

**MATTHEW 17:1–9.** (EHV)

Six days later Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John the brother of James; and he led them up onto a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured in front of them. His face was shining like the sun. His clothing became as white as the light. Just then, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you want, I will make three shelters here: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them. Just then, a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him.” When the disciples heard this, they fell face down and were terrified. Jesus approached and as he touched them, he said, “**Get up, and do not be afraid.**” When they opened their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “**Do not tell anyone what you have seen until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.**”

The Transfiguration account is probably well known to most of us. Jesus goes up on a mountain with three of his disciples; he displays his divine glory; he talks with Moses and Elijah; the Father calls him his Son; the disciples fall down and when they look up, it’s just plain old Jesus again; they return down the mountain.

It’s an interesting story, but if you’ve been a regular churchgoer for many years, it probably doesn’t surprise you anymore.

What perhaps *does* surprise us, when we stop to think about it, is that there is only *one* transfiguration story, or that the Transfiguration story isn’t the story of Jesus’s entire life and ministry. Wouldn’t Jesus’s ministry have been much more successful if his glory were always on display? If he always went around flanked by the great prophets of old? Why was he only transfigured once, and only in front of three people?

A close look at the story reveals that Jesus’s one-time transfiguration has at least a twofold purpose we want to consider today. Jesus’s transfiguration helps us to bear the cross, and it directs us to God’s word.

### **1. The Transfiguration Helps Us to Bear the Cross**

Jesus’s transfiguration helps us to bear the cross. It does that first of all by showing us how difficult the cross is. Jesus had just told his disciples that anyone who would follow him would *have to* bear the cross. He defined the cross as denial of self in favor of his word and even being ready to give up one’s life for his sake.

Six days later he gave three of his apostles a living depiction of the difficulty of the cross by taking them on a difficult journey. Yes, they will see amazing things at the end of the journey, but first they must make the difficult journey. He takes them up a mountain, and not just any mountain, but a *high* mountain. According to one tradition, he took them up Mount Tabor, almost 2,000 feet above sea level. But we’re also told that he took them up there “by themselves”; he wanted this to be a private affair. Mount Tabor is not very private; you can see it for miles all around. But there was another mountain more lofty, more private, and closer to Caesarea

Philippi, the last place we're told Jesus was—namely, Mount Hermon. Mount Hermon is about 9,000 feet above sea level, and a climb of almost 6,000 feet from ground level.

If you've ever been on a mountain hike, you know how difficult it can be, especially as you get closer to the top. You go from traversing woods, narrow streams, and small stones on gradual slopes to hiking over large rocks and rocky projections, and perhaps also some snow drifts, on steep slopes. The journey Jesus took these three on was no walk in the park. Yet Jesus does not simply tell them, "Go ahead and climb to the top; I'll meet you up there." No, he leads the way, and they follow after him. Whatever difficulties they encounter, he encounters and overcomes them first.

The difficulty of the cross is also seen in the company Jesus keeps on top of the mountain. "Just then, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Jesus." These two men are good examples of prophets of the cross. Moses had to preach God's word to a pharaoh who hated him. He had to lead God's people through a sea, through mountainous terrain, and through the wilderness, all while they continually grumbled against God and challenged his own God-given authority. He had no sooner imparted God's Ten Commandments to the people than they decided to break the first one and worship a golden calf. Then, after years of patience, he lost his temper with them just once and he—not they—*he* was forbidden from crossing over into the Promised Land.

Elijah didn't have it much easier. He had to preach God's word to a king who hated him, wicked King Ahab. He prophesied, "As the LORD lives, there will be neither dew nor rain for the next few years except at my word" (1 Kings 17:1). Then he too had to live with the consequences of his prophecy for three years. The LORD sent him across the Jordan to a brook in the wilderness, where he enjoyed a diet of nothing but bread and meat, brought to him by ravens day after day. Then the brook dried up, so God sent him to a widow in Zarephath. There his dietary options went from two to one—just bread. And he may not have had the cleanest reputation living with a widow and her son.

Oh, he had his moments of glory too. Remember his showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel? The prophets of Baal prayed to Baal all day to burn up their sacrifice. Elijah prayed once and fire came from heaven and not only consumed his sacrifice, but also licked up the water around his sacrifice and burned up the stones with which his sacrificial altar was built. And the response he got for pointing people to the true God again? Ahab's wife told him, "By this time tomorrow your life will be mine" (1 Kings 19:2). So he had to flee his own country.

The cross is difficult.

We also see its difficulty in Peter's words: "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you want, I will make three shelters here: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." What is Peter saying? "Lord, it's much better up here than it is down there. If you stay here, Lord, you won't have to suffer and die like you said you would. James and John and I can go down and get everyone else for you. They'll come up here and see you. We would rather sleep outside, exposed to the elements, if it means we get to continue to behold you in your glory, and that we don't have to go back down there."

The cross is difficult.

But how does knowing how difficult the cross is help us to bear the cross? It helps us to bear it, because then, when God sends it, it doesn't surprise us. The cross consists of hard work

and effort. It consists of pain. It consists of headaches, frustrations, and setbacks. It consists of personal spiritual battles against the devil and sin and unbelief. It consists of heavy responsibility. It consists of enduring rejection. Yes, it may also consist of losing our very life.

But Jesus doesn't just show us how difficult the cross is. He also shows us the reward that comes after, and only after, the cross. Yes, the journey up the mountain is difficult, but what do the three disciples enjoy once they reach the top? They get to see Jesus in his divine splendor without injury to themselves. They also get to enjoy the company of two renowned saints. Yes, Moses and Elijah conversed with Jesus, but the Bible says they appeared "to them," to the three.

And what do those two prophets enjoy after their difficult lives? We know that both Moses and Elijah went to heaven. Moses died in a natural way and was buried by God himself. Elijah was taken up to heaven directly, in a whirlwind. We also know that heaven is beyond time and its joy is uninterrupted. So, as they talk with Jesus, we get a glimpse of their reward, of what heaven is, since they are still in heaven as they are talking with him. Heaven is dwelling with and seeing Christ in his glory. Heaven is being at his side. Heaven is enjoying the full measure of his love and favor. Heaven is familiar and friendly discourse and conversation with him. Heaven is being privy to his gracious will and purpose. What greater reward could they have, than to look upon Christ and interact with him face to face?

Jesus also gives us a glimpse of his own reward, for he too has borne the cross, and will continue to bear it even more heavily once he comes down. Good Friday is drawing near. Yet he will endure and overcome and will ascend to the right hand of the Father. And there he *will* enjoy a continuous transfiguration.

So also Jesus shows us our reward. Paul says that Christ has *already* seated us with him in the heavenly realms by faith. And after we have borne the cross in this life, we will experience our own transformation and live with Christ in eternal bliss and glory forever. Most of you go to work almost every day. You may not even like your job, but you still do it. Why? Because of its reward; you know you'll get paid for it. How much more should we be eager to bear even the heaviest of crosses knowing that we will receive this highest reward?

## **2. The Transfiguration Directs Us to God's Word**

But how do we know all this? How do we know this actually happened? How do we know this reward is ours? And how do we believe it? We ourselves were not there to see this. Only those three disciples were.

We only know and are convinced of it through God's word. And that is the second purpose of Jesus' transfiguration—to direct us to his word.

It directs us to his word by showing us the power of his word. We're told that Jesus only took Peter, James, and John with him. That doesn't seem like the greatest plan if he wants *all people* to believe in him, does it? Wouldn't more witnesses be better? Wouldn't better witnesses be better? Better witnesses than Peter? Six days earlier Jesus called him Satan when Peter rebuked Jesus and tried to dissuade him from his mission. Jesus wants *him* to be one of three witnesses to his transfiguration?

And he wants *James*? Jesus wants one of only three witnesses to his transfiguration to be a man who will be beheaded shortly after Jesus's ascension? Doesn't he want someone who will live a little longer?

And he wants *John*? We often think of John as one of the greatest and noblest apostles. He is called “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” But isn’t it interesting that James is rarely called “the brother of John,” but John here and elsewhere is called “the brother of James”? President Biden has three siblings, and I bet you neither you nor I would recognize them if they walked in here today. We would only be able to identify them if they said, “I’m So-and-so, the brother *or* sister of the president.” John is identified as “the brother of James.” He must have been less impressive or less accomplished than his brother.

Yet, despite his choice of *three* witnesses, despite his choice of *these* witnesses, the Transfiguration is recorded in three of the Gospels, written by three authors who were *not* eye-witnesses. And countless Christians, including you and I, not only know about it, but believe that it actually happened! How? The power of God’s word.

We see its power also in the Transfiguration itself. When did the disciples fall to the ground? When Jesus’s face started shining like the sun? No. When his clothes became as white as pure light? No. “Suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them. Just then, a voice came out of the cloud, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him.’” When the disciples heard this, they fell face down and were terrified.” The glorious sight didn’t bring them to their bellies. God’s word did.

And the voice did not say, “This is my Son. See him! Look at him! Gaze upon him!” No, “*Listen* to him.”

The Transfiguration also directs us to God’s word by showing us the unity of his word. On the mountaintop, Jesus converses with Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament, who prophesied many hundreds of years before Jesus walked the earth. And what are they conversing about? The exact same thing—Jesus and his saving mission.

The Transfiguration also directs us to God’s word by showing us the kindness of his word. That kindness is implied in Jesus bringing these three disciples along as eyewitnesses of his transfiguration.

The kindness of his word is implied in the bright cloud. This is not the cloud of deep darkness representing God’s wrath that appeared when God gave his law on Mount Sinai. No, this is “a bright cloud” representing God’s grace and favor.

And what does the voice from the cloud say? “Listen to him.” And what are the very next words out of Jesus’s mouth, to which the three, and we, can listen? “Get up and *don’t be afraid*.” We have every reason to be afraid of God by nature. We are conceived and born in sin, and our sins separate us from God. But Jesus takes all those reasons away. He has come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. In him God’s wrath and his love meet together. On the cross, God will punish our sins in Jesus and take them away. By Jesus’s cross, he will make our cross light.

“As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, ‘Do not tell anyone what you have seen until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.’” Mark and Luke tell us that they kept that command. Yet today I’m telling you what those three saw. I heard it from Matthew. Matthew heard it either from Peter, James, or John. Which means what? Jesus has gone ahead of us, perfectly bearing his cross, perfectly fulfilling God’s word and will, overcoming every obstacle. He has accomplished the salvation of the world and been raised from the dead, thus giving Peter, James, and John license to share their experience with others. And his word is still powerfully at work today.

Brothers and sisters, how often have we caught our synod, our congregation, or ourselves at our best moments and thought like Peter, “Yes, *this* is the church. *This* is the power of Christ. Lord, let’s stay right here. Let’s keep it this way.” We too by nature want to find the certainty of Christ’s kingdom by sight instead of by faith in his word.

We want to find it in our outward obedience, instead of in the news of Christ’s obedience and his forgiveness for our disobedience. We want to find it in an abundance of money at our disposal, instead of in the price of our redemption at our disposal. We want to find it in the youthful exuberance of the pastor and the positive and hopeful attitude of the members, instead of in the sure promises and power of the word of God even when the person speaking it is someone like me. We want to find it in the external harmony and peace of our congregation and synod, instead of the harmony and peace with God the Bible assures us of no matter what turmoil our own or any church is experiencing. Like Peter, too often we are eager to share Christ with our neighbor only when things are going extremely well, only when we have some visible sign to point to as proof that our church is the right church. Otherwise we trust too little in the power of the Word to create faith even when things are going poorly. And all this *after* Jesus has been raised from the dead and has given us the New Testament!

Why are we often so weak in faith? Because, in part, we fail to really listen to the account of Jesus’s transfiguration and thus to benefit from its twofold purpose. Jesus’s transfiguration helps us to bear the cross, and it directs us to God’s powerful and saving word. Let us heed that word and listen to Jesus—listen to him forgive us, listen to him love us, listen to him tell us, “Do not be afraid,” listen to him save us. Let us listen to him that we and many others may faithfully bear the cross in this life and receive its glorious and gracious reward in the next! Amen.