



January 25: Who is Jesus?

WEEKLY READING - MATTHEW 13-17 TODAY'S PASSAGE - MATTHEW 17:1-13 •

MAIN POINT

Jesus' mountaintop transfiguration proved to His disciples that He is God's Son, the promised Messiah.

BACKGROUND

Chapter divisions, devised by publishers after the invention of the printing press, can mislead interpreters by suggesting a hard break between connected units. Matthew likes to juxtapose mutually interpretive events and let the reader discover the link. Matthew 16–17 is a case in point. In chapter 16, Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus agrees and immediately begins to correct Peter's misconceptions about the Messiah: he must go to Jerusalem to suffer, be killed, and rise on the third day. Further, his disciples must follow in his steps. If anyone desires to follow Jesus, he must "deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (16:24). Jesus then softens his message in several ways. If anyone loses his life for Jesus, he will find it. When Jesus returns, he will reward faithful disciples (16:25–28). And if Jesus must suffer death, he also tastes glory (17:1–5). The suffering Son and glorious Son are one. The account of Jesus' transfiguration is straightforward. The Father graciously gives both Jesus and his closest disciples a sign of Jesus' glory and the Father's favor when they need it most. The event is laden with symbolism, but the main event and point are simple: despite his suffering, Jesus is the glorious Son, and his disciples should listen to him. The disciples struggle to understand this and make limited progress (17:9–13).

The transfiguration appears in all three Synoptics. Mark is the shortest. Luke alone notes how Moses and Elijah speak with Jesus about his forthcoming departure in Jerusalem and that the disciples barely manage to stay awake. Matthew alone records how the disciples fall down in fear. Above all, the transfiguration displays the deity of Christ, which ought to lead all mankind to know him and worship him, privately and publicly, on the Lord's Day and every other day. Second, since Jesus is Lord, his disciples and all men should listen to him, even—especially—when his words challenge cherished ideas. Third, this passage lets us consider the fear of Christ when we meet him in his holiness and our sin. Hebrews warns that believers should "offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:28–29). The majesty and holiness of God should lead everyone, even believers, to fear God. Yet, while unbelievers properly fear his wrath and judgment, believers should expect a gentle touch and comforting words: "Fear not."

CHRIST CONNECTION

Before Peter, James, and John get to Gethsemane, Jesus wants them to see (not yet taste from) the cup that he is about to drink. With the high mountain of glory behind them and that lowly hill of Calvary ahead, he wants them to understand both Colossians 1:19 and 20:

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell [the transfiguration—“this is my beloved Son”], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross [the crucifixion—“the Son of Man will certainly suffer”].

He wants them to hold those tensions together. The exalted Jesus, with garments glistening, standing on a high mountain, flanked by two religious giants from the past, where all is light, is also the humiliated Jesus whose clothes have been torn from him and divided, the one lifted upon the cross, flanked by two common, convicted criminals as darkness settles over the land. What paradoxical parallels we see between the transfiguration (17:1-8) and the crucifixion (27:33-54)! We have light and darkness, two saints and two sinners, and between all this is Jesus—“This is my beloved Son” (17:5) (God’s voice from Heaven) and “Truly this was the Son of God” (27:54) (that pagan soldier’s voice moments after the crucifixion).

Jesus wants us to make the same connections Matthew does. He wants us to see, as Chrysostom nicely phrased it, that Jesus was “transfigured to manifest the glory of the cross.” A cross we get the joy to bear alongside our Savior for the glorious purpose of becoming more like Him.

THE FLOW

- 15 minutes - Conversation and relationship-building
- 5 minutes - Create interest (icebreaker, activity, or quote)
- 10 minutes - Year of Prayer guided prayer time
- 40 minutes - Study and apply the Bible
- 5 minutes - Prayer requests

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use at least one of these questions to introduce the topic of discussion.

What constitutes a mountaintop experience, a spiritual or profound experience that affected you deeply and changed the way you lived?

What is your most memorable “mountaintop” experience? How has that experience impacted you beyond that day?

Share information from BACKGROUND and CHRIST CONNECTION to help group members understand the context

Transition/Say - A momentous “mountaintop experience” is both life-altering and perspective-changing. Although we are to enjoy these experiences, we’re not meant to stay there. Peter, James, and John learned this as they saw Jesus in His full glory and finally understood His divinity when He transfigured before them in Matthew 17.

YEAR OF PRAYER - GROUP PRAYER

PRAY THE FOLLOWING PRAYERS TOGETHER AS A GROUP. HAVE A TIME FOR PEOPLE TO OFFER THEIR PRAYERS OUT LOUD WITH THE ENTIRE GROUP OR PUT PEOPLE INTO GROUPS OF 3-4 TO PRAY TOGETHER.

Pause and ask the Holy Spirit to guide your time of prayer.

We give praise to You, Father God, “the only wise God, through Jesus Christ – to (You) be the glory forever!” Romans 16:27 and Revelation 4:18 reminds us that we should fall before You, saying, “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God, the Almighty, who was, who is, and who is to come.”

Share your words of Adoration to the Father now. (pause)

We love You Lord.

Father we ask the Holy Spirit to convict us of our need to pray for prodigals and those who’ve yet to acknowledge You as Savior. Turn their hearts of stone to hearts of clay, allowing them to hear and understand Your truth.

Let’s speak the names of the prodigals and those without Christ, aloud now. (pause)

Father, forgive us when we fail to acknowledge our countless blessings and Your goodness to us moment-to-moment. We thank You for the freedom to worship without fear of persecution. We thank You for the ability to read and comprehend the Bible, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Take a moment now to share your words of thanksgiving to the Father (pause)

There are so many needs around us, those who are sick, those in need of employment, those in need of rest and peace.

Take this opportunity to lift up your petitions and intercessions to the One who is forever interceding for us. (pause)

Group leader close time of prayer

With hearts full of joy and anticipation, we pray in agreement in the name of Jesus, our Lord, and our Redeemer. Amen

STUDY AND DISCUSS

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says and means.

ASK A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 17:1-6.

This event took place six days after Peter’s confession and Jesus’ prediction of His death. Why is that important?

In your own words, how do you picture the transfiguration?

What was the significance of Moses’ and Elijah’s presence?

A transfiguration is an alteration or transformation into something higher, better, and more beautiful. Jesus was transformed, or transfigured, before Peter, James, and John. Jesus’ appearance

became radiant: “His face shone like the sun. Even His clothes became as white as the light” (v. 2).

The presence of Moses and Elijah on the mountaintop is significant: Moses was highly regarded by the Jews as a man of God. The Lord used Moses to lead His people out of captivity in Egypt. Furthermore, prophecies of Jesus identified Him as “the new Moses.” Elijah was a prophet who, through God’s miraculous power, both challenged and defeated the Canaanite god Baal. Elijah never experienced death—he was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind.

Why did Peter want to pitch three tents? Why is his desire to pitch tents practical, or understandable?

Upon seeing Jesus transformed, Peter was undone. So impacted by the glorious and heavenly experience that took place at the mountaintop, Peter longed to stay in the glory of Jesus’ forever. His passion and excitement over Christ led him to literally want to pitch a tent, to bask in God’s glory.

What was familiar about the “voice from the cloud” (v. 5)?

Jesus most likely took Peter, James, and John with Him to the mountaintop because in Jewish culture at least two witnesses were needed to validate a person’s testimony. Having three men there with Him meant they could all serve as witnesses to His true identity and the events that took place on the mountaintop. This would be important in the days that followed Jesus’ resurrection. Although Peter was excited, Jesus reminded Peter that he had to come down from the mountain. We cannot stay in mountaintop experiences forever—we have to go down in the everyday mud and mire and live our lives—we’ve got Kingdom work to do.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ MATTHEW 17:7-9.

What is significant about the order of events in this passage? What would soon happen to Jesus after this experience?

How did time with the Father prepare Jesus to face challenges?

Soon enough, Jesus would go to the cross to die for the sins of the world. On this mountaintop, Jesus was preparing to face the brutality of the cross. He knew the value of spending time with God, seeking strength, and gaining boldness. Time with God, reading His Word, praying, and seeking His guidance give us strength, boldness, and courage for what is to come. While we are not outwardly transfigured like Jesus was, we can be inwardly transformed.

Why were the disciples told to keep quiet about this experience until after the resurrection?

Jesus may have instructed them to keep quiet in order to avoid any man-made hindrances to the plan that the Father had laid out for Him. The testimony of this event would be another proof to share about Jesus’ identity after the resurrection. Jesus had made sure that there were an adequate number of witnesses to validate each other’s testimonies about the event.

God is always preparing us for what He has planned to do in our lives. This mountaintop experience was a gracious way to prepare the inner circle of disciples to carry on after Jesus’ death and resurrection. They could move forward with full confidence that Jesus is God’s unique Son. They could draw strength from the memory of hearing God the Father speak to them, and they could serve as witnesses to the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ MATTHEW 17:10-13.

What is the connection between Elijah and John the Baptist?

Jesus explained that the prophecies about Elijah being the forerunner of the Messiah had been fulfilled through the ministry of John the Baptist. In other words, John the Baptist had lived out the spirit and power of Elijah. (Read Matthew 11:14; Luke 1:17; and John 1:19,21 for further background on their connection.)

Once again Jesus told the disciples of His impending death, yet they did not grasp what He was saying. How is it possible that they could hear Jesus speak the words and still not understand His meaning?

We often hear the words of Jesus without understanding them to the point of obedience. We need the Holy Spirit to be our helper and interpret the words of Scripture, illuminating our minds and hearts for understanding.

How does the God the Holy Spirit speak to us today?

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

What can you do to place yourself in a posture to experience a “mountaintop” experience with God this week?

The disciples demonstrated reverence, fear, and awe on the mountaintop. In what ways can you seek to increase these feelings in your life?

With whom does God want you to take your “mountaintop experience” and share it with? With whom can you share about Jesus—His life, death, burial, and resurrection?

Why is leaving the mountaintop in order to carry the cross hard, yet necessary? What joy do you want to find in both of these experiences?

OPTIONAL GROUP ACTIVITY

“On the Mountain” (Visual Mapping Exercise)

Materials:

- Whiteboard or large paper
- Marker
- (Optional) sticky notes or index cards

Step 1: Build the Scene (2 minutes)

On the board or paper, draw a simple mountain (no artistry required).

Label three spaces:

- Bottom of the Mountain
- On the Mountain
- Coming Down

Explain: “We’re going to map what happens—and why it matters—visually.” Read Matthew 17:1–5 aloud.

Step 2: Visual Observation (3 minutes)

Ask the group to help you fill in the “On the Mountain” section.

Invite the group to call out:

- Who is present?
- What changes?
- What sensory details stand out? (light, voice, fear, posture)

Write or place sticky notes with descriptors from the mountain like:

- Glory
- Cloud
- Voice
- Fear
- Listen

Keep it fast and participatory.

Step 3: Meaning Through Placement (3 minutes)

Now read Matthew 17:6–13. Ask the group:

- What happens coming down the mountain?
- What instructions does Jesus give?
- What questions remain?

Invite the group to add descriptors under “Coming Down” such as:

- Silence
- Confusion
- Obedience
- Waiting
- John the Baptist

Then ask: “Why do you think God reveals glory on the mountain—but gives instructions for the valley?”

Step 4: Personal Connection (1–2 minutes)

Ask participants: “Where do you most often experience God—on the mountain or in the ordinary?”

Closing Visual Thought (30 seconds)

Write the words “This is my Son... listen to Him” and say: “The goal isn’t just to stay on the mountain—it’s to remain with Jesus wherever we are.”

COMMENTARY

MATTHEW 17:1-13

17:1–13. Jesus leads his closest disciples up a high, unidentified mountain for a time apart. The time reference, “after six days,” establishes the link between Jesus’ predictions of his death and this proof of his glory (v. 1). Mountains were places of revelation for both Moses (Exodus 3–4; 19–20; 34) and Elijah (1 Kings 19), and Jesus goes to mountains to pray (Matt. 14:23; Luke 6:12).

Throughout Jesus’ incarnation, human flesh has veiled his glory, but the transfiguration reveals Jesus in his divine majesty, as “his face shone like the sun.” Even his clothes join his wondrous appearance (Matt. 17:2). Peter will remember the event to the end of his life (2 Pet. 1:16–18), and rightly so, for it is unique. After Moses spent forty days with the Lord on Mount Sinai, his face shone with a reflected and fading glory (Ex. 34:28–35). And it is possible that the redeemed will reflect the glory of Jesus forever in the new creation (1 John 3:2). But on this occasion Jesus shines with intrinsic glory.

If the transfiguration is reassuring for Jesus, it is revelatory for the disciples, who will later realize that the event offers a flashback of Jesus’ preincarnate glory (John 1:14; 17:5; cf. Phil. 2:5–7) and a preview of his coming splendor (Rev. 1:14–16; 19:12). The Father designed the event to assure the disciples that Jesus is both a suffering Messiah and the Lord of glory. When the work of redemption is complete, the faithful will see more fully the extent of Jesus’ sacrifice for his people in both his incarnation and his death.

On the mountain, Moses and Elijah appear and speak to Jesus. Both men are major actors in redemptive history, but they denote more together than they do separately. First, they represent the Law and the Prophets. Second, both had epoch-shaping roles. Moses led Israel out of Egypt and into nationhood. Elijah worked for renewal when much of Israel succumbed to idolatry with Baal. Third, both had an unusual “exodus” or departure from this world. Moses died alone with God on a mountain, and God took Elijah to heaven on a chariot of fire. Fourth, both had singular revelations from God. Finally, both were forerunners of the Christ.

Matthew merely reports that the three speak together. Luke includes how they discuss the departure (Gk. *exodos*) that Jesus is “about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31). In short, their topic is his death. Indeed, Jesus is the great Prophet, whom Moses had foretold (Deut. 18:15–18), and he finishes the work of Elijah by leading God’s people to him.

Peter is dazzled but confused, glad to be present at this unveiling of Jesus’ deity but casting about for the right response. He reverently proposes, “If you wish, I will make three tents here” (Matt. 17:4). The proposal is respectful (“Lord,” he begins) but misguided. The three will not be staying. Jesus has turned toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:31, 53), as Peter eventually understands (Acts 2:14–41).

While Peter flounders, the Father acts, dispatching a cloud of light to “overshadow” or envelop them all. This should remind Matthew’s readers of the glorious, glowing cloud that guided and protected Israel after her exodus from Egypt (Exodus 13–14), the cloud from which God revealed himself and by which he entered the tabernacle (Exodus 33; 40). From the cloud the Father reveals three essentials: First, Jesus is the Father’s beloved Son. Second, the Father is well pleased with him, even if others are not (Matt. 12:24; 15:1–2; 16:1). Third, the disciples should listen to him, especially, the context suggests, when he foretells his suffering, death, and resurrection (17:5).

The voice, together with the vision, knocks the reverent but frightened disciples to the ground (17:6). This was a common response to theophanies in the OT (Gen. 17:3; 28:17; Dan. 8:17), and the apostles echo it here and in Revelation 1:17 when they see Jesus in his glory. The Bible mentions two kinds of fear: the awe of the redeemed in God’s presence and the terror the wicked feel in the presence of God. The first are regularly exhorted to “Fear not.” Here Jesus tenderly touches his fallen disciples, lifts them up, and reassures, “Have no fear” (Matt. 17:7). The others remain in their fear (28:4–5). The scene ends with the three lifting their eyes and seeing Jesus only, for Moses and Elijah have departed.

Matthew artfully concludes with all eyes on Jesus. Such is fitting, for Moses and Elijah are Jesus’ forerunners, not his peers. The alert reader may recall Deuteronomy 18:15–22, where Moses reminded Israel that when God’s voice and theophany terrified them, they asked that a less

frightening prophet speak on God's behalf. That prophet was Moses (Ex. 19:18–19). Yet Moses also foretold another prophet like him, saying, "To him you shall listen" (Deut. 18:15; cf. Matt. 17:5).

Jesus' superiority to Moses continues Matthew's "Jesus is greater than" theme. He is greater than Adam and Israel in faithfulness (4:1–11), greater than the scribes and Pharisees in righteousness (5:17–6:18), greater than John the Baptist (11:11–15), greater than the temple (12:3–6), and greater than Jonah (12:41) and Solomon (12:42). John and Hebrews concur. John writes of how Jesus is greater than Jacob, John the Baptist, and Abraham (John 4:12–14; 5:33–36; 8:53–58). Hebrews 1–12 continually presents the superiority of Jesus to prophets, angels, Moses, priests, and heroes of the faith.

The experience of the transfiguration is both intense and tender. Jesus' deity shines out and the Father's voice thunders, yet Jesus touches the three and stills their fears. Nonetheless, Peter, James, and John do not yet comprehend what they have experienced, and so, for the final time, Jesus commands them to "tell no one the vision" until the resurrection (Matt. 17:9; cf. 8:4; 9:30; 16:20). Until the disciples grasp the bond between death and resurrection, suffering and glory, they cannot accurately proclaim the transfiguration. Besides, if they tried, who would believe them? Who would understand them? After the resurrection, the transfiguration will make sense.

The transfiguration evidently deepens the disciples' conviction that Jesus is the Messiah, but it also prompts a question: "Then [oun, commonly "therefore"] why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" (17:10). "Therefore" means the disciples are drawing an inference: If Jesus is the Messiah, where is Elijah, whom the scribes call his forerunner? Perhaps seeing Elijah (17:3) prompts the query, but there is more. Interest in Elijah is high (16:14; John 1:21), since Malachi foretells a return of Elijah to restore Israel (Mal. 4:5–6). Besides, if Elijah will "restore all things" before the Messiah's arrival, why has Jesus spoken of suffering and death (Matt. 16:21–17:9)? In short, if Jesus is the Messiah, where is Elijah?

Jesus replies, "Elijah does come, and he will restore all things," but "they did not recognize him" and treated him as "they pleased" (17:11–12). By "Elijah" Jesus means John the Baptist, who has come as Elijah and forerunner. Jesus endorses much, but not all, of the scribes' ideas. "Elijah"—John—must come and restore Israel, but not in the order they suppose. When John came, the people ultimately rejected him. Further, if John, the forerunner, was mistreated, could Jesus expect a better lot? So, Jesus says, "The Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands" (v. 12). Then "the disciples understand" that Jesus is speaking of John the Baptist (v. 13). Soon enough Jesus will repeat that the Son of Man must suffer and die (vv. 22–23). How important, then, that they remember the transfiguration.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Prayer Requests of Group Members (be sure to share these with the group and check in on relevant requests)

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- .
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Those we are Asking God to Save

Friends -

Family -

Co-workers -

Others -