

A Mountain Top Experience

Matthew 17: 1-13

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March 9, 2025

In one of the churches I have pastored there was an older woman who loved to go to a Christian camp and conference center in the Great Smokey Mountains near Ashville, North Carolina. Each summer she would return from her week at camp and declare to everyone, "I've been to the mountain." For her that meant that she had not only had a great time, but that she had also sensed the presence of the Lord in the hollows and the hills of that mountainous retreat.

Mountains have a way of drawing us closer to God as evidenced in the pages of the Bible. It was on a mountain named Sinai that the Lord gave the Ten Commandments to Moses. It was on a mountain named Carmel that Elijah, the prophet, called down fire from heaven. And it was on a mountain that three of Jesus' disciples stepped into the presence of the Almighty. For them, you might say, it was an unforgettable mountain top experience. So let's take a look at that account in the Gospel of Matthew this morning and I think the best way to do that is by asking some questions.

- Here's the first one. **Where did this event take place?** In verse one we are simply told that Jesus took the disciples up to a high mountain. It is not named. However, previously they had been in Caesarea Philippi, a region far to the north of the Sea of Galilee. The tallest and most majestic mountain in that area is Mount Hermon. It's over 9,000 feet tall and its summit is snow covered in the winter. Most biblical scholars believe that this is the mountain to which Jesus took His disciples.
- **Who climbed the mountain?** Jesus did not invite all of His disciples. He chose the inner circle, those who were closest to Him. Just a few days earlier, Peter had boldly declared that Jesus was the Messiah, the anointed One of God. James and John were the two brothers, both fishermen, whom Jesus had invited to become His disciples at the beginning of His ministry. Jesus chose these three because they, more so than any of the other disciples, would understand the importance of what was about to take place.
- **What happened on that mountain?** The events that took place on this mountain are usually described as the Transfiguration. The word means "to change or transform one's appearance" and that's precisely what happened. At some point as they climbed the mountain, perhaps nearing the summit, Matthew tells us in verse two, "His face (referring

to Jesus) shone like the sun, and His clothes became white as light.” Something of a similar nature had taken place centuries earlier. When Moses came down the mountain with the Ten Commandments, “his face was radiant because He had spoken with the LORD” (Exodus 34:29). Like Moses, Jesus was aglow with the glory of God. Not only that, the disciples also realized that Jesus was not alone. He was speaking with two heavenly beings, Moses the great law giver and Elijah, God’s most revered prophet. Then something even more amazing took place. A bright cloud enveloped Jesus and His disciples, the same kind of cloud that had announced God’s presence throughout the pages of the Old Testament. They were now dwelling in the presence of the Almighty and He was speaking to them. The LORD said, “This is My Son, whom I love; with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him.” Just as all of these events unfolded, the place where they were standing was now shrouded in darkness and Jesus was alone. To say the least it was quite an experience for Peter, James and John.

- **So how did the disciples react to what had taken place on that Mountain?** When they saw Jesus aglow with the light of God’s presence speaking to Moses and Elijah, they wanted to memorialize the event. They were so overwhelmed with having been invited to be a part of this experience that they wanted to do something to commemorate this event. In verse three Peter speaks up and says, “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.” Peter and his two companions were not unlike the response of most people when something of great importance takes place. They want to build a memorial to enshrine these kinds of events. However, before the disciples could even secure Jesus’ permission to begin such a project, God’s voice from heaven intervened. They fell to the ground stricken with fear, just as any of us would be.
- **Once everything was over, what did Jesus say to His disciples?** First, He calmed their fears. He reached down and touched them, perhaps helping them to their feet and told them not to be afraid. No harm would come to them. They needed that word of gentle reassurance. Had we been there, we would have needed it too. Then he told them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of man has been raised from the dead” (verse 9). Jesus knew that sharing this kind of information could create the kind of unwelcomed notoriety, both positive and negative, that would get in the way of what He needed to do in the coming days. After His resurrection the world would know beyond a shadow of a doubt who He was and why He had come. Now was not the right time to tell them.
- Finally, there is one last question, a question that the disciples themselves asked Jesus. **What about Elijah? Isn’t he supposed to come before the arrival of the Messiah?**

They were thinking that Elijah would burst forth from the clouds like a majestic, angelic herald, proclaiming that Jesus was the Savior. Jesus knew that had already happened, but not in the way they had expected. So he told the disciples, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did to him everything they wished" (Matthew 17:11-12). Hearing Jesus' response to their question, the disciples realized that Jesus was speaking about John the Baptist, the one who had baptized Jesus and who said of Him, "Behold the Lamb of God" (John 1:36).

Having taken a look at the scriptural account of the transfiguration, which was for the disciples and should be for all of us "a mountain top experience," what conclusions can we draw from what took place? There are three things that I would like to call to your attention.

First, the transfiguration authenticated the Sonship of Jesus. It's one thing for someone to claim something about themselves to be true. That, however, does not mean that what they are claiming reflects reality. For example, when the time comes that our Pastor Nominating Committee finds someone that they wish to present to our church, one of the things they will do is to check that person's references. They will contact those who know this candidate and ask a lot of questions about that person's character, background, and abilities. They will want to know if that person is who he or she says they are. The same kind of verification should be required even with regards to the divinity of Christ. If Jesus was the Messiah, the chosen one of God, someone needs to verify that claim. That someone was none other than Jesus' heavenly Father. He had said it for the first time at Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Now the heavenly Father had said it again during this mountain top experience.

Second, the transfiguration delineated the future of Jesus. I have often thought that Jesus' meeting with Moses and Elijah was like a summit conference. During WWII, the Allies gathered together to discuss the future of the ongoing conflict in which they were involved. Like those allied leaders, Moses and Elijah had come to confer with Jesus. What did they tell Him? We will never know. Perhaps they came to lay out the strategy for those concluding days of Jesus' life and ministry. Perhaps they came to strengthen His resolve, knowing that Jesus would not only face a torturous death, but the rejection of those whom He had come to save. They too had faced hardships and even the threat of death by their fellow countrymen. Perhaps they came to remind Him that God's loving presence would see Him through this coming ordeal. Whatever they said or imparted unto Jesus, the sum total of it meant a journey to Jerusalem and a cross that awaited Him on the slopes of Mount Calvary.

Finally, the transfiguration fulfilled Malachi's prophecy about Jesus. The prophet Malachi had said centuries earlier, "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He

will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, or else I will come and strike the land with a curse" (Malachi 4:5-6). Those were the last words of the prophet in the last book of the Old Testament. They were now about to be fulfilled. Elijah had come. In the spirit and zeal of Elijah, John the Baptist had boldly proclaimed, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 3:2). Now the doors to that kingdom were about to be opened wide as Jesus began His journey to Jerusalem.

What about the doors to your heart? Will they be opened to God as we begin our journey to Jerusalem in the weeks to come? When Malachi spoke about the turning of fathers' hearts to their children, he was speaking of reconciliation, restored relationships, not only among men, but even more importantly between men and their God. The time has come for us to be reconciled to God through His Son, Jesus Christ. That's why Jesus began His journey to Jerusalem, a journey that began with a mountain top experience.