

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 16, 2010**

**GLIMPSE OF GLORY**

**Matthew 17:1-13**

**INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE**

I want to begin today by saying thanks to all of you for your prayers and other expressions of love and concern on behalf of my daughter Erin and nephew Ben, as Ben received the gift of a kidney from his cousin Erin last Wednesday out in Phoenix, Arizona. Both Ben and Erin are healing well so far, and we are just incredibly grateful for what God has done. Not only that, we are in awe of the fact that God has designed us in such a way that doctors can take a healthy organ from the body of one person and transplant it into the body of another person. As David recognized long ago, we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14).

Please continue to lift up both Ben and Erin in prayer in their ongoing recoveries. Erin was discharged from the hospital yesterday. Ben, amazingly, was to be discharged either last evening or today. Erin and Mary Sue will remain in Phoenix for another week, so that Erin can have a follow-up appointment there before coming home. The Lord willing, they plan to fly home to Virginia a week from tomorrow, on May 24.

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Now, to shift gears.... To this point in our study of the life and times of Simon Peter, we have looked at several turning points, several key moments in his life, including:

- His first encounter with Jesus, when his brother Andrew took him to meet Jesus (John 1:35-42).
- The call of Jesus to Peter and Andrew, and James and John, to leave their boats and their fishing nets to follow Him and to become fishers of men (Matthew 4:18-22).
- Peter’s clear and confident confession of Jesus as the promised Messiah and the true Son of God when Jesus asked the disciples: “Who do you say I am?” (Matthew 16:13-20).
- Then, last Sunday, how Peter was blind-sided by the explicit way Jesus spoke to the disciples about the suffering that awaited Him (Jesus) in Jerusalem. Peter responded by rebuking Jesus for talking that way. Then, you remember, Jesus responded to Peter’s rebuke by rebuking him, even calling him a tool of the devil. Peter thought that suffering and glory were irreconcilable. But Jesus went on to say that anyone who wanted to follow Him must say no to self, yes to God, and take up their cross – the cross of suffering for His sake (Matthew 16:21-28).

Today we look at another dramatic moment in the life of Simon Peter. Let’s look together at Matthew 17:1-13. Let’s give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word.

## **UNFORGETTABLE**

Is there an experience in your life you're sure you will never, ever forget? Maybe it is the birth – or adoption – of a child. Maybe it is your wedding day. Or the day the light of faith dawned in your heart and you put your trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of your life. Experiences like these, I hope you will never forget. (Or maybe it is something far less significant, like making the game-winning basket for Cranberry Junior High with 8 seconds left to beat Titusville Junior High, 43-42. That was the high point of my basketball career!)

What happened when Jesus took them up on the mountain was something Peter, James and John would never forget, as long as they lived. It was unforgettable. Peter wrote about that experience in 2 Peter 1:16-18: “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He (Jesus) received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to Him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with Him on the sacred mountain.”

*The Message* paraphrase expresses it this way: “We weren’t just wishing on a star when we laid the facts out before you regarding the powerful return of our Master, Jesus Christ. We were there for the preview! We saw it with our own eyes: Jesus resplendent with light from God the Father as the voice of Majestic Glory spoke: ‘This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of all my delight.’ We were there on the holy mountain with Him. We heard the voice out of heaven with our very own ears.”

Can’t you hear the tone of excitement and awe in the words of Peter? “We were there. We saw it with our own eyes. We heard the voice with our own ears. It was unforgettable!” You wouldn’t be able to forget it either.

And, as *The Message* brings out, it was a preview of a coming attraction. Kind of like a trailer for an upcoming movie. It was a preview of the majesty and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ that will be revealed to the whole world when He comes again. Peter, James and John were given a glimpse of His true glory. How could you ever forget something like that?

Let’s look at what took place up there on the sacred mountain. (Which mountain it was, by the way, the Bible doesn’t say. Different Bible scholars have suggested at least three possibilities, but we don’t know for sure which it was.) Wherever it took place, there are four things I want you to notice in this story.

### **1. THE TRANSFIGURATION**

If Peter and the others were blind-sided when Jesus began to explain to them that suffering and death awaited Him in Jerusalem, imagine their surprise, their amazement, when He was transfigured right before their very eyes.

The word “transfigured” is not one that most of us use in ordinary conversation. At least I don’t. But it comes from a more recognizable word in Greek: *metamorphomai*, which means “to be transformed” or “to be changed.” Metamorphosis is what happens to a caterpillar when it is transformed into a butterfly. It changes into another form. The word *metamorphomai* can also mean to change the outside of a thing or person to match what is on the inside. That is what happened in the transfiguration of Jesus: His outward appearance was changed to match the inward reality. The pre-incarnation glory of Jesus, the heavenly glory He shared with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, was veiled when He took on our flesh and blood. Even though He was fully God, as Paul says in Philippians 2, Jesus had willingly laid aside His heavenly glory and “made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being made in human likeness” (2:6-7). But here, on the sacred mountain, as Peter called it, Jesus gave the three disciples a glimpse of His glory: “His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light” (Matthew 17:2). They had never seen anything like it.

Do you remember, following the exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai after being in the presence of the Lord, how his face reflected the glory of the Lord? The glory Moses radiated was not his own. It was extrinsic to him. It came from outside of him. He reflected God’s glory, just as the moon reflects the light of the sun. The radiance of Moses’ face eventually faded away. But the glory of Jesus revealed in the transfiguration was different. It was intrinsic. It was His own. It came not from an outside source but from His own being. And though it was hidden by His flesh during His life on earth, the day will come, at His second coming, when His divine majesty and glory will be on display for every eye to see. And it will never fade away.

Here is an interesting thing: The word *metamorphomai*, the word used for the transfiguration of Jesus, is also applied twice in the New Testament to believers. In Romans 12:2, Paul says that as followers of Christ, we are not to conform to the values and ways of our culture. Instead, we are to be transformed – *metamorphed* – in our inner being by the renewing of our minds. In the way we think and in the way we act, we are to be changed from the inside out, so that we reflect not the spirit of the world, but the character and the values, the mind and heart of the Lord Jesus Himself. That kind of transformation is God’s will for your life and mine.

The second place where the word *metamorphomai* is applied to us is in 2 Corinthians 3:18, where Paul talks about the transforming power of the gospel and says that in contrast to Moses, who covered his face with a veil so the people couldn’t see the glory fading away after he had been in God’s presence, we who have been saved by God’s grace reflect God’s glory with unveiled faces, and we are being transformed more and more into His likeness.

This is God’s will for your life and mine, as much as it was God’s will for Peter, James and John. The longer you and I know the Lord Jesus, the better we come to know Him, the more our lives should reflect His beauty and brightness, His glory and grace, with the result that by looking at us and the way we live, other people may see what a great God He is. Lord, let it be so.

## **2. THE APPEARANCE OF MOSES AND ELIJAH**

Quickly, the second thing to notice in this passage is the appearance of Moses and Elijah with Jesus. Moses, of course, was the great law-giver in Israel's history, and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets. Together they represented the law and the prophets which pointed to the coming of Jesus and found their fulfillment in Him.

Matthew says in verse 3 that Moses and Elijah were "talking with Jesus." Did you ever wonder what they were talking about? Matthew doesn't say. But over in Luke 9:31, it says they were talking with Jesus about His departure – literally, His exodus – which He was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. Unlike Peter, Moses and Elijah didn't try to talk Jesus out of it. They understood that His imminent suffering and death in Jerusalem were not an unnecessary tragedy to be avoided, but were central to God's plan for the salvation of sinners. For the redemption of His people. By means of His suffering and death on the cross.

In addition to providing evidence that there *is* life after death, the appearance of Moses and Elijah with Jesus here demonstrates both the unity of the Bible's message (the law, the prophets, and Jesus were all in agreement) and the support of these Old Testament giants for the ministry of Jesus.

## **3. PETER'S PROPOSAL**

The third thing to notice is Peter's proposal in verse 4 to build three shelters – one each for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. It was probably one of those occasions when Peter spoke without really thinking about what he was saying. I'm not sure we can be certain of Peter's motives in this instance, but it is possible that his thinking went something like this: "Wow! This is so cool. We're up here with Jesus, Moses and Elijah. What could be better than this? I don't want to leave. I don't really want to go back down to the plains and valleys of everyday life. I don't want to go back to the problems of life. I just want to stay here and soak up the glory."

Have you ever felt like that? Ever had a kind of mountain-top spiritual experience that you wished would never end? Ever wished you could stay on the mountain with Jesus and not have to deal with the problems of life? I know I have.

But that is not how it is in this life. That was not God's plan for Peter and the other disciples. And it is not God's plan for you or me. Thank God for those mountain-top experiences in your life. Cherish them. But remember that you can't stay there forever. You have to take the blessings of the mountain-top, when you felt God's presence in a powerful way, back to the valley, where life is hard and people have problems. But God is with you there, too.

## **4. THE VOICE OF GOD**

Fourth, be sure to notice what happened while Peter was still babbling: God broke in. Verse 5 says that a bright cloud enveloped them. In the Old Testament – on Mount Sinai, in the wilderness, in both the tabernacle and the temple built by Solomon – the cloud symbolized the

visible presence of God with His people. So God showed His presence to the three disciples in a visible and dramatic way. But that isn't all. Out of the cloud God spoke.

Have you ever heard the voice of God speaking audibly to you? I know God has spoken to me. He has spoken to me through His Word – and He continues to do so. He has spoken to me through other people. He has spoken to me by impressions on my heart. He has spoken to me through different experiences and circumstances. But I have never heard the voice of God in audible tones. Maybe you have. Nor has God ever spoken to me out of a cloud.

But God spoke to the three disciples. And He had a specific message for them, a message with four points:

1. This (Jesus) is my Son.
2. I love Him.
3. I am pleased with Him. (In other words, He has my seal of approval. He is doing exactly what I want Him to do.)
4. Listen to Him! (Stop talking and pay attention to Him!)

Peter and the others needed to be reassured that Jesus knew what He was doing. He knew what He was talking about. He knew where He was going and why. Even if they didn't get it yet, the disciples needed some reassurance that the passion – the suffering and death awaiting Him in Jerusalem – was part of God's plan.

The disciples also needed to see clearly that, as great as they are, Moses and Elijah are not the equals of Jesus. Jesus has no equals. The message of God to Peter and the others here is about the uniqueness and the supremacy of Christ. He alone is God's Son. And He is supremely the One to whom we are to listen and obey.

God the Father is not pleased when we try to put anyone on the same level as Jesus. Not Moses. Not Elijah. Not Abraham. Not Mohammed. Not the Dalai Lama. Not the Pope. Not Luther. Not even John Calvin.

Jesus has no equals. He is not just one of many ways to God. He is the only way. He is not merely one prophet among many. He is the living God in flesh and blood. He has no equals.

When the disciples heard the voice of God, the Scripture says they fell flat on their faces, terrified in their hearts. But Jesus came over and touched them, and told them not to be afraid. When they opened their eyes and looked around, they saw no one except Jesus (Matthew 17:6-8). Only Jesus.

In your life, in my life, may we too see Jesus, and only Jesus. He has no equals. And He never will. It was a lesson, an experience that Peter, James and John would never forget.

Dear friends, may we see a glimpse of His glory today, may we *listen* to Him. May we listen to *Him*. And follow Him alone.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.