

Chapter 68: “Listen to Him!”

Matthew 17:1–8

After Jesus transitioned toward teaching his disciples about the full nature of his sufferings, we may have expected an uninterrupted course of trial and difficulty on the way to the cross. Instead, Jesus immediately reveals his glory on the mountain of transfiguration. Through this, Matthew portrays Jesus’ sufferings as an integral part of his glory. More than that, we also find in this story an important insight into making sense of the glorious vision that we read about from a distance of thousands of years and thousands of miles. Here, we learn to *listen to Jesus as we await his appearing*.

Christ’s Exaltation (Matt. 17:1–2)

As we have studied the Gospel of Matthew, we have regularly noted the transitional statements between passages. Typically, these transitions are rather vague about the exact amount of intervening time (e.g., “then,” “at that time”). If there is any specificity, it is usually to reflect that the second passage takes place directly after the first passage (e.g., “at that time,” “that same day,” “while he was still speaking”). In the present passage, Matthew does something fairly unique by capturing a specific amount of time that does not immediately follow from the first: “And after six days...” (v. 1). Morris notes that the specificity likely suggests that, while this passage may be separated from the previous passage by nearly a week’s time, that nevertheless Matthew intends for us to consider the themes of the two passages together.¹ That is, whatever happens at the transfiguration of Jesus, we must understand it as a complement to Jesus’ prediction about his own sufferings and the sufferings of his disciples (Matt. 16:21–28).

Blomberg also notes that this length of time may allude back to Exodus 24, when the glory of the Lord appeared in a cloud on a mountain to a representative group of Israelites: “The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called Moses out of the midst of the cloud” (Ex. 24:16). This time, it is Peter, James, and John, rather than Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel on the mountain with the covenant mediator (Ex. 24:1). This allusion is likely intentional, since there are a number of connections in this passages that point back to the appearance of the glory of God to the Israelites at Mount Sinai.

Yet, the presence of Peter, James, and John serves important functions beyond a formal similarity with the Old Testament counterparts. Specifically, Jesus seems to be taking with him three witnesses in order to fulfill the legal requirement for proving an important assertion, since nothing was to be established in Israel’s courts except on the testimony of two or three witnesses (Deut. 17:6).² Accordingly, France observes how this entire story is told entirely from the perspective of the

¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 437.

² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:309.

disciples rather than from Jesus (in contrast to, for example, Matt. 9:36, which narrates what Jesus saw and what Jesus felt):

Jesus “took *them* with him” and “led *them* up” (rather than he went and they followed); he was changed “before *them*”; Moses and Elijah “appeared to *them*”; we hear of Peter’s rash words rather than of the experience of Jesus himself; the cloud “overshadowed *them*,” and the voice which came from it addressed *them* directly, speaking of Jesus in the third person and calling on them to listen to him; we heard of *their* reaction, of Jesus’ reassurance to *them*, and of what *they* could see when they opened their eyes.³

The vision of Jesus’ transfiguration is not for everyone—not even for all of Jesus’ disciples—but Jesus deliberately brings a sufficient number of witnesses to prove its reliability beyond reasonable doubt.

Then, on the mountain, we read that Jesus “was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light” (v. 2). The word for “transfigured” is μεταμορφώθη (*metemorphōthē*), from which we get our word *metamorphosis*. The word is written in the passive voice, suggested that Jesus did not transfigure himself, but that he was transfigured by someone else—that is, by his Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit.⁴ This point is especially implied by the connection between this passage and the baptism of Jesus, since in both places the Father spoke from heaven to declare, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17; 17:5). Just as the Father and the Holy Spirit (who descended like a dove; Matt. 3:16) were active at Jesus’ baptism, so they are the implied agents who transfigure Jesus in this scene. As Morris notes, the transfiguration of Jesus and the verbal declaration of Jesus would not only have taught the disciples an important lesson, but this event would also have provided encouragement for Jesus as he prepares to go to the cross according to his Father’s plan.⁵

Additionally, the fact that Jesus’ face “shone like the sun” serves as one more allusion back to the ministry of Moses, whose face also shone after he had spent time in the presence of the Lord on top of Mount Sinai within the glory cloud (Ex. 34:29). Carson, however, notes an important difference between the two faces: “Moses’ face shone because it reflected something of God’s glory (Ex 34:29–30). But as for Jesus, he himself was transfigured.”⁶ Moses shone like the moon at night, reflected the glory of the sun. Jesus, however, shines his own light, illuminated by his own glory, like the sun. This scene very deliberately compares and contrasts the greater glory of Jesus with the lesser glory of Moses, which prepares the way for the surprising appearance of Moses in the next verse.

Peter’s Error (Matt. 17:3–4)

Perhaps the most surprising part of the story of Jesus’ transfiguration is at the sudden appearance of Moses and Elijah, which Matthew narrates with the particle of surprise ἰδοῦ (*idou*), meaning, “behold!” or, more colloquially in modern English, something like “look at that!” (v. 3). To begin,

³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 643.

⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 651.

⁵ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 437.

⁶ Carson, “Matthew,” 437.

commentators are puzzled by why these two figures would appear, rather than others. Hagner notes that both Moses and Elijah were uniquely associated with Mount Sinai (also called “Mount Horeb”; 1 Kgs. 19:8), and that both seem to appear together again as the two witnesses described in Revelation 11:1–13.⁷ The simplest explanation is that Moses and Elijah symbolize the Law and the Prophets (respectively), which Christ came to fulfill (Matt. 5:17).⁸ Some of the explanation surely must arise within the heavy allusions back to the ministry of Moses on Mount Sinai throughout this passage, as well as the discussion of whether Elijah had to come before the coming of Jesus in the following section (Matt. 17:9–13).

One other difficult question focuses on what Moses and Elijah may have said while they were “talking with him” (v. 3). While Luke summarizes the conversation between the three figures as dealing with “his departure” (Luke 9:31), Matthew only tells us that Moses and Elijah were “talking with” Jesus. We should perhaps remember that angels appeared to minister to Jesus after his temptation by Satan (Matt. 4:11), and that (according to Luke) another angel appears to strengthen Jesus while the Lord is agonizing in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:43). Are we to understand that Moses and Elijah are “talking with him” to strengthen him to endure the sufferings for which he has been sent into the world? Indeed, the Law and the Prophets were written to bear witness about Jesus, so perhaps Moses and Elijah are continuing to bear witness to Jesus, but in person rather than by proxy through their written and recorded ministries. Perhaps, but Matthew does not give us any information, possibly to force us to see this scene through the limited perspective of the dazed disciples as they try to make sense of what is happening as they watch the scene unfold.

In the middle of this daze, Peter foolishly opens his mouth. The Greek is interesting, since the literal translation of v. 4 would be, “But answering, Peter said to Jesus....” This is a very common way to introduce the speech of someone who is responding to the statement or the question of someone else; however, as Morris points out, there is no indication that Moses, Elijah, or Jesus have addressed Peter, so that Matthew is casting this as “a typical Petrine initiative.”⁹ Peter, therefore, is speaking without need or knowledge when he blurts out, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah” (v. 4). Peter, who had accurately confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16), has now failed to understand the mission for which Jesus came (Matt. 16:22) as well as, here, the full significance of Jesus’ identity as the Christ and the Son of the living God.

Yet another difficult question revolves, then, around the intention for the three “tents” (σκηνάς; *skēnas*). Nolland offers a helpful list of possible symbolic meanings behind these “tents”:

First, σκηνή is used of the wilderness tabernacle (from Ex. 25:9 onwards) and therefore subsequently of the place where God dwells. Is temple imagery involved in Peter’s suggestion? The separate shelters for Moses and Elijah suggest that this is not the case.

Second, σκηνή is used of the royal dwelling of David, promised to be restored (Am. 9:11; cf.

⁷ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 493.

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:311.

⁹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 439.

Is. 16:5). After the confession of Mt. 16:16, the shelters could be intended to symbolise just this restoration, but again the separate shelters for Moses and Elijah are a problem. Third, σκηνή was used in various ways with dramatic staging. Does Peter think that he should in some way ‘frame the scene’? Fourth, σκηνή is used for the Feast of Booths, one of the three main Jewish festivals, celebrated in the autumn. It had important associations with harvest, but the practice of living temporarily in makeshift shelters particularly recalled the Exodus, and the festival was an occasion of covenant renewal. Some form of eschatological fulfilment of the festival came to be anticipated (cf. Ho. 12:9; Zc. 14:16–20). Perhaps Peter thinks of the glorified three as fitting participants already at this point in the eschatological fulfilment of the feast. Here is a first installment of the eschatological fulfilment.¹⁰

Whatever Peter may have meant, God himself will shortly inform him that he has misunderstood the significance of this event. Peter is clearly attempting to honor Jesus in some way *alongside* Moses and Elijah, while failing to miss the point that Moses and Elijah have come to hail the Lord to whom they themselves must bow.

Our Exhortation (Matt. 17:5–8)

Matthew tells us that God interrupted Peter without waiting for him to finish detailing his plan: “He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them...” (v. 5a). For the second time in this passage, Matthew calls attention to this event with ἰδοῦ (*idou*), “behold!” The fact that God speaks in “a bright cloud” is another important link back to Moses’s experience on Mount Sinai, but also has a wider scope of reference, as Carson notes: “The ‘cloud’ is associated, in both the OT and intertestamental Judaism, with eschatology (Ps 97:2; Isa 4:5; Eze 30:3, Da 7:13; Zep 1:15; cf. 2 Bar. 53:1–12; 4 Ezra 13:3; 2 Macc 2:8; *b. Sanh.* 98a) and with exodus (Ex 13:21–22; 16:10; 19:16; 24:15–18; 40:34–38). Of the synoptists, only Matthew says that the cloud was ‘bright,’ a detail that recalls the Shekinah glory.”¹¹ This format of God’s appearance both reveals the identity of the Speaker while also veiling any appearance of his form (see Deut. 4:11–12).¹²

Then, for the third time in this passage, Matthew again declares, ἰδοῦ (*idou*), “behold!” or, “look!”¹³ Ironically, however, Matthew calls us to *look* at something that cannot be seen: “and [behold] a voice from the cloud said...” (v. 5b).¹⁴ This last instance of “behold,” though, may carry important meaning because of what this (invisible) voice says: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (v. 5c). As many commentators note, the first part of this statement is an exact repetition of what God said about his Son at Jesus’ baptism (Matt. 3:17). Second, commentators also note that the second part (“listen to him”) seems to allude back to Moses’ prophecy of a new prophet like him: “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me

¹⁰ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 702–03.

¹¹ Carson, “Matthew,” 438.

¹² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:313.

¹³ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 494.

¹⁴ The ESV omits this instance of “behold.”

from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen...” (Deut. 18:15).

What commentators do not as often notice, however, is the incongruity between the thoroughly *visual* event of the transfiguration and the explicitly *auditory* command. We are told here only about Jesus’ transfigured appearance so that we don’t even know what Moses and Elijah were talking about with Jesus. Nevertheless, we are told to *listen* to Jesus as the proper response to this event. Indeed, we might have expected for God to rebuke Peter by saying, “*Look* at him!” This is where that third “behold” takes on possibly more significance. We cannot *look* at the invisible voice, but only listen to that voice. Furthermore, while Jesus’ appearance is transfigured, the voice of God commands us not to linger the gaze of our eyes on his appearance, but rather to redouble our focus on *listening* to him. It is a remarkable thought that, upon receiving a vision of the Lord’s unveiled glory, the disciples thoroughly misunderstand its significance. To understand the meaning of this event, they cannot rely upon their eyes but upon their ears.

Later on, then, Peter insists on the reliability of this event by declaring that he, along with James and John, were “eyewitnesses of [our Lord Jesus Christ’s] majesty” on the mountain (2 Pet. 1:16). Nevertheless, he does not speak much further about what he *saw* on the mountain, but only about what he heard: “For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the *voice* was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,’ we ourselves *heard* this very *voice* borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain” (2 Pet. 1:17–18). Furthermore, as Peter tells us of the implications of this story for us, he then writes, “And we have *the prophetic word* much more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no *prophecy of Scripture* comes from someone’s own interpretation” (2 Pet. 1:19–20). Just as Matthew tells us to “behold/look” at an invisible voice, and just as that invisible voice tells us to “listen” to the transfigured Jesus, so Peter now tells us that the prophetic word is much more fully confirmed through the prophecy of Scripture by the apostles as they preach and write under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21). It is historically essential that the apostles were indeed eyewitnesses of the transfiguration, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus; however, we are discouraged from trying to “see” in the same way that they did. Instead, the Scriptures call us to “listen” to Christ. Furthermore, because we now have the “prophetic word much more fully confirmed,” a Christian today with a Bible and the Holy Spirit can more accurately “see” Jesus than the disciples did when they saw his unveiled glory transfigured on the mountain.

In response to this voice, the disciples “fell on their faces and were terrified” (v. 6), just as the people of Israel “trembled” at the sound of the Lord on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:16; 20:18–21). While the Israelites remained at a distance and sent Moses in their place, though, we read here that “Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Rise, and have no fear’” (v. 7). While they had been on their faces, Moses and Elijah had disappeared, so that “when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only” (v. 8). On this verse, Calvin writes, “When it is said that in the end they saw Christ *alone*, this means that the Law and the Prophets had a temporary glory, that Christ alone might remain fully in view.”¹⁵ Notably, however, Jesus’ glory had once again been veiled. R. T. France writes, “his mission will be accomplished not in heavenly glory but in the normal conditions of earthly life.”¹⁶ For a

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:316.

¹⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 651.

moment, the veil had been lifted for the disciples to see Jesus’ glory truly for what it was. Now, however, Jesus must veil that glory as he continues to fill up everything required of him in his estate of humiliation in order to win the salvation of his people.

Discussion Questions

1. What might the transitional statement in v. 1 (“after six days”) suggest about the connection between this passage and the previous passage? Why does Matthew want us to think about Christ’s sufferings and Christ’s glorification together? How does this passage remind us about various aspects of Moses’s covenant mediation at Mount Sinai? How should we understand the nature of Jesus’ glory in his transfiguration?
2. What should we make about the actual appearance of Moses and Elijah on the mountain (v. 3)? How might Moses and Elijah symbolize the Law and the Prophets, which Christ came to fulfill (Matt. 5:17)? What do you think that Moses and Elijah may have been “talking” about with Jesus? Why do you think Peter speaks (v. 4)? What do you think he means by the three “tents” that he suggests building?
3. How does the bright cloud remind us of Moses’ mediation of the covenant at Mount Sinai (v. 5a)? How does the cloud veil the glory of God? How has Jesus’ form as a servant veiled his glory up to this point? Why is it interesting that Matthew tells us “behold/look” regarding the “voice” from heaven (v. 5b)? Why do you think that God tells the disciples to “listen” to Jesus rather than to “look” at him?
4. Read 2 Peter 1:16–21. What does Peter speak about seeing as “eyewitnesses of his majesty” on the mountain? Why do you think he speaks so much about the voice he heard? How does Peter relate that to the “word of prophecy” in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments? In a passage about a glorious vision of Jesus’ transfigured, why do you think that the application points primarily toward listening to the Word of God?