

# The Transfiguration of Our Lord

## BREAKING NEWS CHANGES EVERYTHING

Matthew 17:1-9

### The Transfiguration of Our Lord

Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

17:1 Six day later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" 6When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." 8And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. 9As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

*Note: While the immediate context in Matthew (16:13-17:22; also 3:17; 13:30; 26-28; and of course his use of Mark 8:27-9:37) is critical to an evangelical-confessional understanding of the text, the OT background (Exod. 19, 23, 40; Lev. 23; Num 29; Deut. 4-5, 18; 1 Kings 8; 1 Chr. 17; 2 Chr. 17; Ps. 2:7, Isa. 4,*

42:1; Zech. 14) and NT foreground (synoptic parallels; John 1:14; Rom. 12:1-2; 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19-20 and 15; 2 Cor. 3-5; Eph. 2; Col. 2-3; Heb. 8-10; 2 Pet. 1; Rev. 21) needs to be familiar to the preacher as well. If not, the preacher will be tripped up by competing images and metaphors. Exactly how and why the “transfiguration” came to be written (by Mark) is now impossible to determine. In preparing a sermon, it will be all too easy to get lost in the highly ambiguous character of the many details, and easy to lose the gospel in the process. What must not be lost is the saving-difference that Jesus makes, regardless of the images and metaphors used to make the point. What is offered in this analysis is but one possibility for maintaining that saving-difference. I begin with a preference for the word: that while the surrounding details may be very interesting, the heart of our text is in verses 4-7. For a superior analysis of Matthew’s theology, see Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom*.

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Overshadowed**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : “Good” Interrupted**

For Peter, like us, it is far easier to confess Jesus’ messiahship than to understand it (16:16, 22-23). Up on the mountain (a holy place, the kind where God first revealed himself to Moses), Peter sees Jesus transformed (the Greek word for “transfigured” is literally “changed-form”) both in body and in clothing, clearly suggesting that Jesus was someone to be reckoned with, though exactly how was hard to say. Tradition suggests that Jesus’ face “shone like the sun” due to the divine presence, and that Jesus’ clothing became “white as light” (so the Greek says, not “dazzling white,” softening the razzle-dazzle tone in Mark and Luke; but see 28:3 for a similar

description of the angel) possibly in preparation for contemplating the divine presence. Since Moses and Elijah were central figures in Israelite religion and prophetic hope, Jesus was at least in good company! Peter was clearly impressed, so he suggested that tents or “mini-temples” be made for each of them, to protect them from or to contemplate the divine presence, or both. (The Greek word rendered in the text as “dwellings” can also be translated as “tents” or “temples” or “tabernacles,” but the clear reference is to the Feast of Tabernacles where a temporary covering is made for each male who, wearing clean clothes as a sign of holiness, dwells for several days in contemplation of the exodus wanderings when God dwelt among the people in a tent-of-meeting or tabernacle. I use the word “mini-temples” to recall the holy use of the tent which also recalls the original tent-of-meeting, that is, the original Temple.) Whether Peter was thinking of the Feast of Tabernacles or thinking to protect them from the holiness of God, Jesus’ transformation seemingly had no effect on Peter. (The honorific title “Lord” in v. 4 is deliberately ambiguous here and cannot be used in this Step as anything more than Matthew’s narrative equivalent of Mark’s “Rabbi”; see 10:24, but also 12:8 in regard to 17:9). He immediately thought it “good for us to be here” (v. 4); at the very least to stay awhile and chat with the great luminaries of Israel’s past. Why did Peter think that was so “good”? Peter’s cultic suggestion to make “mini-temples” can only mean that he was stuck in the past: it makes no difference whether Jesus was a prophet like Moses and Elijah, or whether Jesus was fulfilling Israel’s traditional messianic expectations. Either way, Peter’s religiously “good” understanding of Jesus’ messiahship had not changed in the slightest. Peter, like us, had a hard time breaking with the past. So, like Jesus had done earlier (16:22-23), God interrupted him!

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Overshadowed**

YHWH, the unnamable God of Israel, speaking from a cloud that “overshadowed” them (v. 5), overruled Peter’s traditionally “good” expectations of Moses and Elijah and Jesus. Whatever Peter had thought about Jesus’ messiahship (whether as a kingly ruler or as a prophet or as an apocalyptic forerunner to the kingdom of God) was now overthrown. According to the divine “voice,” Jesus is more than a messiah: he is the “beloved Son” of God. It is to Jesus that one must now “listen.” Even Moses and Elijah—past spokespersons for God—now have need to speak with Jesus (v.3). It is hard to imagine a more compelling transfer of divine authority than is recounted here! If Moses and Elijah represent the totality of Israelite religion, then everything that had been considered “pleasing” to God (v.5) is now overshadowed by Jesus. Suddenly, Peter and company (us too) are thrown into a whirlwind of uncertainty. If the totality of Israelite religion is now at stake, and if it is to Jesus only that we must now “listen” (that is, in whom we must now put our “faith and trust”; see Step 5), then everything that we had “heard” before from Moses, etc. is overruled by God and thus without saving-significance.

## **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Fallen and Afraid**

With the religious ground under them altogether shaken, by the glory of the divine presence if not by the implication that they haven’t a religious leg to stand on, “the disciples [us too] fell upon their faces and were exceedingly afraid” (a better translation of v. 6). Hearing the “voice” of God brought them to the ground, concealing their faces from YHWH, for no one can see the face of God and live (Exod. 33:20). Concealing one’s face from God is not necessarily due to fear (see Matt. 26:39), but fear before God arises due to sin. The disciples were overcome with real fear, not just awe; terror in the presence of the unnamable God, not just respect. Just like a tree is cut down by

loggers and falls to the ground, the disciples (who had put their “faith and trust” in the whole of Israelite religion; see 3:10) were now in jeopardy for their very lives. Their sin in the near presence of the glory of the Unnamable (even if still mediated by the cloud and the voice) had now become inescapable.

## **PROGNOSIS: Breaking News Changes Everything**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Well Pleased***

Unexpectedly, Jesus “touched” the disciples and commanded them to “get up and stop being afraid” (v. 7, imperatives). So they “lifted their eyes and saw no one except Jesus only” (v. 8). Clearly, something astonishing was going on. With a single touch, Jesus’ disciples are able to stand on the mountain of God and look at the Son of God face to face without being afraid. So then, Who is Jesus? (Let us not suppose God had left the scene and that the disciples’ fear was no longer warranted! No, God was still present on the mountain, mediated as it were by Jesus.) Following Jesus’ death and resurrection (v. 9; 28:16-20), we know full well that Jesus is the Son of God, the beloved, with whom God is “well-pleased,” who speaks for God (v. 5; see 5:1). What is well-pleasing about Jesus is not his sonship per se but his servanthood (Isa. 42:1-9; Matt. 3:16-17) ultimately expressed in his crucifixion-death being the presupposition of resurrection (v. 9). By Jesus’ death, God “touched” sinners without killing them. In effect, Jesus is God intervening between us sinners and the Unnamable, absorbing the divine glory that would surely have destroyed us. (At this point, the triune mystery of God is revealed.) For Jesus’ self-giving love for us sinners, God is “well-pleased” and Jesus has saving-significance for us. As symbolized by the tent/temple/tabernacle/mini-temple sequence (bringing God near to us while also protecting us), Israelite religion from beginning to end (Moses to Elijah) maintains the distinction and separation between a holy God and sinful humanity. The vision of

the “transformation” of Jesus declares that this distinction and separation is overcome in the crucified-risen “Son of God” who sees God and yet lives. The saving-difference of Messiah Jesus is his servanthood sonship, which is the final reason for Peter’s (and our) address to him as “Lord” (v. 4; see Phil. 2:5-11) and his/our confession of him as the “Son of God.” The gospel in this text, the breaking news that changes everything, is our being “touched” by Jesus and hearing his voice, “Get up and stop being afraid” (v. 7).

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Listening, Hearing, Obeying***

Therefore, Jesus is worthy of being “heard” (v.5; the Greek can also be rendered, “Hear him!”), not only in the sense of hearing with the ears but in the sense of hearing with the heart (or mind or soul or however one needs to express the gospel’s internal reception or acceptance), and recalls one of Jesus’ aphorisms, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” Throughout Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus “speaks” for God, but there is something more intrinsic to God’s “voice” (v. 5) than what is said. True, Jesus speaks with divine authority, but Jesus is more than a teacher (Mark 9:5) and more than a prophet (Luke 7:26). For Matthew, Jesus is as trust-worthy as God himself, not particularly because of what he says (that, too) but because of who he is and what he does. This is made clear by the phrase, echoed countless times throughout the OT, of “hearing/obeying the voice of God” (see Gen. 22:18; Exod. 18:19; 19:5; Deut. 28:1, 15). When God speaks from the cloud, “Listen to him!” (v. 5; see Deut. 18:15-19), God is saying, “Hear/Obey his voice” exactly as though it was God himself. (In Hebrew thought, which is certainly at play here and must not be lost in Greek translation, to hear is to obey, and to hear/obey the voice of God is to “trust” him or to “faith” him. John 18:37 is a fine example which is substantiated in John 1:1; see also Rom. 1:5;

10:16; 16:26.) Thus, to “hear Jesus’ [voice]” is to trust Jesus exactly as one would trust God himself.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : A New Kind of “Good”**

We must look very closely in the text to discover the external difference that Jesus makes. We must look at Jesus himself to see what “good” (v. 4) looks like from the new perspective of the gospel, that is, from our trust and faith in Jesus the Son of God. To begin with, Jesus “touched” (v. 7) sinners and looked at them face to face. The Son’s close proximity to sinners was only made possible by his close relationship to his Father, which was and is a relationship of faith and trust. This relationship created a new kind of “good” that is only possible by dying. But Jesus’ “touch” was only a hint of what was to come, namely, his crucifixion (v. 9, implied). Jesus’ touch also summarizes the totality of his life in relation to humanity. His touch and his crucifixion tell the same story, namely, that the totality of his life was given over to death for the forgiveness of sins. What is important here is that only the free, unrewarded giving of one’s life is an irrefutable demonstration and actuality of one’s love for another. Of all persons who have ever lived, Jesus was and is the only free man, and only his life has ever been freely given. But the giving of his life was only possible because of his trust in his Father, namely, that his Father’s love for him was not the reward for his dying but the basis of it, and that despite the reality of death (real death) the Father’s love for his Son would be glorified (as it turns out by his resurrection from the dead). By the death of the Son of God for us (Step 4), we can be confident that our lives are secure in him (Step 5). On this basis, we may “touch” the lives of others with our own, even if that means dying on their behalf (Step 6). Whenever Christ-trusters are prepared to give their lives over to death for others, particularly for

those who are socially or religiously separate from us, “good” things are bound to happen.