

No One Like Jesus: Metamorphosis
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 29; Malachi 4; Matthew 17:1-13

Our final Scripture reading today is Matthew 17:1-13. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word. “After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, “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.” While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” The disciples asked him, “Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?” Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.”

What a crazy few weeks! The country has been on edge about everything from baseball to the presidency and everything in-between. The games are over, the votes are cast, but the underlying tension is still there...even if everyone you wanted to win won. People of all sorts, from all different points of view, are asking, “How did we get here?” How did the Cubs finally break the curse? How did Trump get the vote? How did we come to the place we are at as a country? And while we can debate polls and strategies and forecasts, there’s the sense that we can’t get at the clear answers. The whole truth is hidden from our view, too complicated to understand fully. We can guess, we can figure, we can even cheer or mourn how things have gone. But seeing the big picture seems out of the question.

Today’s passage, on the other hand, turns things around for those of us who believe in Jesus Christ and are a part of His Kingdom. The transfiguration is a sudden, brief glimpse into total truth. It is a vision of what is to come, and more, it is a vision of who Jesus really is. Jesus finally brings down the curtain for three of the disciples and lets them see ultimate reality. The big picture we have been missing comes together in Jesus.

Last week, Jesus warned the disciples they must die to their old selves. He also promised that some of them would not taste death before they saw Him coming in His Kingdom. That’s a tricky phrase. Did Jesus mean that some of the disciples would not die before the end of time? The best interpretation is that they would witness the glory of Jesus as the exalted, divine King at the transfiguration. Because Matthew, Mark, and Luke all have this promise and the transfiguration right next to each other, it’s a good bet.

Six days after the promise, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up on a high mountain. This is a common place where God meets His people. Jesus often went on mountainsides to pray. Abraham's son Isaac was saved by God on a mountainside, and the law of God was given to Moses on top of Mount Sinai. Jerusalem, the supreme city of Israel, the city of God, was built on the region's mountain. Even the pagans used to go up on mountains to make their sacrifices to their gods. So Jesus leading the disciples up the mountain prepares us that something important is going to happen.

But what occurs is beyond imagining. Jesus changes before their eyes. The word in Greek is *metamorphothe*, which is where we get the word *metamorphosis*. He is transformed. He changes right before their eyes. It is difficult to describe exactly what happens – Matthew says, “His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.” Mark comments, “His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them.” Luke writes, “The appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.” The three descriptions show us that it's too amazing to fully describe in words.

That brings us to our first point today: *the glory of Jesus is beyond compare, leading us to worship and adore Him*. It is beyond anything we can possibly imagine. In Exodus, when Moses saw God's glory, the Israelites were terrified. Moses' face glowed just *reflecting* the Lord's glory. He had to put a veil over his face until the glow died down. Peter, James, and John, like Moses, see the glory of God face to face. Their descriptions can't match the wonder they've seen.

The sight of Jesus' glory remains with the three disciples as long as they live. John writes in his gospel, “We have seen His glory, the glory of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” In his second letter, Peter writes, “We were eyewitnesses of His majesty...we ourselves heard the voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.” Both were much older when they wrote about the Transfiguration, but it stuck with them. It didn't make them fearless or sinless, but it did confirm that Jesus was the Son of God.

The glory of God is overwhelming. At the end of Revelation, the glory of God fills the entire New Jerusalem – a city over 1500 miles in length and width and height. As Revelation 22 describes it, “There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will be their light. And they will reign for ever and ever.”

God's very being is radiant! He is brighter than the sun. When this world is done and God recreates the heavens and earth, He Himself illuminates everything. We're told in Mark and Luke that when Peter offers to make tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, it's because he was out of his head, so full of wonder and fear and awe that he simply had no idea how to respond.

Glory is an incredibly important concept in the Bible. The word “glory” shows up in the Bible 357 times. We hardly ever use the word these days. When was the last time you described something as glorious? I haven't. But the word glory describes God's splendor, His majesty, His brilliance, His brightness, and His revealed presence. When we give “glory” to God, it's an acknowledgment of all these things.

God has given us a gorgeous fall this year, and He's given us mild enough temperatures to be out in it. All the wonderful colors, the leaves falling, the sunlight shimmering through the trees, all of it makes me appreciate God's handiwork. It's truly amazing. And yet it's nothing – nothing! – in comparison to God's glory. The glory of the fall is awesome, yet it fades. In a couple of weeks, it will be gone. But God's glory never fades at all, not an iota. And the glory of Jesus will always be on display in His Kingdom, in ways utterly unimaginable to us right now.

Why does this matter to us? When we typically think of Jesus we think about how he appeared among us – a servant, meek and mild, our master who nevertheless humbled Himself to death on a cross for our sakes. In His life on earth, Jesus was the picture of perfect submission to His Father. But we need to remember that He is glorious. He is divine to His very core. In Him is life itself (John 1:4). He is the fountain of living water (Jeremiah 17:13 and John 7:37). The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being (Hebrews 1:3).

His glory reminds us that He is always reliable. He is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and Omega of Revelation 22:13, which means there is never a time we cannot count on Him. Jesus has power and authority from the Father, so you can trust that He has the ability to help you no matter the situation.

And His glory means it is right to worship Him. John tells us Jesus' glory is full of grace and truth. Jesus is worthy of worship because the glory, the majesty, the splendor He has are a direct result of who He is – merciful, kind, compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. If there is anyone we should worship, it is Him who is the living embodiment of every good character trait. His glory is not just brightness for brightness' sake – it is the result of God's utter perfection at every level. We shouldn't settle for worshipping earthly or man-made glories when our God, our Jesus, is the only being that has glory in and of Himself.

And we can worship in confidence because of another key point we learn from today's passage: *everything points to Jesus*. As if Jesus' glory wasn't enough, then He bring Moses and Elijah to the party! They represent the whole of the Old Testament revelation – God gave the law through Moses, and Elijah was the prophet who stood for all the rest. We never see anything like their appearance before or after the transfiguration. No wonder the three disciples were out of their minds! Yet standing with Him, talking to Him, they are definitive proof that Jesus is the Son of God. These heroes that stand for everything within Jewish history now show their allegiance to their Messiah.

And if that's not enough, a bright cloud surrounds them, and suddenly they hear the voice of God the Father Almighty. He loves His Son; He is pleased with His Son; listen to His Son! Then the disciples panic. They know who it is that's speaking, and they are afraid they might die. But Jesus comes to them and reassures them; "don't be afraid." And then it's all over.

We often skip the Old Testament. It's long; it seems boring. We may think that God was angry in the Old Testament and loving in the New Testament. But every part of the Bible speaks to Christ. Galatians 3 teaches that the law of Moses was a tutor, a teacher, meant to lead us to Jesus. It points to our need for a Savior to rescue us from sin. We are no longer bound to that law, but we learn God's ways from it.

Hebrews 1:1-2 says, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways.” And through them, God promised the Messiah. 1 Peter 1:10-11 teaches us, “Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.” Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets, all of them point to Jesus as the Son of God.

Everything points to Jesus. Our world points to the desperate need for redemption. There are a lot of hurt feelings on all sides over this week’s election. As Catha pointed out this week to some kids at school, the greatest issue facing us as a country isn’t Trump’s agenda or angry protestors or the mainstream media or Obamacare or a lack of jobs. It’s sin. The greatest issue facing the world is not globalization or global warming. It’s sin. The Bible reveals the depths of the depravity of the human heart, and we’ve seen that anger and hatred on full display this last week. We need the hope of a Savior because we have no way to deal with the sin problem that fuels every other problem.

The Bible clearly shows us the problem of sin, of rebellion against God. But it also, through all of its pages, promises us that God is rooting out the problem. Through Jesus, He has forgiven the sins of all who come to Him in humility to receive His grace. Through Jesus, there is a way to live that is not overcome by the rage of the world. Through Jesus, we have a promise of eternal life. And Moses and Elijah, even the Father Himself, testify to the Son.

Where is God in this election cycle? He is where He always has been – showing us our need for Him and the redemption available to us through Jesus. And if you have any doubts that Jesus is who He says He is or that He has the power to save us both now and in eternity, look through the whole Bible. You’ll see Him promised to us thousands of years before He came. You’ll see that He did come at just the right time. And you’ll find as you read that the eyewitness accounts of the thousands who saw Him underline the truth that He is alive and well and working even now to bring us into His Kingdom.

Here’s my last thought for the day: *know that the only way off a mountain is down.* As soon as they start coming down off the mountainside, the mood turns somber. First, they can’t tell anybody about what they’ve seen until Jesus dies and is resurrected. How do you keep an event like this to yourselves? And then, what about Elijah?, the disciples ask. Well, guess what, the spirit and power of Elijah was on John the Baptist, and you saw what they did to him, Jesus says, and that’s what’s about to happen to me. The suffering and death of Jesus are right back at the forefront again. Peter, James, and John have witnessed the extraordinary glory of the Lord as He really is, they’ve seen and heard Moses and Elijah and the Father, yet for all that wonder, things are going to get hard again quick.

Sometimes we have mountaintop experiences with God. I don't think anybody here has seen Moses or Elijah, but things go well in your relationship with God. Bible reading is good for a time and prayers are answered. You might go to a retreat or conference of some kind and come back on fire for God. And when things start to get difficult again, it's painful because of the joy you'd experienced in the Lord. Or maybe you haven't had something like that and you long for it. You think that maybe if you did *something* – did more ministry, listened to Christian music all day, watched more Bible studies on RightNow Media, that would do it.

Everyone wants to stay on the mountaintop. Peter's first, gut-level response was, "Let's set up some tents and stay here as long as possible!" Everyone wants to have that incredible experience of God and for it not to go away. And you know what? In eternity, we will always reside in the glory of our Lord. Our eyes will always be lit by His splendor. Every moment will be better than the last as we grow ever more aware of God's goodness while we're in His presence. Eternity is the permanent mountaintop.

But now is not the time for it. Not because we don't want to always experience the love and forgiveness and presence of God, but because in this world that's so steeped in sin, we're always going to be pulled back into the thick of it. God has put us, His people, on the front lines of battle against the darkness of evil and wickedness. As long as we are here, we will be daily fighting to carry our crosses and act as servants to God and to other people. We will face trials, temptations, and difficult times. God gives us mountaintop experiences to encourage us to stay in the fight, but He doesn't intend for us to stay there.

And you know what? God is in the thick of it in the valleys too. He comforts us in our grief. He heals us when we are hurt. When we hear wounding words from others, He whispers to us, "You are still my child." He does not abandon us in difficult times. His presence may not be as immediately apparent, but He is there. Jesus who left His rightful place in heaven to walk the tiny villages and byways of Israel is not going to leave us in the valley. He came down from heaven to walk those valleys, and His Spirit stays with us at every step along our way.

It's been a hard week for all of us in different ways. No matter if our candidates won or lost, we are uncertain as to the future, how things will turn out. But the transfiguration reminds us that we can be certain of the one ultimate reality – that our Lord Jesus is far more glorious than anything we can imagine, that the whole of Scripture – and indeed the whole universe – witnesses to His glory, and that one day as we continue to follow in His steps, we will ascend the mountain of the new Jerusalem and enjoy His glory forevermore.