

The Transfiguration Part 2

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[0:00] If you have a Bible, either a physical one or a digital one, I invite you to open it up or turn it on and head to the book of Matthew chapter 17. We are in a series called Into the Wilderness, and we have been exploring two main scriptures, two main parts of Jesus's life, his testing in the wilderness, as well as his transfiguration on the mountaintop.

And so we've been exploring these themes of wilderness, of wastelands and mountaintops, and what we can learn from them. And in that, let's just do a little bit of review work.

Weeks one through three, we looked at Matthew chapter four. We looked at the testing of Jesus. We looked at themes of like appetite and approval and not trying to make Jesus do magic tricks for us.

And then last week, we took a look at the transfiguration the first time. We're going to look at it for a couple more weeks. And last week, my main kind of point out of that passage was that Jesus has declared us the light of the world.

The Old Testament and the New Testament agree that when Jesus brings his kingdom, when Jesus becomes king of the world, one of the signs that we know that he becomes king is that his people, the people who follow Jesus, the people that know God's redemption and salvation are going to be like stars in the sky.

[1:19] They're going to be heavenly luminaries, is what one writer puts it. It's going to reveal how God has always seen his people, how he has always seen his creation as bright, heavenly beings.

That, as C.S. Lewis said, you've never met a mere mortal, that we are all glorious because of Jesus. And so when Jesus is transfigured up on this mountaintop in Matthew 17, it's not revealing his divinity.

I'm not denying Jesus his divinity. That's absolutely true. Rather, instead, it's all about revealing what humanity is capable of, what God's intention is for every single human being.

All right. So let me ask you a question. When have you dramatically misread a situation? When have you dramatically misread a situation?

Let me give you an example. When I was in college, there was this girl, as many stories start, there was this girl who I liked, and we were becoming better and better friends.

[2:29] So we were becoming friends. It was the end of my freshman year. We're going into the summer in between freshman and sophomore year, and we were both working, had on-campus jobs for the summer.

And we would also were providing BBS for a church that we were attending. So we were hanging out, like, all the time. And I didn't have a lot of experience with girls, with dating, with any of that. But I was getting more and more convinced that this girl liked me back. And I became so convinced of this that while we were driving back from BBS, she was driving me back to my on-campus apartment, that I decided I was going to ask her out in the car, in transit, back to my house. We weren't there yet. We were in the middle of the route. And I asked her out on a date. And she said no. So I dramatically misread the situation.

I thought that she liked me back. She clearly did not. She did not think of me that way. And she shot me down for that date. And then we had the rest of the car ride back.

[3:37] It was an awkward scene. So when have you dramatically misread a situation? When have you thought something was true, acted on that, said something because of how you misread the situation, and then had to kind of back away slowly?

I'm thinking of the gif of Homer Simpson kind of backing into the bushes. When have you had to do that? That's what we're going to be talking about tonight with Matthew 17.

I see that people are LOLing maybe at me, maybe at the kids possibly, making a cameo. We're going to be taking a look at Matthew 17, the transfiguration, and how Peter dramatically misreads the situation.

So here is the word of the Lord. It says, And Peter said to Jesus, And while Peter was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice said, This is my son whom I love.

With him I am well pleased. Listen to him. And when the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them.

[5 : 17] Get up, he said. Don't be afraid. And when they looked up, they saw no one but Jesus. Brothers, sisters, friends, this is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Spirit, we pray that you would illuminate the scriptures for us tonight, that we may know you more, and that we may serve your world better. In Christ's name, amen.

So, when have you dramatically misread a situation? That is what Peter has done, and I'm going to explain why. But in order to do that, we have to talk about Sukkot, or what you might know of as the Feast of Tabernacles.

We're going to talk about some Jewish feasts tonight. So, Sukkot was a festival in the Jewish calendar that was one of the three main festivals.

There was the Day of Atonement, there was what we call Pentecost, and there was also Sukkot, or the Feast of Tabernacles. And this is what Leviticus chapter 23 says about it.

[6 : 16] It says, You are going to live in temporary shelters for seven days, and all native-born Israelites are to live in such shelters, so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in temporary shelters when I brought them out of Egypt.

So, all of the feasts that are in the Old Testament, they're all meant to serve as like memorials, as a way for the Israelites to continually remember what God had done for them.

And what the Feast of Tabernacles was all about was it was partially like an agricultural festival, as a festival of harvest, and it was also meant to be this physical, tangible reminder that when the Israelites came out of Egypt, they lived in tents.

They went camping for a really, really long time, 40 years. And they were meant to keep doing that on a yearly basis, go out into a tent and live there, have a camping trip, basically, so that they could tell their kids and their grandkids and generations after how God had taken them out of Egypt and had them go camping as part of his restoration, his saving of the Jewish people.

Deuteronomy 16 puts it like this. It says, And I love this part.

[7 : 34] Be joyful at your festival. And I love how the word joyful comes right after the word winepress. Winepress, Be joyful at your festival. You and your sons and your daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites and the foreigners and the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns.

For seven days, celebrate the festival. This is a feast and a party that goes on and on and on. For the Lord your God will bless you in your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete.

That is the Feast of Tabernacles, or what we call Sukkot. Now, here's what you need to know about Sukkot, is that it was often associated with the end of the age.

In Jewish eschatology, so their ideas about how the world was going to end, there was this age and the age to come. There was the age that we're in now.

We're familiar with it. It has things like disease and death and darkness and kids who cry in the middle of the night and wake you up, and bosses that are terrible and paychecks that don't come.

[8 : 41] There's this age and there's the age to come, when God becomes king of the world and everything is set right again. And Sukkot was associated with the end of the age.

The end of the age is meant to happen soon in the Jewish mind, and there are ways that they were to know that it was coming.

In the book of Nehemiah, the Jewish people have come out of exile, and when they come out of exile, they go back to Jerusalem, and they start rebuilding the temple and the walls of the city.

And they celebrate Sukkot. And it says in the book of Nehemiah, it's the first time they celebrated it in 600 years since the time of Joshua. But Nehemiah, they think that the end of the world is coming.

And so they are going to start celebrating Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles. Amos chapter 9, one of the minor prophets towards the end of the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament, says this. It says, In that day I will rise up the fallen tents of David, Sukkot of David, and I will wall up its breaches, and

I will raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old.

[9 : 52] And in Zechariah 14, it says this, And the Lord will be king over all the earth, and he'll destroy all of Israel's enemies, and anyone who has left, this is verse 16, will go to celebrate the Feast of Booths, the Feast of Tabernacles, the Feast of Tents.

And if anyone doesn't, there will be plague. Thanks, Zechariah. So Israelites, Jewish people thought that when the new age was going to come, there was going to be a new celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, a new celebration of the Feast of Tents, of Booths, a reminder of how God had brought Israel out of the Exodus.

Okay, so I want you to keep that in mind. Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles, end of the age, keep all of that in mind. Keep going. There's also expectations about Moses and Elijah and the end of the age.

So Jewish people were expecting Messiah. They were expecting Sukkot, the Feast of Booths. They were also expecting Moses and Elijah to play in this as well. So back to Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 18 says, I will raise up for them a prophet like you, Moses, from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command them.

[11 : 11] And I myself, the Lord, will call to account anyone who does not listen to my words, that the prophet speaks in my name. So Deuteronomy 18 tells the Jewish people that there is a time that's going to come where God's going to raise up a prophet like Moses.

And many of the Jewish writers in the time of Jesus, a couple hundred years before and up to the time of Jesus, had these big expectations about a prophet like Moses who would show up and bring Israel back to righteousness, bring them back to the Torah, to the law, and that would help prepare the end of the age.

There are also expectations about Elijah doing the same thing. This is the book of Malachi. This is the very last book of the Old Testament. Malachi writes this.

He says, See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. You will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, the hearts of the children to their parents, or else I will come and strike the land of total destruction.

Yes, there's lots of destruction language in the Old Testament. We know that. Point being is that Moses was supposed to show up and Elijah was supposed to show up. So, let's go back to Matthew 17.

[12 : 23] After six days, Jesus takes with him Peter, James, John, the brother of James, leads him up to a high mountain, and there he was transfigured. His face shone like the sun, his clothes become as white as the light, and just then there appear before him Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus.

So, the disciples, who are Jewish men, all of their end-of-the-age expectations, their big \$10 word here, eschatological expectations, are coming to pass right before their very eyes.

Jesus, he looks like one of the righteous ones shining before him. We talked about this last week with Daniel 13. And remember, this is not Jesus proving that he was God.

No one expected the Messiah to be divine at this point. That was a big surprise. Jesus shining before his disciples is Jesus being one of the righteous shining ones. So, the disciples, they see Jesus shining, and then Moses shows up.

This is Deuteronomy 18, books that they would have memorized as children, a prophet like Moses. Yeah, it's Moses himself right next to Jesus shining. And then Elijah shows up. This is Malachi chapter 4.

[13 : 33] Elijah himself is showing up next to the one they think is going to be Messiah. It would be like if all of your favorite celebrities showed up while you were taking a hike.

I'm trying to think who that list for me would be. Like, I don't know, Tom Hanks. If Tom Hanks showed up, that'd be pretty great. Like, one of your living celebrities, and then two of your favorite dead celebrities.

So, like, I don't know, Elvis and Michael Jackson, right, where Tom Hanks showed up while you were taking a hike, trying to get out of your house for a while. In the comments, I would love it if you posted some of your favorite celebrities so I can come up with some better examples.

So, the disciples go up to this mountain. Jesus starts shining. Moses starts showing up. Elijah starts showing up. And then, what does Peter suggest?

He says, Peter says 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.

[14:35] Greek word for shelter is skene, and it means tent or tabernacle or shelter. And in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, it's that word, the feast of skene, that is used for the feast of tabernacles.

So, Peter thinks the end of the age has come. He is ready to celebrate the feast of tabernacles. He is ready to do the thing that the prophet said we're supposed to do when the people show up who are supposed to show up.

He is ready to kick off the end of the world with Jesus. Let's get this party started. But here's the problem. Peter wants the glorious end, and he wants to skip over the messy middle.

He wants to get to the glorious end where everything is made right, where Jesus is king of the world, where God makes every tear go away, every difficult, hard thing go away, and he wants to skip over the messy middle.

Is this relatable at all? Because Jesus has told Peter just a few verses earlier what the messy middle was going to be.

[15:47] Matthew 16, 21. It should be on your screen. It says, And so already we get this theme of Peter wanting to skip over the messy middle.

He wants Jesus to be king. He wants Jesus to be Messiah. He wants Jesus to be Lord. But Jesus starts saying, Well, in order for that to happen, the Messiah has to suffer and die and be resurrected. And Peter is like, You don't need to be resurrected.

Just don't die. And here, Peter sees Jesus shining like the sun. He sees Moses and Elijah, and he again wants to skip over the hard part.

He doesn't want Jesus to suffer. He doesn't want the disciples to be scattered. He just wants to get to the glorious end. And Matthew 16 continues.

Jesus says, turns and says to Peter, Get behind me, Satan. You're a stumbling block to me. You don't have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.

[17:03] Which, by the way, quick aside, if you've ever wondered why Jesus reacted so strongly to Peter, or like to turn around and say, Hey, devil. It's a pretty strong reaction.

You have to remember that Jesus was not only fully divine, which is true. He was also fully human. And in the modern era, we know of such things as like PTSD, of traumatic responses in our brain because of things that have happened in our past.

Remember that Jesus was tempted in the desert by the devil himself after having fasted or been starved for 40 days.

Okay? So Jesus goes on out into the desert. He doesn't eat anything. And then the devil himself shows up to tempt Jesus. I can hardly think of a more traumatic event.

So it would not surprise me that when Jesus is dealing with Peter, tempting, testing him to say, No, you don't need to do the hard stuff, Jesus. Jesus is going to have a PTSD kind of response to say, Whoa, that sounds a lot like the devil to me.

[18:08] Anyway, just a quick aside on that. So, while Peter was still speaking, saying that we should build tents, God shows up.

The Father shows up. It says this, A bright cloud covered them, and a voice from a cloud said, This is my son, whom I love, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.

Yes, to the person. Theory in the comments. Jesus was triggered. So, Peter makes this recommendation. He thinks it's time for the end of the age. It's time for the Feast of Tabernacles.

And God shows up in a cloud and says, This is my son. Listen to him. Excuse me. Now, if you're Peter or James and John, you thought things were wild before, but now you're in for the real shock. Jesus and Moses and Elijah shining, that's not that wild. That's Daniel 12 chapter stuff. We know that the righteous are going to shine like the sun. Moses and Elijah showing up.

[19:05] I mean, you're glad that you get to see it, but also it's been foretold. You've been expecting Moses and Elijah showing up someday anyway. But then a bright cloud and a voice, that is Mount Sinai, Exodus, Ten Commandments, Prince of Egypt, Charlton Heston, ABC special kind of level of wildness going on.

A bright cloud and a voice to any Jew at any time equals Yahweh God himself showing up. You are in for something right now.

And then that voice says, This is the Son of God. Jesus is the Son of God. And that we should listen to him. God doesn't say that about Moses, the giver of the Torah.

God doesn't say that about Elijah, the revered prophet. He says it about Jesus. What on earth is going on? So the transfiguration begins to unveil the true nature of Jesus's mission and identity.

The transfiguration begins to unveil the true nature of Jesus's mission and identity. Peter is declared already in Matthew 16 that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

[20 : 23] But what is becoming apparent is that there is some deeper connection between the person of Jesus and God himself. Not just that he's the Son of God, not just that he's anointed by God, but that maybe Jesus is God himself because he is superseding, he is above and beyond anything that the prophets or that the law could offer.

And this is what the writers of the New Testament were getting at in like the book of Hebrews. Hebrews chapter one, verse three. The Son is the radiance of God's glory. And listen, the exact representation of his being.

What's true of Jesus is true of God. What's true of God is true of Jesus. As one comedian puts it, God is at least as nice as Jesus.

Hebrews chapter three, verse three. Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself, which is a real first century burn if I've ever heard one.

But author of Hebrews is saying, yes, Moses, the Torah, that's great. But the builder of the house, Jesus himself, God himself, is better than that.

[21 : 38] Galatians chapter three, this is a N.T. Wright's translation. This is what Paul says in Galatians. Before this faithfulness of Jesus arrived, we were kept under guard by the law in close confinement until the coming faithfulness should be revealed.

Thus the law was like a babysitter for us, looking after us until the coming of the Messiah, so that we might be given covenant membership on the basis of faithfulness. But now that that faithfulness has come, we're no longer under the rule of the babysitter.

I love that translation. Paul was listening to what God said on the mountain. This is my son, Jesus. Listen to him. Yes, the law and the prophets were helpful. Yes, Moses and Elijah were useful, but just as useful as a babysitter is.

At some point, you shouldn't need to listen to them anymore. Listen to Jesus. Listen to the son of God himself. Jesus is the full revelation of who God is, God's character, in a way that the Old Testament could never be, in a way that Moses could never be, in a way that Moses could never be.

What's true of Jesus is true of God. God is at least as nice as Jesus. So, Matthew 17, verse 6.

When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground, terrified.

[22 : 56] And Jesus came and touched him. Touched them. Get up, Jesus said. Don't be afraid. And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed him, Don't tell anyone what you have seen until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead. There are a bunch of things that I want to say about this, but I'm already running long, so we'll keep this going.

Number one, Jesus will always move towards you in your fear, never away from you. The disciples are terrified by what they've experienced, and they've heard the voice of God in a shining cloud, basically saying, You've got a new person to listen to from now on.

But Jesus moves towards them, and lays hands on them, and gets them up, and says, Don't be afraid. Jesus, our God, will always move towards you in fear, never away from you.

I think that's an appropriate message for today. Number two, some things are meant to be reflected on before we share them. Some things are meant to be reflected on before we share them.

[24 : 06] The disciples have had this incredible experience, just three of them, that Jesus has chosen to experience this. And Jesus says, Don't tell anybody yet. And I think that's important, that sometimes we can have these mountaintop experiences in our lives, and we immediately want to Instagram it, and tweet about it, and write blog posts about it, and call our mom, or whatever.

And I think sometimes God says, Just sit still for a moment. Just appreciate the moment for what it is. Let it rest in your heart before you go and share it with people.

I had one professor talk about it in terms of, Don't just throw fruit at people. Throw fruit that has seeds, so that then they can have fruit. And so many times, we have this mountaintop experience,

and we just want to throw the fruit at people.

I'm like, Hey, look at this thing that I've experienced. And people are like, Well, whatever. Let it take root in you. So then when you share about it, other people can also have a mountaintop experience because of what you're sharing.

Number three, be suspicious of your mountaintop experiences, and be suspicious of your suspicions. So be suspicious of your mountaintop experiences. Peter goes up to the mountain.

[25 : 15] He sees all of these things, and he thinks that he knows what's going on, but he doesn't. I think sometimes we have a mountaintop experiences, and we will get these, maybe delusions of grandeur, that, Oh, man, I feel like God is calling me to fill in the blank.

Be suspicious, at least for a little while. Maybe let God do some correcting, not only in the mountain, but also in the valley. And also be suspicious of your suspicions. Some of us have mountaintop experiences, and our cynicism immediately kicks in, and we don't want to, we don't want the mountaintop.

We don't think God could actually speak to us. Maybe be suspicious of that too. Maybe realize that your cynicism can be a louder voice than God. God doesn't want to shout over your cynicism, so maybe turn it down.

Finally, mountaintop experiences aren't just for you. The very next story after this one, which I'm not preaching on, thank goodness we'd all run out of time.

Our very next story after this one is a story about Jesus and his disciples curing a sick boy and restoring a family relationship. So Jesus and the disciples have this mountaintop experience and then immediately go out and help people.

[26 : 30] Your mountaintop experience, whatever that is, your experience with God, is meant to not only shape you and form you and change you, it's also meant to equip you to go out and make a difference in the world.

And T. Wright puts it like this. The more we are open to God and to the different dimension of God's glory, the more we seem to be open to the pain of the world. We are right to be wary when we return from some great worship service, when we rise from a time of prayer in which God has seemed close and his love real and powerful.

These things are never given for their own sake, but so that as we are equipped by them, God can use us within his needy world. So let me just ask a few kind of implication questions tonight.

Number one, where are you seeking shortcuts to get around the messy middle? Are there places, relationships, things in your life where you know what the end goal is and you just want to skip ahead and you're trying to get around the messy middle?

As many counselors and therapists have said and said to me, the easiest way around is through. So where in your life are you trying to get around the messy middle? Implication question number two, what false ideas about God do we need to set aside and instead listen to what Jesus reveals about God?

[27 : 51] Many of us, I am sure, have concepts of God, man, angry, beard, throne, sky, things like that, that we need to replace with what Jesus reveals about God.

Grace and mercy and compassion and someone who reaches out when we're afraid. What do we need to set aside about our thoughts about God and replace with what Jesus reveals?

Number three, how is God asking you to lean into serving his creation, his people, and those who don't yet know him? As you come out of your valley or down from the mountain, God intends for you to serve his world, to equip you, to change you so that you can go help others get to know this gracious, loving God.

So how is God asking you to lean into that? Brothers and sisters, I thank you so much for joining us. Let's have a word of prayer.

Father, Son, and Spirit, we thank you for the gift of your word and for what it is teaching us tonight. God, I ask that you would change us, inform us, that as we go out into a world that right now seems scarier than even usual, that we might take your presence with us and spread and share your compassion and love to those who need it most.

[29 : 20] God, may we be confident that you are moving towards us in our fear and our anxiety. And for those of us who are gifted with not feeling that fear and anxiety, may we spread some of that joy and that deep-seated hope around.

God, we love you, and we trust you, and we need you. We pray these things in your name. Amen.