



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for February 21, 2010
Released on Wednesday, February 17, 2010**

"Witnessed by Disciples"

Lesson Text: Matthew 17:1-12

Background Scripture: Matthew 17:1-12

Devotional Reading: 2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-12

- 1 And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into a high mountain apart,
- 2 And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.
- 3 And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elijah talking with him.
- 4 Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.
- 5 While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.
- 6 And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid.
- 7 And Jesus came and touched them, and said, Arise, and be not afraid.
- 8 And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, save Jesus only.
- 9 And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead.
- 10 And his disciples asked him, saying, Why then say the scribes that Elijah must first come?
- 11 And Jesus answered and said unto them, Elijah truly shall first come, and restore all things.
- 12 But I say unto you, That Elijah is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them.

LESSON AIMS

Facts: to analyze what happened to Jesus, Peter, James, and John on the Mount of transfiguration.

Principle: to realize that just as Jesus' appearance changed from normal to radiant, so all believers will eventually be changed in a similar manner (1 Corinthians 15:51-53).

Application: to encourage followers of Christ to anticipate with sure hope the transformation from mortal bodies to eternal bodies.

INTRODUCTION

Things Are Not Always as They Seem

Have you ever seen a celebrity look-alike? Some bear an uncanny resemblance to well-known people. And it seems that this is not a new phenomenon. The American author Mark Twain (1835–1910) was so annoyed by the many people who sent him photographs claiming to look like him that he offered this reply to one: “In my opinion you are more like me than any other of my numerous doubles. I may even say that you resemble me more closely than I do myself. In fact, I intend to use your picture to shave by.”

Although a celebrity double looks like someone famous, the double is not really the famous person. Many things appear to be what they are not. Margarine can look like butter. An actor in a white coat can look like a doctor. Today’s text is about a situation like that, only in the opposite direction. Outwardly, Jesus of Nazareth appeared very ordinary (Isaiah 53:2). But the unseen reality was that He was much more than an ordinary man of His time. The Gospels reveal Jesus as fully human but—amazingly and paradoxically—fully divine as well. He was God incarnate, the Word made flesh who lived for a while among us.

Jesus’ transfiguration manifested that reality visibly to His disciples. To understand Him rightly, we need to understand that event as described in today’s text from Matthew.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Time: A.D. 29

Place: Mt. Tabor, Mt. Hermon or Mt. Miron

The account of the transfiguration in Matthew follows immediately after Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ and Jesus’ startling prediction of His death and resurrection (last week’s lesson). At the end of that episode, Jesus said to His disciples, “Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom” (Matthew 16:28). Those words seem to point forward to Jesus’ return, when He will extend the fullness of God’s rule over His redeemed creation and overcome death for all time.

But Jesus’ statement suggests His resurrection as well, a vital part of God’s plan for redemption. And it appears that the transfiguration (today’s lesson) also is part of this design, as it provides a glimpse of the glory that belongs to Jesus and will be further revealed in His resurrection and return in glory.

The account of the transfiguration provides yet another example of the disciples’ struggle to understand Jesus. In the preceding story, Peter first declared Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God. But then Peter rebuked Jesus when Jesus said that He was to be crucified and resurrected. Though Peter and the others recognized Jesus as God’s promised king, they did not yet realize the kind of king He really was. They needed to reckon with the fullness of His glory, and they needed to couple that with His warning that He was to suffer and die.

SURPRISED DISCIPLES (Matthew 17:1-4)

1. How many disciples did Jesus take with Him up the mountain, and what did they see? (Matthew 7:1,2)

Jesus separates from most of His disciples, taking only Peter, James, and John with Him. Matthew tells us one other instance where Jesus does this: when He prays in the Garden of Gethsemane (26:37). By linking the stories in this way, Matthew invites us to understand each in light of the other.

Jesus took Peter, John, and James with Him to pray. Jesus often retreated from the crowds for this purpose. On this occasion He took these three, knowing ahead of time what they were about to experience. It might well be that Jesus and His disciples were

still in the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:13), in which case the mountain ascended would be Mount Hermon. This would certainly fit as the high mountain Matthew mentions.

It was as He was praying (Luke 9:29) that Jesus' face and clothes took on a different appearance. Matthew 17:2 says His face became bright like the sun and His clothes became gleaming white, like light. The Greek word translated "transfigured" is *metamorphoo*, from which we get the English word "metamorphosis," which is described in *The American Heritage Dictionary* (Houghton Mifflin) as "a transformation, a marked change in appearance, character, condition, or function." A biological example given is a caterpillar becoming a butterfly.

2. What was revealed to them about Jesus in this incident? Why was Jesus' glory normally hidden?

What the disciples were allowed to see was a preview of Jesus in His future exaltation. This was a small glimpse into seeing the Son of man coming in His kingdom (Matt. 16:28). A metamorphosis is an outer change that comes from within. Jesus' appearance is often described as the outshining in of His true glory, which was of necessity veiled by His human body of flesh. Since Jesus is divine, His glory had to be hidden when He became a man. For these few moments, the disciples were allowed a glimpse of that inherent glory.

Mark describes the whiteness of His garments as beyond anything that an earthly launderer can produce (9:3). Luke describes them as "glistening" (9:29), meaning they were shining radiantly or blazing with light. It was a nearly blinding brilliance the disciples saw. When John later wrote his Gospel, he described it this way: "And the Word was made 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" (1:14).

3. What is significant about the appearance of Moses and Elijah? (v. 3)

The appearance of the two ancient prophets underlines what an extraordinary event this was. We can imagine many reasons why these two appear with Jesus. Moses and Elijah also had been part of great acts of revelation on mountains.

Both of these worthies experienced something unparalleled in their departure from this life. Elijah was taken up to heaven without dying (2 Kings 2:11); Moses died, indeed, but he was buried by God in an unknown grave (Deuteronomy 34:5,6). From the unseen world these two were brought to do homage to the Messiah—Here were the representatives of the Law and the prophets, the principal supporters of the old covenant, honoring Him who was introducing the new covenant, which was to fulfill and supersede the previous one.

Now, too, it was made manifest that Jesus was not Elias or one of the prophets, as some erroneously had supposed, but different from and superior to all; that He had power over life and death, and could bring whom He would from the unseen world; that the cross and passion were not degrading, or proofs of weakness, but glorious and triumphant accomplishments of the will of God.

Modern readers often ask how the disciples recognize these two prophets. Perhaps the apostles may have known them by spiritual intuition or special revelation; or they may have gathered their knowledge from Jesus' conversation with "Moses and Elijah talking with him" (v. 3).

4. What did Peter offer to do? What interrupted his offer? (v. 4)

As he does in the previous story, Peter leads with his mouth. Again, his words appear sincere, devoted, passionate, but confused. He wants to build *three tabernacles* or tents, like those that are built every year at the Feast of Tabernacles to celebrate Israel's deliverance from Egypt (Leviticus 23:42). Obviously, Peter

understands that he is witnessing an extraordinary event, which he wants to commemorate in some way.

Peter's suggestion indicates he spoke without really knowing what to say (c.f. Mark 9:6 "For he wist not what to say; for they were sore afraid"). The fear upon seeing Jesus transfigured and Moses and Elijah with Him rendered them speechless, but Peter attempted to fill in the silence. It might be that as he recovered somewhat from his shock, joy took over, and he wanted to prolong the scene.

Peter's offer was interrupted when they were suddenly overshadowed by a bright cloud and a voice speaking out of the cloud.

FEARFUL DISCIPLES (Matthew 17:5-8)

5. What was the message proclaimed by the Father on this occasion?

What was the disciples' response? (vs. 5,6)

God Himself spoke out of the cloud and assured them that Jesus truly was His Son and that He was very pleased with Him. They should therefore be very attentive to Him. To the disciples this was a significant authentication and one they never forgot. Peter's statements in 2 Peter 1:16-21, refers to hearing this voice from God giving reassurance of His Son. This incident prepared Peter significantly for his future ministries.

The verbal proclamation from God was the same as at Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3:17), but the addition of the words "hear ye him" (17:5) immediately elevated Jesus above Moses and Elijah. The whole scene caused great fear in the disciples, and they fell on their faces before God. Their action was evidence of both physical fear and spiritual respect leading to an act of worship. They were motivated by real fear, but at the same time they recognized the greatness and worthiness of the One behind the voice.

6. How did Jesus allay the fear of the disciples? (vs. 7,8)

Jesus had often spoken to the disciples about His Father, and now suddenly they heard His voice. No wonder they were so terrified; this was a direct encounter with the One they had heard of but with whom they never expected such a confrontation. Jesus understood their agitation, however; He came and touched them, telling them their fears were unfounded. The fact that Jesus touched them is probably significant. His touch would have given them the reassurance they needed.

Maybe it would be fitting to stop and meditate on this scene and its outcome. It is true that the disciples did not need to fear in this situation. We often encounter situations, though, that cause us fear because of circumstances we suddenly face. That late-night phone call that gives us bad news, that doctor's report that confirms a serious problem, and many other possible scenarios cause fear to grip our hearts. There is no escaping the realities of life; such times are going to come without advance knowledge.

Just as the touch of Jesus reassured the three disciples, so the touch of God through His Word gives us the reassurance we often need. It was because the disciples knew Jesus so well that when He touched them, they were immediately relieved. You will notice that those people who know God well are the most confident during times of trial. Those who spend no time in His Word and in prayer will most often degenerate into panic when hardship comes. How important it is to get to know Him before the trials arrive!

After Jesus spoke, the disciples lifted their heads and looked, only to discover that Jesus stood there alone. Moses, Elijah, and the cloud were gone. Everything had returned to "normal."

CURIOUS DISCIPLES (Matthew 17:9-12)

7. What command did Jesus give the disciples prior to their return, and why did He say this? (v. 9)

Jesus told the disciples specifically that they were not to tell anyone what they had seen until after His resurrection. There were probably several reasons for this. First, no one who had not been present would be able to understand. Second, if they were to tell what they had seen, too much attention would be given to them instead of to Jesus. The emphasis could quickly become their experiences. They were to point others to Jesus, not attract attention to themselves.

Third, the leaders of Israel had already rejected Jesus as their Messiah, and He did not intend to promote Himself further. He was not at the stage in His ministry when His primary purpose was the training of His disciples for what they were to do after His death. Our previous study of Matthew 16:21 showed Jesus' first revelation to them of His approaching death and how shocked they were about it. Even now when Jesus told them to tell no one until after His resurrection, they probably did not fully comprehend the resurrection.

Fourth, those who did believe Jesus was the promised Messiah would want once again to make Him king if they heard of this incident. Popular messianic expectations would become the focus of attention instead of the salvation He had come to provide through His suffering.

8. What question did the disciples have about Elijah? What do we know about Malachi's prophecy about Elijah? (vs. 10-12)

There was one thing the disciples could not understand about all this, and that was that they had heard the scribes saying Elijah must come before Messiah did. Apparently one of the reasons the religious leaders rejected Jesus was the lack of an appearance by Elijah. They were probably basing their teaching on Malachi 4:5. But now the three had seen Elijah; so they wondered how that appearance fit into these teachings. Elijah had appeared to them but not to the Jewish people to prepare them for Messiah's coming. How were they to understand all this?

Jesus affirms the disciples' expectation. The promise of the prophet is valid. *Elijah* must *come* to restore all things (Matt. 17:11). That is, he serves as God's agent to begin God's reclaiming of the sinful world. Yet the disciples' understanding of the nature of that promise may be flawed, as Jesus goes on to explain.

In verse 12 it becomes clear that Jesus is speaking of John the Baptist as *Elijah*, just as He did in Matthew 11:11-14 "... Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist. . . And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come" (vs. 10-14).

However, Jesus warns that this promised Elijah has not been universally recognized (*knew him not*). Many have opposed John, including Herod Antipas. Just two chapters before, Matthew tells us of John's execution in Herod's prison, a sordid affair that seems to show evil very much in power in the world (Matthew 14:1-12). It appears that the wicked can do whatever they please, without consequence.

Jesus then states to the disciples that He will *suffer* in the same way that John the Baptist did. Linked with Elijah in the transfiguration, Jesus now links himself with John the Baptist, the successor to Elijah, in death.

John, with his preaching and baptizing, inaugurated God's program of reclaiming lost humanity. Jesus will bring that program to reality with the very death of which He speaks here. His triumph as the glorious Lord will come after suffering torture and death at the hands of a ruthless human empire.

Will the disciples understand the significance of Jesus' words? Matthew gives us their reaction in the next verse.

9. Did the disciples have any doubt, or misunderstand what Jesus was saying (v. 13)? *Extra credit, not in lesson text.

The disciples clearly understand what Jesus is saying. That is, they understand at least the first part of His statement in verse 12: that Jesus speaks of *John the Baptist* as Elijah, that John fulfills the promise of the coming Elijah (compare Luke 1:17).

But Matthew does not tell us that the disciples understand anything else. Previously they did not accept what Jesus said when He spoke of His death. Although they understand that He speaks of John here, the disciples still show an insufficient grasp of what Jesus says about himself.

For the disciples, it is unthinkable that the one who has been transfigured before them on the mountain will suffer the way that John the Baptist did. But without that suffering, Jesus cannot fulfill the purpose for which He has come. Without that suffering, He cannot rule in the way that He has come to rule.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. God chooses some people for special experiences that others will not have (Matthew 17:1).
2. Jesus Christ is the full personification of God's glory; to know Him is to know God (v. 2).
3. We must never elevate any mere human to the level of Christ's authority (vs. 3-5).
4. When we are stricken with fears, Jesus alone can offer us true comfort (vs. 6-8).
5. Some experiences with God must remain private until the right time comes (v. 9).
6. Some think they are ready for Christ's coming, but they will be surprised by how unprepared they really are (vs. 10-12).

CONCLUSION

Seeing Jesus transfigured must have been an exhilarating experience for the disciples. Adding other Scripture references to this, we realize that the same sort of thing will happen to believers when they are glorified (Rom. 8:30) and when they see Him face-to-face (1 John 3:2). When our rejuvenated bodies are reunited with our spirits and caught up with Christ in the air, we will enjoy our new forms for eternity (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

In the meantime, we have to face all of the natural and man-made problems. However, despite these things, there should be something about our external appearance that reflects our inner joy and peace.

We can be confident that beyond the present difficulties lies a glorious future, assured to us not because of our worthiness but because of His grace, the same grace that took Him to the cross.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, we want to know You as the Lord who shines in the darkness, who brings light and love and power into our lives. But we know that You accomplished that at the cost of Your own blood. Help us to remember everything that You are and everything that You did for us. We pray in Your name by Your sovereign authority. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

"Hear ye him" still applies!

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson is "Anointed by a Woman in Bethany." As the Jewish religious authorities plotted the death of Jesus, Mary of Bethany came to anoint Him with precious ointment in the home of Simon the leper. The disciples thought this was wasteful, but Jesus commended her act of devotion, for she had done it in view of His coming burial. Study Matthew 26:6-13.

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