

The Glorious Jesus

Matthew 17:1-13

This is one of those passages that I never used to understand. I didn't get it. My college degree is in engineering, and my brain is able to grasp numbers, and logical sequences. Multiplication tables and algebra make great sense to me. Things that fit together in a coherent system of thinking were always helpful, and, in that context, my understanding of the Bible has always been stable and secure. Things make sense. Things did fit together.

But then there were those strange passages in the Bible. Passages that were extraordinary. I could easily grasp some of them, like the resurrection. Clearly, the display of God's supernatural power was marvelous and intentional. And plain. Even the virgin birth. I understood and appreciated the miracles, multiplying bread and healing the sick. God was being God. He was showing off his power so that we might believe.

But then there were things that I might be tempted to label as gratuitous miracles, those that are above and beyond what was needed, in my observation. With no specific purpose made especially obvious to me. They were just there. Like Elijah and Enoch being taken up into heaven, directly, without death. Or, like the transfiguration here in our text this afternoon. To my logical mind, it seemed that this event could have been excluded from the Bible, and nothing really would have been lost. We didn't need it for any doctrine. We didn't need it for any otherwise unknown demonstration of God's power. And it seemed a little strange, more than a little out of the ordinary.

And, of course, it was, and in that context I have come to appreciate the transfiguration much more over the years. So

while no necessary doctrine or revelation of God exclusively depends upon this event, there is something especially glorious about it! Maybe even more glorious than anything else Jesus does with his disciples.

The people of God in the Old Testament were used to seeing signs and evidences of the glory of God. Visible, observable signs. Just one example, the very end of the book of Exodus.

Ex. 40:34 "Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. 35 And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting, because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. 36 Whenever the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle, the children of Israel would go onward in all their journeys. 37 But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not journey till the day that it was taken up. 38 For the cloud of the LORD was above the tabernacle by day, and fire was over it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys."

But now, things have changed. Jesus has come, and he was, of course, the fullness of God's glory in the flesh of a man.

John 1:14 "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

So the incarnation was a revelation of God's glory, but still, for the most part, Jesus' human appearance was ordinary. He ate. He slept. He lived fully and completely as a man, with all the normal, ordinary appearances of humanity. Except for here at the mount of transfiguration. Here we read that "His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light." Here, on this mountain, alone with the three of his closely connected disciples, here his appearance was transfigured before them.

That's certainly an interesting word, transfigured. The Greek word looks a lot like the English word "metamorphosis." A transformation. He was still a man, in the flesh, an earthly creature, but he took on the appearance of his divine nature. Now, I can't go very far down that road of explaining that to you. I can only go as far as the Scripture, no further. But this wasn't just an appearance. He was transformed, so that these three disciples were eyewitnesses of,

I. AN APPEARANCE OF GLORY.

The glory of God. Something akin to that OT revelation of God I just read, where "the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle." Here, by comparison, the glory of Jesus filled the mountainside. His appearance changed, such that his divine glory was now evident and obvious. The words of our language are inadequate to express that fully, but the words recorded by Matthew under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit are at least clear. We see,

A. The glory of Jesus.

v.2

Likewise, v.5a "While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them."

In Revelation 1, John writes something very similar,

Rev. 1:12 "Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. 14 His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; 15 His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; 16 He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength."

That's something of this same glory. It goes beyond a calculated, mathematical description or definition. The Son of Man in all his glory is a manifestation of the glory of God himself. And that is an experience that we seldom have. We have the ordinary. The simple. We don't have statutes and graven images, by the prohibition of the law, because we invariably worship them as God. Because God is a Spirit. He does not have a body, nor physical existence. But he is glorious, full of glory.

By faith, that is a perspective you and I ought to seek and desire, to behold the glory of God as he is revealed in the person of Jesus. Only Peter, James and John actually saw this glory with their eyes, but here it is in the Scripture for you and for me to behold. Here is the glory of Jesus. The vision is not the superficial profanity of painting a halo over Jesus' head, or even a depiction of Jesus with some sort of glow emanating from his head, as artists have been prone to draw. No, something far greater. Something you can see and perceive only by faith. But that faith is real, and the glory of Jesus is real!

It was so very real to Peter, James and John, and they reacted appropriately.

v.6

That's what the presence of the glory of God does to a man, a fallen man. "They fell on their faces." They were "greatly afraid." This glory was "terrible," to use that word properly in a way it is seldom used today. This glory was awful, full of awe, not so much what we usually mean by "afraid." This manifestation of the glory of God goes beyond any ability to define and describe, and it leaves you on your face! That is the fullness of the meaning of the word reverence.

The same idea is described by the words of,
Heb. 12:8 “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. 29 For our God is a consuming fire.”

Isaiah’s familiar response is also an appropriate cross-reference,

Is. 6:1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. 2 Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one cried to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!” 4 And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 So I said: “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts.”

Consider also,
2 Cor. 4:3 “But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, 4 whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. 5 For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus’ sake. 6 For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

There is a particularly practical application of all of this, which goes right before those words, in,
2 Cor. 3:18 “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.”

So the point of considering the glory of Jesus, the goal of beholding the glory of the Lord is for our own transformation; our own transfiguration. Not that we transform into God. Not that we become a god, but that we become like God, conformed to the image of Jesus himself, reflecting a measure of his glory. “We... are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.” From glory to glory, as it is sometimes translated. So the revelation of the transcendent glory of God is a motivating factor in your own spiritual transformation which we commonly call ‘sanctification.’

Let’s move on. There were two others with Jesus, Moses and Elijah. And obviously, they had both died. But here they, too, appear in glory.

B. The glory of Moses and Elijah.

Their presence was very real. There is no sense that it was just an “appearance,” a ghost or something like that. Rather, it seems like a real, resurrected appearance of two real men.

v.3

But their glory lay in their resurrected state, didn’t it? Their glory was in their perfected bodies, their glorified state of now living with God in heaven. And we see that glory by its contrast with the foolishness of Peter who missed the significance of their resurrected glory by assuming he could provide for their earthly needs.

v.4

He missed the whole point! Moses and Elijah weren’t there to live again on earth as mortal men. They were there to highlight

and proclaim the glory of Jesus, they themselves brought to that mountain of transfiguration for that purpose. They weren't there to demonstrate their own glory, but rather the glory of Jesus.

And, of course, that was always their purpose, wasn't it? Even as men on earth as they lived out their lives, they lived to proclaim the prepare for the revelation of the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Moses, of course, represents the whole of the law of God, the giving of the law in the Old Testament. And Elijah represents the whole of the prophets of God, men whose work was to speak in prophetic anticipation of Jesus throughout the Old Testament. Indeed, the whole Old Testament is often referred to simply as "the law and the prophets." And the purpose of the whole OT is to point the way to Christ, to point to Christ, to prepare for his appearing.

Even as the Old ends, we read about both Moses and Elijah again, and we read about the return of Elijah, a prophecy fulfilled by the presence of John the Baptist, who came in the spirit and power of Elijah. But the prophecy was clear, as the Old Testament revelation from God was ending, we read,

Mal. 4:4 "Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, Which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, With the statutes and judgments. 5 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. 6 And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."

Elijah will come. And he did, the prophets of God continued with the presence of John the Baptist. And here at the Transfiguration, that predictive prophetic voice of the law and the prophets is again emphasized. And Jesus gave his disciples a bit more of an explanation in,

v.9-13

Moses and Elijah provided a testimony of the glory of Jesus. Moses and Elijah represent all that God revealed in preparation for Jesus, the law and the prophets. And we can read of the resurrected Jesus speaking to the two men on the road to Emmaus, with these words,

Luke 24:27 "And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself."

So why Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration? Because the law and the prophets of the Old Testament are all given by revelation of God to point us to Jesus Christ, that we might see and behold his glory!

John 1:14 "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

Now, let's get more specific regarding,

II. THE IDENTIFICATION OF GLORY.

You see, this transfiguration was not merely a visual event in which we are left to our own personal interpretations. This was not merely a visual experience for Peter, James and John. It was also verbal. This evening, we are not left merely with a visual experience, either, but rather one that is clearly and articulately interpreted for us. To be plain,

A. Jesus is the beloved Son of God.

You see, while Peter was speaking foolishness about building earthly tents to house these visitors from heaven, God himself was speaking from heaven!

v.5

This must have been the most astounding lesson that the disciples every learned, the most astounding truth that any Christian would come to understand. The messiah, the savior and redeemer of mankind, is the Son of God. The Messiah, the anointed king, is not merely a descendant of David, but also a descendant of God, begotten of God.

Consider Psalm 2, where we find a description of God the Father exercising his rule and authority over the kings of the earth who always seek to rebel against him.

Ps. 2:4 “He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; The Lord shall hold them in derision. 5 Then He shall speak to them in His wrath, And distress them in His deep displeasure: 6 “Yet I have set My King On My holy hill of Zion.”

That wouldn't be hard for any believing Jew to understand. They expected a king in Zion. They looked forward to the restoration of David's kingdom under the reign of David's greater son. But what comes next in Psalm 2 is astounding. It is a Son talking about his father.

Ps. 2:7 “I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, You are My Son, Today I have begotten You. 8 Ask of Me, and I will give You The nations for Your inheritance, And the ends of the earth for Your possession. 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel.”

The king, the Son of David, would be the Son of God! The Son of God would rule all the nations of the earth! The Son of God would be king, in heaven and on earth. “You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will give You The nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for your possession.”

That's what God is declaring at the transfiguration, that Jesus

the Messiah, Jesus the King, was also God's one and only Son. His beloved son. So God the Father speaks from heaven in unmistakable terms, “This is my beloved Son.” But that's not all. God adds his commendation and blessing,
v.5 “...in whom I am well pleased.”

Then, of course, the obvious application, “Hear him.” Listen to him. When God speaks, you listen!

Where did that language come from? It isn't new or original here at the Transfiguration. Rather, it comes from the prophets as well, the prophet Isaiah.

Is. 42:1 “Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, My Elect One in whom My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles. 2 He will not cry out, nor raise His voice, Nor cause His voice to be heard in the street. 3 A bruised reed He will not break, And smoking flax He will not quench; He will bring forth justice for truth. 4 He will not fail nor be discouraged, Till He has established justice in the earth; And the coastlands shall wait for His law.”

So the Messiah King is “my servant.” And God's pleasure is pronounced upon him. The servant is the one “in whom my soul delights.” As it is in Matthew 17, “in whom I am well-pleased.” So God the Father is joining together these two great prophetic themes of the Old Testament. The Messiah King and the Suffering Servant, both of whom are joined in one person, God's own beloved son.

B. Jesus is the chosen Servant of God.

And the clarity of Isaiah's prophecy is that that servant of God is a suffering servant!

Is. 53:4 “Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and

afflicted. 5 But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”

So this transfiguration is a demonstration and revelation of Jesus as the servant of God, chosen by God to suffer and die for the sins of men. He is the atoning sacrifice, the propitiation. His blood was the blood of the New Covenant, shed for the forgiveness of sins. And that’s the glory of this transfiguration, for all of that is so clearly revealed. The glorious Jesus is revealed.

That was a one-time event, to be sure. One time, even during the life of Jesus, for it wasn’t repeated again while he remained on earth and surely it won’t be repeated now that he has been ascended into heaven.

Likewise, we don’t have the outward benefit of that Old Testament revelation of God’s glory either, the glory of the Lord that filled the tabernacle. But we do have something glorious for ourselves, an outward and ongoing revelation of the glorious Jesus himself. The outward form may be humble and simple, but the internal reality is just as glorious as this transfiguration, only more so. Because at the Last Supper when Jesus ate with his disciples, he “took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.”

Astounding, isn’t it? “This is my body.” Then he continue.

Mat. 26:27 “And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, 28 for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

So there is much to learn from the Transfiguration about the glorious Jesus, but there is even more to learn here at the Lord’s Table. Here is Jesus, represented in all his glory. Here is his work. Here is his life, and his death. Here is your life, for here is the forgiveness of your sins. So as you eat and drink this afternoon, please hear the Lord God speaking from heaven, as it written, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”