

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 it 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.