

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL REVEALING (Matthew 17:1-13)

11.7.21

Description: *Following Jesus' acknowledgement of who He is — “the Christ, the Son of the living God” — He shows them who He is as He is displayed in His Transfiguration.*

INTRODUCTION

One of the things I try to do with my introductions to each message is to set the stage, often by means of some example from sports or headlines or my life or something similar, for what the Bible is going to be presenting. For some messages, finding an appropriate introduction is easy; others are more challenging. But the goal is always the same — to have the congregation as ready as possible to grab onto the topic.

Today is an example of one of those times where an introduction is almost impossible because our text is describing something that is virtually beyond words to convey, and any human experiences I would even try to use as being somewhat similar would be totally inadequate to this story, even pathetic. Let's just say that we're going to be talking about a little bit of heaven, so **let's pray as we prepare to experience it and be blessed by it!**

TEXT

Again, as we did last week, we'll let Matthew tell the core of the story, with ample additions from the gospels of Mark and Luke.

After six days Jesus took with Him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves [to pray] — Matthew 17:1 [Luke 9:28b].

So, several days after the events of last week — Jesus acknowledging Himself as the Messiah, and then revealing for the first time what being the Messiah truly meant — Jesus took three of His disciples — Peter, James, and John — with Him as He headed to a “high mountain” — the exact place unknown to us today.

Now Peter, James, and John had become sort of an “inner circle” for Jesus as time had progressed. This was not a favoritism on the part of Christ, who would not have done that, but it was His way of preparing these particular three guys for the roles in the church that He knew would be coming their way. They had first been separated out to accompany Jesus when Christ had gone with the synagogue official Jairus to heal his daughter, ultimately bringing that little girl back to life. After this moment on the mountain, they would also be closest to Jesus when He was experiencing His most trying moments in Gethsemane just prior to His arrest there. For now, they were going to be with Jesus in a place of solitude — just their master and themselves.

Notice that Luke tells us that Jesus went up on the mountain to pray. As we mentioned last week, Christ had prayed before first calling the apostles into ministry, and before acknowledging His true identity, and now He prayed just prior to the most overwhelming moment of His disciples' lives. Jesus modeled the power and priority of prayer by always making it an essential part of His life — regardless of the circumstances, whether big

moments or small. And the truth is, Jesus regarded ALL the moments He faced in His life as worthy of prayer.

There He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light — Matthew 17:2. In fact, according to Mark: ***His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them,*** and Luke described them ***as white as a flash of lightning — Mark 9:3; Luke 9:29b.***

And then, while He was praying, while He was talking with His Father, Luke tells us that ***the appearance of His face changed*** — He was transfigured! I love the descriptions that Matthew, Mark and Luke give us: ***His face shone like the sun, His clothes became as white as the light, dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them, white as a flash of lightning!***

What an amazing moment that must have been — and wow, what this moment was saying about Jesus! Remember back in the OT, when Moses would enter the Tabernacle to hear the commands of the Lord? The Bible says that: ***[W]hen He came out and told the Israelites what He had been commanded, they saw that His face was radiant — Exodus 34:34b-35a.*** His face shone from the experience of being in the presence of the Lord; He was literally reflecting the awesome holiness and purity of God Himself, so much so in fact that the Bible says that, the first time people saw Him like this, they were actually afraid of Him. But that's not what was happening here. This was the glory of God that was, and is, completely present in His Son. This indescribable shining was the deity that He Himself possessed — precisely what the author of Hebrews was saying when he wrote: ***The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being — Hebrews 1:3a.*** That's what was happening to Jesus!

Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah [in glorious splendor], talking with Jesus — Matthew 17:3 [Luke 9:30a].

Well, so much for solitude. Jesus was joined by two famous figures from Israel's history: Moses and Elijah, appearing, as Luke took note of, in a similar kind of "glorious splendor" as was Christ Himself — not with deity, of course, but with heavenly, spiritual bodies.

Now both of these guys had completely unique endings to their earthly lives. According to Deuteronomy, at the death of Moses, God Himself ***buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is — Deuteronomy 34:6.*** According to Scripture, God never performed such a task for anybody else. And Elijah of course never experienced death at all — the Bible telling us in II Kings 2 that he was taken by God directly into His presence without ever having died.

So, what did their presence mean on this particular day? While only conjecture, it is possible that their presence was symbolic, meaning they represented something connected with Christ Himself. From this standpoint, Moses represented the Law, Elijah represented the Prophets, and Jesus represented the complete fulfillment of both.

And what were they talking about? According to Luke: ***They spoke about His departure, which He was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem — Luke 9:31.***

The Greek word used here by Luke to describe Christ's departure is the word *exodos*, meaning His exit, His departure by means of His becoming deceased. Obviously, heaven was just as aware of what was coming up for Jesus as He was. And why not? According to Peter, Jesus ***was chosen before the creation of the world — I Peter 1:20a*** for the task of salvation that was now fast approaching. Heaven itself would have been the first place to absorb this incredible news.

So how were the disciples handling this amazing moment? The way the Greek constructs it tells us: They were crashed, sacked out, sawing wood, asleep — probably happening as Jesus was consumed in prayer. But, as both Jesus became transfigured during His time of prayer and then Moses and Elijah showed up, Luke tells us they quickly came to: ***Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him — Luke 9:32.***

And then, now fully awake, Peter inserted himself into the moment, as only Peter could: ***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” — Matthew 17:4.***

Peter was appropriately overwhelmed; who wouldn't be? Or another way to say it: Peter was scared stupid. Both Mark and Luke tell us that he and his friends were so scared, he didn't know what to say or even what he was saying. But his response totally showed his misunderstanding of what Jesus, and this moment, was all about. Peter wanted to build shrines or temples for Jesus, Moses and Elijah along the order of the tabernacle where the wilderness and pre-temple Israelites would meet with God. He wanted to extend this glorious moment, to somehow make the glory continue. After all, what could be better than this moment he and his fellow disciples had just witnessed? Well, Jesus in His role as Messiah would indeed be proving to Peter and, in fact, the entire world, what true glory would look like. But that glory would run through the cross; God had authored it and Christ would obediently accept it.

And, as if to confirm that, Peter was interrupted by God Himself. Luke tells us: ***While [Peter] was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud — Luke 9:34.*** And then Matthew adds: ***[A]nd a voice from the cloud said, “This is My Son, whom I love [whom I have chosen — God speaking, Luke 9:35b]; with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!” — Matthew 17:5b.***

As if it wasn't enough that the disciples were seeing Jesus in a glory that affirmed who He said He was, Christ's Heavenly Father added to that amazing ID: “Jesus is MY Son. I love Him, I have chosen Him, I have anointed Him, to serve Me as Messiah, and am so very well pleased with Him.” And then, on the basis of all that, the command: “Listen to Him.” Going forward, His words that would be all that mattered. Why? Simple: His words are going to have divine, and eternal, impact.

When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” He said. “Don't be afraid.” When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus — Matthew 17:6-8.

God's speaking to His Son terrified His followers, and they dove to the ground. But, in a moment, Jesus came up to them and tenderly touched them, telling them both that there was nothing to fear, and that they would be leaving now. They looked around. Whatever they had just witnessed seemed to be over now. The only One here was 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" — Matthew 17:9.

As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus gave the three of them some additional instructions. In fact, according to Mark, they were more like military orders, as from a general to a private: "Don't tell anybody anything about what you have seen until after I have been raised from the dead. Understood?"

Now by doing this, Jesus is communicating two vitally important things: First, that He is indeed going to be dying, that everything He outlined before the whole group would be happening — as in beating, suffering, and being killed, but then being risen from the dead. That was guaranteed. And second, that the reality of the glory of Jesus as God's Son would be incredibly important to hold on to and share, to confirm what Christ's being raised from the dead most absolutely, truly meant. And it would be on these three guys as leaders to make sure these instructions were carried out.

So, the disciples certainly now had clarity as to Christ and His mission: first must come suffering, then would come glory. In Christ's case, the suffering would be found on the cross, but the glory would be in His resurrection, His ascension, the triumph of His church and, ultimately, in the triumph of God Himself over sin, death and the power of the devil.

However, they were still confused over some scriptures that had discussed Elijah — one of the guys they had seen on the mountaintop. Hadn't Malachi quoted God Himself that: ***"I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents"*** — ***God speaking, Malachi 4:5-6a.*** The disciples had been taught that, before the Messiah could come, Elijah would have to return. So, was his appearance with Jesus this day the fulfillment of that teaching?

So [t]he 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 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 — Matthew 17:10-13.

Jesus gave the disciples a very clear-cut answer. Elijah had indeed come, in the person of John the Baptist, who had ministered ***"before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah . . . to make ready a people prepared for the Lord"*** — ***Gabriel, Luke 1:17b.*** But the nation, under the religious leadership of the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees, had rejected John's ministry, and he had been killed. Likewise, they would seek for Jesus to be slain as

well, even more strongly rejecting Christ than they did John. Yet God's purposes would be accomplished — as the disciples would continue to learn.

APPLICATION

I really want to focus on the transfiguration itself. What a magnificent moment — certainly unlike anything those three disciples had ever experienced before. But, some 2,000 years later, what about us? What are we to carry forward from this incredible moment? Some ideas:

First, the idea of “transfiguration.” The Greek word for this is the basis for our English word “metamorphosis” — meaning a change on the outside that comes from the inside. It is the fundamental notion behind sanctification — the growth from new birth in Christ to more and more reflecting the image of Christ. It is why we pose the question so often — “How has Christ changed you?” By means of the Holy Spirit, we too are literally meant to be “transfigured.” We are completely different from the inside out, reflecting a new nature that alters how we present ourselves to the world. And the working of the Holy Spirit should be as real to the world as was the transfiguration of Jesus to the disciples.

Second, this moment was literally “a little bit of heaven.” The disciples saw Moses and Elijah in glorified bodies — similar to the bodies we may have in heaven. What's more, the disciples recognized Moses and Elijah. Obviously, they weren't wearing name tags: “HELLO — My Name Is.” Nor according to the text were any introductions made, like at a “12-step” meeting: “Hi; my name is Moses” — “Hello, Moses.” Certainly, there were no photos of them from their lives on earth. Yet they were recognized. This suggests that, as members of the family of God, we also may be empowered to know, because of our own glorified bodies (including glorified minds), everybody we meet in heaven, regardless of whether we knew them on earth. Think of the joy we experience in family reunions, seeing and recognizing people we haven't seen for a long time. In heaven, we will ALL be family. I have always been excited to think that someday, I will be able to talk with Moses and Elijah myself, along with David, and the disciples, along with Paul and Silas and Barnabas, and one of my personal favorites, Daniel. The possibilities of our relationships in heaven are fascinating!

This also includes seeing Jesus. The disciples saw Jesus as His rightly glorified self. That is how we will see Him as well; the apostle John (one of the witnesses to this moment) told us so: *[W]e know that when Christ appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is — I John 3:2b*. Think about that promise for ALL our futures: We will see our Savior “as He is.” How amazing that is going to be.

CONCLUSION

And lastly, think of the process by which Jesus has been presenting Himself to His disciples, His world, and to us: He started off as a profound teacher, causing those who heard Him to be *amazed at His teaching, because He taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law — Matthew 7:28b-29*.

Next came the works, those amazing miracles. Remember the one when He stilled the stormy waters on the Sea of Galilee? ***The men were amazed and asked, “What kind of Man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey Him!” — Matthew 8:27.***

Then last week we had Jesus specifically acknowledging Peter’s confession as to exactly who He was — ***“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” — Peter, Matthew 16:16b.*** And now this week we have the demonstration of exactly what the Messiah, the Son of the living God, looks like. No wonder John, who was a witness to that moment, wrote in his gospel: ***The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth — John 1:14.*** No wonder that Peter, another witness to that day, wrote in his second letter: ***[W]e did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty — II Peter 1:16.*** His glory, His majesty. Now think of what that means for us — today, here, and now. Simply put, every promise that we have to claim and look forward to, in the life we have now and in the life we have to look forward to in heaven, is based on the majesty, and the inherent power in that majesty, and the glory found, only in Jesus.

That’s who we praise, that’s who we worship, that’s who we claim. The challenge? To reflect who He is, WHO HE IS, to the world as we reflect who He is to ourselves. Let’s pray!