

THE PREPARATION OF CHRIST'S GLORY

MATTHEW 17:1-13

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INTRODUCTION

America's first President, George Washington, had also been the commanding general of the Continental Army during America's Revolutionary War, a war that lasted much longer than anyone had anticipated. As it dragged on, Washington found it necessary not only to encourage his troops, but to challenge them to stay with him and keep on fighting. To do that, he set before them the reality of what would happen if they failed—slavery to the British crown. And he reminded them what victory would mean long-term: freedom and liberty not just for themselves but for their posterity.

The situation we see in Matthew 17 is of much greater importance. Christ will be commissioning these disciples to go into all the world and preach the gospel. They will be key in establishing the Church so future generations can prepare and make citizens of the Kingdom (Mt 16:25-28), and, He is calling them to a set of ministries that will lead eventually to their own deaths. For them to establish the Church and foster the planting of local churches along the way, they are going to have to sacrifice their lives in His service.

To prepare His disciples for this, they need some important things:

- They need assurance of who Jesus really is.
- They need a clear picture of Jesus' goal—the things He wants to accomplish.
- And they need to experience Him for who He really is.

CONTINUING THE MATTHEW NARRATIVE

Just six days have passed between Matthew 16 and the start of Matthew 17—six days since Peter and the disciples had made their declaration as to whom they believed Jesus was—the Son of the living God, their Messiah. Now, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with Him to a high mountain alone where Jesus will show them His glory and prove to them they were right to believe He was who He claimed to be. (For parallel passages you can read and compare Mark 9 and Luke 9.)

How does Jesus' showing them His glory prepare them for service?

- By confirming the glory of Christ.
- By elevating the centrality of Christ.
- By explaining the mission of Christ.

It works that way for us, too.

Why does Jesus provide this experience to Peter, James, and John specifically? Because they are His most prominent disciples. They're going to be pivotal leaders in the Early Church. In that capacity they will need to both understand what Jesus is doing as well as experience the very glory of God. It is such a compelling experience that John later writes in his own Gospel, "and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14).

WHY MOSES AND ELIJAH?

Moses and Elijah are the two Old Testament figures the disciples see standing with Jesus, but what do they signify? Matthew's Gospel gives us insight, because on more than one occasion Matthew places emphasis on Jesus' relationship to the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17, and Matthew 7:17), reporting that Jesus made it plain He did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them. As if to highlight this relationship between Jesus and the Law and Prophets, Jesus is joined by Moses, the one who penned the five books of the Old Testament known as the Law, and Elijah, a mighty prophet. When you think about it, it's quite remarkable the degree to which Jesus reveals Himself to His disciples. He shows them who He really is in word, in deed, and in His glory. And in this instance, He is showing them that He is, most certainly, the person who fulfills the Law and the Prophets.

Jews gloried in the Law and the Prophets, so it was important for them to understand that the glory of Jesus outshines all of that! In Deuteronomy 18:15-22 Moses prophesied that God would raise up among His people someone like Moses to lead them. So, it is entirely appropriate that he would be there for the disciples to see and to make this key connection. Elijah was taken up into heaven in a fiery chariot—meaning that he was translated, and it happened before Elisha's eyes. Elijah's presence harks back to the messianic prophecy in Malachi 4:5, 6 that he would be the forerunner of Messiah. So, although Moses' glory and importance was great, as was Elijah's, what Jesus reveals about Himself to His disciples makes their glory pale in comparison with His own.

THE TRANSFIGURATION AS THE PIVOTAL MOMENT

Also amazing is what these disciples ultimately do with this experience. Peter reflects upon it in his Second Epistle. It was such a memorable event to him that even after the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension, it is the transfiguration that he fixes upon as the pivotal moment in his own mind (2 Peter 1:17-21). That experience leaves Peter with no doubt whatsoever that Jesus is who He said He was.

There is a sense in which we, through the Word of God, can experience the reality of the glory of God through the transfiguration. Of course, for that to happen we must spend time immersed in God's Word, meditating on it and listening to the Spirit of God reveal Himself through it. So, what happens as we know the glory of God through the Word of God? We are enlightened and transformed by it. Paul explains this to us when he makes mention of the transfiguration.

“Therefore, since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech — unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away. But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:12-18).

Jesus' goal for us is to also be glorified with Him. We will never become like God in all His attributes—His immutability, omniscience, eternality, but since we have been made in God's image, we have the ability to share in God's glory through His Word, and one day we will be with Him. Scripture tells us that we will see Him as He is, for we will be like Him; and we will share in His glory.

So what is our responsibility? Romans 12:2 is the key. “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...” As we learn about Him from Scripture, His Word is changing us from the inside out, so that one day when we see Christ that glorification will be complete. Our responsibility, then, is Christ-likeness.

THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST

Mark and Luke give us details about the transfiguration that Matthew does not. For instance, they report that Peter, not knowing what to say as Moses and Elijah are leaving the scene, speaks of building three tabernacles, one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus. The Father Himself uses that remark to clarify things for them. He speak out of a bright cloud that descends and hovers over them—a cloud so brilliant that its light blanks out everything else by its intensity. He tells them what the Scripture records He had said once before at Jesus' baptism: “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him!” Then the cloud departs and Jesus' countenance is again veiled, cloaked once more by His humanity. In tenderness and humility He touches His disciples, who are by now prostrate on the ground and utterly terrified, and tells them, “It is I. Do not be afraid.” Now they fully understand. He is very God.

Theologically speaking, there are two things we must have clearly in focus if we are to have a correct view of God: the transcendence of God—as in, He is so high above His creation that that His creation cannot even approach Him, and the imminence of God—as in, He is utterly and intimately close at hand in relation to His creation. We must hold both these things in our mind if we are to have a true picture of who God is. He is close and intimate, and He is high and holy. We must not emphasize one above the other, because to do so would distort our concept of God.

THE PREEMINENCE OF CHRIST

Jesus touches them, speaks gently to them, and when the disciples look up they see no one but Jesus. Matthew words this in such a way as to especially highlight the preeminence of Christ. This preeminence must also be in our minds. The preeminence of Christ is the entire goal of God in our time. It is the Father's desire (Colossians 1:13-19).

Does He have the preeminence in your life? In mine? Or is He just prominent? There's a difference. Are there other things that compete for our attention, other things that become a greater preoccupation for us than Christ? Can we not all say we allow this to happen at times, or perhaps way too often?

Jesus, in part, is showing these disciples His glory because they are headed for some very hard times of suffering and difficulties. He wants us to know Him in His glory, in part, for the very same reason. Following Christ fully demands of us a life of sacrifice.

It is easy to take our eyes off Jesus when difficulties come. So many things vie for our attention, but Jesus desires we put those things aside and focus on Him and on serving Him. Difficult times can make us focus more on Jesus, but

human nature being what it is, we can easily allow ourselves to be distracted by them to such a degree that we lose that important focus. Does He have preeminence in your life?

DESCENDING THE MOUNTAIN

Jesus is fully focused on His mission, which is the cross. He will allow no other concern to interfere with that goal. As they descend the mountain, Jesus answers their questions regarding the prophecy of Elijah in relation to Messiah's appearing. He points them to John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament prophets, whose ministry anticipated the coming of Messiah. He tells them that just as the governmental authorities did what they did to John, so Jesus would also suffer at their hands. Then He tells them not to tell the others what they had witnessed on the mountain until He had risen from the dead. The disciples have no idea what that means, but they obey. Jesus has a mission, and that mission was to die. He silences these three men temporarily so this manifestation of His glory cannot be used to derail that mission.

THE WAY TO EXPERIENCE GOD'S GLORY

There is only one way to know God's glory. You must be saved from your sin. The Scripture teaches us that we are born into sin. We don't need to be taught how to sin, because it is native to us, it is innately in our character to do so. Here is what you must understand if you are ever to experience God in His glory:

- God can by no means clear the guilty.
- God desires we all experience His glory as creatures made in His image.
- God sent His Son to take your punishment upon Himself at Calvary.
- The fact that Christ took your punishment in your place gives Him the right to cleanse you from your sins so that Christ's righteous may belong to you.

Has that exchange taken place in your life? Have you trusted by faith in Christ's finished work on the cross?

For those of us who are saved, we must understand what sacrificial service is. Just as Jesus prepared His disciples for a life a sacrifice, so the Lord wants us to prepare for this as well. Matthew 16:25 says, "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."

CONCLUDING APPLICATIONS

Preparation for sacrificial service:

- Begins with confidence in the glory of Jesus and our inclusion in it.
- It requires a singular focus on Jesus as preeminent.
- Requires clarity of mission—the making of disciples.