

THE MOUNTAIN, THE MEMORIAL, AND THE MORNING AFTER

Matthew 17:1-16

Almost every event in the life of Jesus is portrayed in early Christian art except this one. If you look through the art museums of the world, you will find tremendous paintings of the resurrection, the crucifixion, the walking on the water. But I am told that, until the 16th century, no art form depicted the event which is described in this chapter.

In the 16th century, Raphael began a work on this event. However, before he completed it, his brush was stilled in death. There is something so holy about this event, so majestic, so grand, that it is difficult to portray.

It all started when Jesus told His disciples that they would see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom. Some of them might have thought, "Yeah, right! You mean after 2000 years at the second coming." But Jesus said, "No, it will happen in your lifetime. Indeed, some of you who are standing here will see it."

And six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother... (Matthew 17:1).

Why did Jesus pick these three men?

James was to be the first apostle to die for the faith. He would have to be courageous. He would need this vision to sustain him through what was to come.

John would be the last apostle to die. He would write the gospels and epistles of John as well as Revelation. Perhaps Jesus wished to give him something that would endure for a long life.

Peter was to be the one on whom the church would be built. He would be the one to stand up on the Day of Pentecost and proclaim the significance of the gift of tongues. And he would open the doors of the kingdom to the Gentiles. He would need the lessons of this vision.

These three men are going to be with Jesus during the Gethsemane experience. They will be the pillars of the church.

But perhaps there is another reason why Jesus took these men. Perhaps He needed someone to be with Him. He is getting ready to go to Jerusalem to die. The time is

drawing closer. It will be the most awful time of His life. And He needs a friend.

Being a Christian doesn't mean that you can go it alone. Jesus needed friends and He knows that we need a friend, too. That is why He has given us the church.

And six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and brought them up to a high mountain by themselves. 2 And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. (Matthew 17:1-2).

We are told of the event without much prologue. Jesus takes these three men up into a high mountain and suddenly He is changed. They undergo a supernatural experience of revelation. Such an experience had taken place a week earlier when Peter had recognized Jesus as the Messiah of God. Now comes a confirmation. This time it is visual and audible and dramatic.

They are at a high mountain. The highest mountain in the area is Mount Hermon. It rises above Caesarea Philippi where, a week before, Peter had made his great confession. It may be that they were still here in this same area.

Four men. They are by themselves. They have left the other apostles behind to come to this place and to be alone. Suddenly there is a change. The change emanates from the person of Jesus. His face shines. Even his clothing shines. Light is unleashed. There is a roaring radiance. The glory of God spills forth.

In that glorious homecoming, there are suddenly two other figures. They are the two most famous of the prophets of the Old Testament.

And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. (Matthew 17:3).

Why the appearance of these two prophets? Because under Old Testament Law, the truth of a matter must always be established by witnesses. A single witness was not enough. There must be at least two. And so, the two greatest possible witnesses are sent to testify of this little Galilean rabbi.

Moses was the great Lawgiver. Elijah was the great prophet. The Law and the Prophets both bear witness of Jesus. Did you ever stop to think that Moses finally made it into the promised land? It only took him an extra 1400 years.

And Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one

for Moses, and one for Elijah." (Matthew 17:4).

Don't you just love Peter? The most solemn and wondrous and unique and holy occasion in the history of planet earth has just taken place and he has to put in his two cents worth.

“Lord, it is a good thing we happened to be here! No one else would have believed this! Those other disciples at the bottom of the hill wouldn't have had a clue what to do with such a revelation, but I've got a plan! We'll build a couple of three tabernacles and we'll start our own church. We can call it Mount of Transfiguration Tabernacle. We can feed multitudes and You can take turns preaching with Moses and Elijah.”

Peter is just getting started when suddenly there is an interruption. It does not come from the other two disciples. It doesn't even come from Jesus. It comes from the Father Himself.

While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and behold, a voice out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" (Matthew 17:5).

God interrupts Peter. He says, “Peter, shut up and listen!” He says the same thing to us sometimes. Sometimes He says, “Slow down! Be still! Listen to Me!” That is what the Sabbath is all about. Once every seven days we are to slow down and be still and listen for a still, small voice and the soft sound of sandaled feet. Have you heard Him today? Are you listening to Him now? Or is your mind on other matters? Is your attention divided?

God gets Peter's attention. He does this by overshadowing Peter with a cloud. This wasn't any old cloud. This cloud was special. In the Older Testament, Exodus 16:10 says how the whole congregation of the sons of Israel *looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.*

And the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I shall come to you in a THICK CLOUD, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe in you forever" (Exodus 19:9).

And it came about when the priests came from the holy place, that the CLOUD filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord. (1 Kings 8:10-11).

Why was there a cloud? Because mortal man cannot look upon the glory of God without being destroyed. The cloud was for their protection. The cloud was to keep them alive.

The cloud was so that they might hear the voice of the Lord and live through the experience. There was an important message given to them that day; a message that has been entrusted to us. What is this message? “This is My beloved Son!” You are impressed by prophets and visions and clouds and bright lights. And God says, “You're being impressed by the wrong things!” Moses is impressive. And Elijah is impressive. And a bright cloud overshadowing a high mountain is impressive. But if that is all you see here, then you've missed the most impressive thing of all.

You've missed the fact that God became a fetus and was born to a Hebrew peasant girl. You've missed the fact that the splendor of heaven was poured into a human body. You've missed the One who was older than time and greater than death. You've missed the Son of God.

Peter speaks of building tabernacles. God says, "I've already prepared a tabernacle and His name is Jesus!" That's what the Bible says in John 1:14, “And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us...”

By the way, if you go to Israel today and climb Mount Tabor, the traditional location of the Transfiguration, when you get to the top you will find three shrines — three memorials.

One to Moses.
One to Elijah.
One to Jesus.

Religion has missed the lesson of this passage. Jesus is not just a good man or a godly teacher or a miracle worker or even a prophet. You cannot even compare Him to such lofty prophets as Moses and Elijah, for they are mere men. He is the unique Son of God.

And this brings us to the reason for this entire event. Why did it take place? What is the significance of the transfiguration? Why is it recorded in three out of four of the gospel accounts?

Here is the reason. It is because the transfiguration underlines and proves the confession made by Peter the week before.

Do you remember Peter's confession? Jesus had asked, "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples had checked their latest copy of the Gallup Poll and cited the responses...

28% - Elijah
42% - John the Baptists
13% - Jeremiah
17% - Some other prophet

Then Jesus asked, “But who do you say that I am?” And Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Since that time, a week has passed. I would bet that during that time Peter has asked himself, “Why did I say that?” And so, he and these other two disciples are given the testimony of two witnesses and the very voice of God as evidence that Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

What an experience! A true mountain-top experience. The trouble with a mountain-top experience is that eventually you have to come down off the mountain. Have you ever had a mountain-top experience? Perhaps it was that special time when you heard the gospel and you said, “That’s for me!” And you gave your life to the Lord. Or perhaps it was at a camp or a retreat when everything just came together.

Paula had that sort of experience in 1995 when she was in Mexico leading children's outreach ministry. It was a wonderfully fulfilling time for her.

Our daughter, Sky, had the same sort of experience on a mission trip to Jamaica on a literal mountain in the early 1990's.

I can think of several times that I've ascended to a spiritual mountain top and had that experience with the Lord.

But then, you come back down off the mountain. The fireworks end. Monday morning comes and it's back to work as usual. And that's what happened to the disciples, too.

And when they came to the multitude, a man came up to Him, falling on his knees before Him, and saying, ¹⁵ “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic, and is very ill; for he often falls into the fire, and often into the water. ¹⁶ And I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him.” (Matthew 17:14-16).

Luke’s account tells us that this was the next day. A need arises. A demon-possessed boy. And the father first brings him to the disciples. After all, they had done this sort of thing before. They had cast out demons. Now they were even more experienced. But they failed!

Was this a case of demon possession or was it an evil spirit? It could have been both. The term “grand mal seizure” literally means “a grand evil seizure.”

What do you do when you come down off the mountain and the first thing you face is your own failure?

Sometimes it is taught that you can do something to get the fireworks back. Follow these 12 steps and send me \$50.00 and you will partake of that experience again. It isn't so.

You weren't meant to live on the mountain.

Jesus didn't say, "Okay, this isn't going too well so let's go back up the mountain." Instead, He said, "There's another mountain ahead and it has a cross on it" (Matthew 17:22-23).

You were never called to live on a mountain. You were called to carry a cross. And yet, I want to suggest to you that there is strength that you can bring from the mountain. There are some things that you can do that will help after you have come back down. There are some principles that will carry you after the fireworks.

1. PRINCIPLE #1: Remember the Reality of the PAST.

Peter was one of those who stood on the Mount of Transfiguration. Years later, he wrote about the importance of remembering.

For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having FORGOTTEN his purification from his former sins. (2 Peter 1:9).

Peter's focus is that there is a reality which we dare not forget.

For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.

For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic glory, "This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased."

And we ourselves hear this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. (2 Peter 1:16-18).

Peter says, "Look guys, we didn't make this up. Christianity isn't just a nice philosophy of love that we put together. God really came down and said that Jesus was His Son."

Don't miss this! Christianity is not merely a philosophy or a set of good teachings. Christianity is a historical religion.

Have you ever noticed that the Apostles' Creed doesn't say a thing about how you ought to live? When we recite the Apostles' Creed, we are reciting a listing of historical events. Take away those events and there is not Christianity.

We must never lose sight of that fact. The world likes to say, "It doesn't matter if

Jonah was really swallowed by a whale or if Moses really parted the Red Sea or if Jesus really got up from a tomb and walked around. The important thing is that you teach love and kindness."

No! No! NO!!! Christianity without the historical events of the Scriptures is not Christianity. If God lied about those things, then He might lie about other things, too.

But God hasn't lied. He is the God of truth. And when you are tempted to doubt him, you go back and remember the reality of the past.

2. PRINCIPLE #2: Be diligent in your walk in the PRESENT.

Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble. (2 Peter 1:10).

Live for today! Don't worry about how you failed in the past - you can't change it. But you CAN make a difference TODAY.

One of the dangers of Christianity is that, as we look back to the cross and, as we look forward to the Second Coming, that we ignore the present. Have you ever stopped to look at all the riches of heaven that are yours right NOW?

You have become a partaker of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). You are a child of God. You are a saint, set apart by God for a special purpose. You have been declared to be righteous—justified. You are the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Our problem is that we don't stop to look at what we already have. The story is told of rescue workers who were conducting an evacuation in the face of an oncoming flood. They came to the house of a man and told him they were expecting flood waters and that he should get in their car and be taken to safety. He refused, "I believe the Lord will save me." As the waters continued to rise, a rescue boat happened along. The man was now on his porch because the driveway and yard were underwater. The rescuers called for him to get in the boat, but he waved them away, saying, "The Lord will save me." Later a helicopter hovered over his house. The flood waters had risen and the man was now on his roof. They dropped a rope ladder down to him, but he shook his head and called out, "The Lord will save me." They came back an hour later, but now the house was gone.

The man died and went to heaven and stood before the Lord. He said, "I am happy

to be here and am not one to complain, but I am also a bit surprised because I was certain that you would save me. The Lord replied, "Why are you surprised? I sent you a car, a boat and a helicopter."

In the same way, we strive to return to the mountain and the experience which we once had there, all the while neglecting the still, small voice that was with us all along. Here is the point. The God of the mountaintop isn't only on the mountaintop. He is here today. And you can speak to Him today.

3. **PRINCIPLE #3: Look to the Lord in the FUTURE.**

For in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you. (2 Peter 1:11).

A number of years ago we went camping up into the mountains of North Carolina. My idea of camping is a Howard Johnsons with S/C and color TV. But I was over-ruled. And so, we got this big tent and we camped out for nearly three weeks.

One night, as we were on our way to North Carolina, we stopped for a night in a national park in South Carolina. We were tired and it was dark and we set about putting up the tent.

As Paula set about driving the stakes into the ground for the tent, I called out, "Don't drive them in too deeply, we're leaving in the morning."

Are you driving your stakes too deeply? This world is temporary, but all too often we live as though it is permanent. I know that we Christians are often accused of only living for the future - of looking for pie in the sky by and by. But that is not the significant question. The real question ought to be whether there really IS any pie in the sky by and by.

We've been invited to a supper. It is a marriage supper of the Lamb of God. We're the bride. And we're sending out wedding invitations.

You see, the mountaintop experience was only a preview of things to come. Whatever special experience you ever had with the Lord in the past will not compare to what lies ahead. The best is yet to come.

This brings us to a final principle. It is the **PRINCIPLE OF THE PREVIEW**. When you go to the movies, you will often first see a Preview of Coming Attractions. They will show you short clips of a coming movie which you might want to see. It is designed to motivate you to come back and see the whole thing.

That's our job! We have been called to be a preview of a coming attraction. Jesus is coming. He is the Producer, Director, Author, and Star. But in the meantime, all people see is us.