospel writers also comment upon Jesus’s clothes. Matthew says His garments became white as light. Mark includes the additional remark that they “became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them” (Mark 9:3).

While Jesus was transfigured, suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared to Peter, James, and John. Moses and Elijah were two of the most important figures in the Old Testament. Moses was Israel’s great law giving prophet who led Israel out of bondage in Egypt. Elijah was Israel’s great miracle working prophet confounding the prophets of Baal. Together these prophets are the personification of the entire Old Testament—as Moses representing the Law and Elijah, the Prophets. The book of Malachi concludes the Old Testament with a reference to both figures.

“Remember the law of Moses My servant, even the statutes and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel. ‘Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.’”
(Malachi 4:4-6)

Both prophets were strongly linked to the Messiah. Moses prefigured the Messiah (Deuteronomy 18:15-19). Elijah was to be the Messianic forerunner (Malachi 3:1, 4:5-6). Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus was a greater lawgiver than Moses (John 1:17). And Jesus was a greater miracle worker than Elijah, who merely avoided death and never died (II Kings 2:11), while Jesus overcame death and is risen from the dead (Matthew 28:6; 2 Timothy 1:10; Hebrews 2:12; Revelation 1:8).

Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus. Only Luke reports what they were talking about—and that was “of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31). Apparently, also according to Luke, during this time the three disciples: Peter, James, and John “had been overcome with sleep” (Luke 9:32). It was when they awoke that they saw what was taking place before them.

The Bible does not explain how the disciples recognized the two famous prophets. God could have revealed their identities, just as the Father revealed Christ’s identity to Peter (Matthew 16:16-17). Jesus could have made introductions. Or the disciples might have gleaned who Moses and Elijah were simply from listening and picking these details up from the exchange.

Towards the end of Jesus’s discussion with the prophets, Peter interjected himself into the conversation. He said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

Peter’s interjection is presented as out of touch with what was taking place. Within the immediate context of that moment Jesus was discussing His messianic mission soon to be accomplished in Jerusalem. This would entail His crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. Peter seems oblivious to this necessary task because he says it is good for us to be here, and suggests that he will make three tabernacles, or tents, one for each of the three great men.

Peter does not say it is good that You Jesus fulfill Your mission as the Messiah in Jerusalem. And Mark, whose main eye-witness source is believed to be Peter writes, “for he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified” (Mark 9:6). It seems that Peter’s way to deal with fright was to pretend bravado and take charge of the situation, even though it seems he was clueless as to what was actually taking place. In this most serious of scenes, Peter appears to play the role of the comical sidekick.

While Peter was still speaking, a voice out of a bright cloud interrupted his babbling. This voice is from God, the Father. He said, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!” This terrifying voice confirmed that Jesus’s identity is as the Son of God. The voice endorsed Jesus with divine approval. And the voice admonished Peter to listen, rather than continue speaking. We could speculate that God had a good laugh at Peter’s antic, but there was still an important lesson to be taught. It is certainly not something Peter ever forgot.

The bright cloud and the divine voice recall something from the distant past in Israel’s history and something from the recent past within Jesus’s kingdom ministry.

The bright cloud that overshadowed them is emblematic of the cloud that covered Mount Sinai, where God spoke to the people as well as the pillar of cloud that went before the children of Israel. It led them on their way out of Egypt and into the Promise Land through the wilderness by day (Exodus 19:16; 13:21). The pillar of cloud was understood by Israel to be a literal manifestation of God’s presence and provision.

The divine voice out of the cloud repeated what was said from out of the heavens at Jesus’s baptism: This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased (Matthew 3:17). The Father was already well-pleased with His Son prior to His faithfulness in His earthly ministry. The Father was well-pleased with how Jesus had conducted Himself as a son of Joseph and Mary, a craftsman, a member of the community, and a neighbor. Now toward the completion of Jesus’s ministry, the Father expresses again that He is well-pleased. Perhaps at this point the Father is commenting particularly on Jesus’s ministry years. Christ’s baptism and transfiguration are strongly linked by these words: well-pleased.

But Christ’s baptism and transfiguration are linked in other ways besides the divine voice and voice’s message. Both events mark or occur at a major turning point in Jesus’s earthly ministry and mission. His baptism is a sort of inauguration. It signifies the beginning of Christ’s public ministry. The transfiguration marks the beginning of the end of Jesus’s earthly ministry.

It occurs at a moment when Jesus is increasingly preoccupied with fulfilling His Messianic mission in Jerusalem and preparing His disciples for the conclusion of His earthly ministry and the remaining work He has for them to do when He is gone (Matthew 28:18-20).

It was only recently that Jesus officially confirmed to His disciples that He was the Messiah and Son of God using words (Matthew 16:16-17). Six days later Jesus powerfully displayed His identity for them in unmistakable and terrible glory and majesty.

When the three disciples heard the voice, they were terrified. They instantly fell face down to the ground. Their terror to God’s voice was similar to the children of Israel’s terror to God’s voice at Mount Horeb (Exodus 20:19). Their response was also similar to when John later encountered the risen and fully glorified Christ in his old age on Patmos, “When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man… (Revelation 1:17).

And Jesus came to His disciples lying face down on the ground and touched them.

He told them to “Get up, and do not be afraid.” Jesus understood that what they had just witnessed was overwhelming and terrifying. He knew it would terrify them. But He did not show them this simply to shock them. He allowed them to witness this so that they would have a more complete understanding of who He was. They would need this visceral knowledge for the kingdom tasks that lay ahead of them once they got up. Seeing who Jesus was firsthand would help give them the conviction to remain faithful to the Messiah during the difficulties they would encounter.

This unforgettable event had an enormous impact on these three disciples. It seemed to increase with time. In their later years both John and Peter wrote about this moment.

“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”
(John 1:14)

“For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, “This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased”—and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.”
(2 Peter 1:16-18)

And when Jesus touched His disciples who were lying face down and bid them to get up and not to fear, they opened their eyes and looked up and saw no one except Jesus Himself alone.

Everything had returned to normal. But yet, what Peter, James, and John had witnessed had forever shaken them to their core. To this point they had heard Jesus preach and teach about the kingdom (Matthew 5-7, 10, 13). They had witnessed Him perform many signs and wonders (Matthew 4:23-24; 8:2-16; 8:23-32; 9:2-8; 9:18-33; 12:10-13; 12:22; 14:12-21; 14:25-32; 15:22-28; 15:30; 15:32-38). They had recently heard Him acknowledge His identity as the Christ, the Anointed One (Matthew 16:16-17). Now they had just dramatically experienced Jesus as God’s Son and the glorious King.

**Biblical Text**

**17:1-8 Six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!” When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified. And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, “Get up, and do not be afraid.” And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus Himself alone.**