

The transfiguration

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[0 : 00] Well that's, you've seen that, that's our flyer that we're giving out at Christmas. Lord of Hope and Glory. This passage we're looking at this evening is certainly about glory, but before we dive into! let's think about this idea of glory for a minute.

That's actually an odd sort of word in some ways. It's an odd sort of concept, and I think the same is true of the Greek word, in Greek it's doxa, in which we get our word doxology.

Actually when you think about glory it's a bit hard to pin down exactly what it means. Think of some things we might describe as glorious, certainly a holiday in an idyllic landscape can be glorious, we might say I had a glorious time.

But on the other hand something very different, like the actions of a soldier in the heat and mud and the terror of battle, who does something courageous, perhaps saves his comrades.

We would say that was glorious as well, let's sometimes talk about glory in that sort of context.

We've got a picture of a star here on our flyer, and I suppose when we think about stars and the sun and the moon, we think of glory as meaning brightness.

[1 : 30] Sometimes we use that metaphor of brightness for other forms of glory, but in most cases it is a metaphor, it's an analogy, a picture.

It's not the essence of the thing. In most cases when we talk about glory, it's just a picture of it. So when John said the light was coming into the world, he didn't literally mean that somebody came down with a big lantern.

It's a metaphor of Jesus' glory. So perhaps we could get some idea of what glory is if we think of what's the opposite of glory.

It's not darkness, is it? The opposite of glory, I suppose, is ordinariness, mundaneness, everydayness. Something glorious is something weighty, which I think is the origin of the Greek word to some extent, the Greek and Hebrew ideas of glory.

It's something significant. It's something that's out of the ordinary. Something that's different. And so Jesus says in chapter 16, verse 27, that the Son of Man will come in the glory of the Father.

[2 : 57] But what that actually is going to look like, exactly, remains to be seen, doesn't it? But meanwhile, Peter, James and John are granted a preview of that glory.

At least in one sense. And this whole passage that we read, and I think we do have to read the whole thing, is really one discourse, even though it takes place over several days.

But Matthew has put it together deliberately. Peter had recognised Jesus as the promised Messiah. But he was very unclear about what that meant. So in chapter 16, verses 13 to 18, he'd got it all wrong, didn't he?

He was obviously still expecting some insurrection against the Romans, or something like that, some great victory. But he had been promised a revelation of Jesus the King.

Chapter 16, verse 28, he says that those, some here, who will not taste death until they've seen the King coming in his glory. And you can wonder about exactly what that means, but surely a preview of it is what Matthew tells us next.

[4 : 22] It's worth just looking at the structure of this whole discourse. It's one of these sandwiches you get in Hebrew and Hebrew literature, certainly, but people think they don't occur so much in the New Testament, but they do occur from time to time.

Mark, its Gospel, has lots of them. There are perhaps not so many in Matthew, but this is one where that sandwich structure is used. And I think it's used very deliberately.

Let's just see how it hangs together. So in chapter 16, verses 13 and 14, Jesus asks, who do people say that I am?

And the answer is, well, maybe you're John the Baptist, or Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah, of course. And then in the middle here we get glimpses of the Messiah himself.

So in chapter 16, 15 to 20, we're told that the truth has been revealed to Peter, but they're not telling anyone yet.

[5 : 28] And then we have this passage in the middle, first of all, where Peter misunderstands that the way of the Messiah is the way of the cross.

And then at the end of chapter 16, we have this part where glory is foretold, but apparently it's deferred.

You will see the Son of Man come with his angels, but not yet. But there will be a preview. And the preview is what we get here.

The glory of Jesus displayed. But yet again, they're told not to tell anybody. Not yet. And then, just a sort of, the other piece of bread on the sandwich, it finishes again with talking about Elijah and John the Baptist.

And I'm sure Matthew has put it together like this very deliberately, so that we see that this is a whole argument that is being presented here. Who is the King? Who is the Messiah?

[6 : 39] What does his Messiahship look like? What sort of King is he? What sort of Messiah? Is the issue that Matthew is dealing with here. So our actual passage for this evening is chapter 17, 1 to 13, that vision that we describe as the, as the transfiguration.

It's the word that's used in most translation, English translations. What exactly that means, you perhaps don't know, but it means something like changing or something like that.

It means what it says there, I guess, is the best way to see it. But it is worth noting that three different words for seeing are used in this passage.

In 16:28 and in 17, verse 8, the word used is *eido*, which is the ordinary Greek word for seeing something. And then in 17, verse 3, we are told that Moses and Elijah appear.

And that Greek word is *optonomai*, which does mean, basically, or can mean to appear. They either weren't there or weren't visible before, but now they can be seen.

[7 : 56] But the NIV is a bit naughty, actually, in its translation of chapter 17, verse 9, because it says, don't tell anyone what you've seen. But that's not actually what the original says.

If you have an English standard version or even an authorised version, you'll find what Jesus actually said is don't tell anyone the vision. The word that's used there is *horama*.

I apologise for my Greek pronunciations. I'm no Greek scholar. But the word that's used there is the word *horama* or *orama*. And Strong gives the following definitions.

That which is seen as a spectacle, something spectacular, or a sight divinely granted in an ecstasy or in a sleep or as a vision.

This is not just some random event that the three apostles are observing. On the contrary, this is something they're presented with, something that's been very carefully constructed.

[9 : 01] A spectacle, if you like, something they're supposed to look at. A choreographed vision for which every detail is resonant with meaning.

Yet there are strange things about most visions, of course, just occur to one, just shown to one person, often in a dream or something. Here, this vision had a sufficient presence in the physical world that all three apostles could see it.

And yet it's equally clear that it's not an entirely natural appearance that we have here. Peter suggested building booths, which he thought, obviously, this was something happening in the physical world.

But, you know, you could get in all sorts of knots trying to wonder exactly how this vision appears in the physical world. But really, that's pointless speculation. All three apostles could see this, but it's not an entirely natural thing.

It's something that they are presented and shown by God himself. There are other questions you might ask, like, how did the apostles recognise Moses and Elijah?

[10 : 13] I mean, it's not as if they'd ever met them. Somehow they did. Perhaps Jesus spoke to them or called them by name. We don't know. Again, this is just speculation, really.

But the point of it, well, actually, there are lots of points of it, I think. This whole thing is designed to give a particular message.

It's not just some random event. It's something quite special. And what I would have liked to have done is read out all the Old Testament passages that are alluded to here.

The only trouble is, if I did that, we'd be here to midnight. There is so much in it. I mean, I've got to be brief this evening because it's communion afterwards as well. So, I can't read out all the passages.

I'm just going to have to point them out to you. But I think it's worth going through. Just going through the whole text, pointing out how each of the detail of this vision is important.

[11 : 20] And then see where that takes us and what we're really supposed to learn from it. So, let's do that. Let's look at the details of the vision. And the first thing we notice is the location.

It's up a mountain. And if you're familiar with the Old Testament, you'll know that when God had something particularly important to say, he very often set it up a mountain.

In particular, of course, he chose a mountain to give the Ten Commandments, Mount Sinai. But there are actually other places in the Old Testament also where God speaks up a mountain.

So, even the location here is significant. The three apostles are taken up a mountain for this spiritual experience. There even seems to be some significance in the three companions because Moses took three companions with him when he went up Mount Sinai.

He also took some 70 elders but there were three particularly named. We found this in Exodus 24. And these people were given a limited vision.

[12 : 31] A limited audience, as it were, was given a vision of God's glory. Exodus 24, 10 and 11. And we were even told there that they ate and drank which is perhaps what Peter might have had in mind when he was talking about building these booths.

They should sort of camp there as the Moses companions did. And of course we have the shining, the shining face particularly.

In Exodus 34, 29 to 35, we find that when Moses has been in the presence of the Lord, his face shone. He had to cover it with a veil.

But this was just a reflection of the Lord's glory. We notice in verse 2 it's Jesus' face himself who shines. Jesus is revealed not as a reflection of the glory of the Lord, but as the glory of the Lord itself.

And we get a similar thing if you're familiar with it in Revelation chapter 114, where the Lord, the risen Lord is described as one whose face shone.

[13 : 51] so there's a reference in the shining face to the Moses face shining when he'd been in the presence of the Lord.

And then the cloud. Throughout Exodus particularly, a cloud signifies the presence and glory of the Lord, doesn't it?

Exodus 24, 16 is one example. and the Lord often speaks from the cloud or the cloud is used to lead the people on their journey.

The cloud signifies the presence of the Lord. And what about the words that God speaks? Again, they're all limited, they're all embedded in Old Testament thinking, messianic thinking.

So in the messianic psalm 2, for instance, God says, you have become my son today, I have begotten you. The son is the Messiah, the king in the line of David.

[15 : 02] And of course, as we've looked at recently before, in Deuteronomy chapter 18, 15 to 19, Moses promises a prophet to come.

He says that after him, God will send a prophet, and what does he tell the people? He tells the people that they must listen to him. Exactly the words that God uses here.

He says, my son, listen to him. He's making it clear that this is the prophet that Moses was talking about. What about the, I'm sorry, that's the slide for that, I didn't change it, I apologize.

It's got the references there if you want to write them down. And what about the dramatist personae, the people, the characters in this narrative?

Moses. Moses, of course, was regarded as the founder of the Jewish nation. He was the law giver. he was the one who spoke with God face to face and saw the form of the Lord in Numbers 12, 8.

[16 : 23] But now he speaks with Jesus face to face. Moses was the one who led the people out of slavery and towards the promised land, although he didn't quite get there himself.

But now Jesus has taken on that role. he leads his people out of the slavery of the world and death. Unlike Moses, who actually didn't quite make it to the promised land, Jesus, we were told, has already been to check it out and has returned to take us to himself.

And then there's Elijah. There were a lot of prophets in the Old Testament, of course. Elijah didn't write a book. He might say, why is it not Isaiah? or Jeremiah who wrote books that might have been

representative perhaps of the prophets or Daniel.

But actually there are reasons why Elijah is the prophet who appears here. First of all, he was one of the greatest prophets, of course.

His name means Yahweh is God. And I don't know whether it hadn't struck me until I thought about this recently, but when Elijah faced down the 450 priests of Baal in 1 Kings 18:39, what is it that the people cried at the end of it?

[17:48] The Lord, he is God. There was a quoting Elijah's name. But there's even one even more important reason, I think, why we have Elijah here.

because crucially he was the forerunner prophesied by Malachi. And I think I do need to read out this passage.

Malachi 4, 4-6. You can look it up if you want to. It's just a few verses. I'll read it out. Malachi 4, 4-6 says the following. Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.

So that's where Moses comes into the prophecy. Then Malachi goes on. 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. and those in our Old Testament, the last words of the Old Testament and certainly chronologically the last words of the Old Testament.

[19:14] Elijah will come before the great and terrible day of the law but if you don't listen to him then the land will be struck with a curse. We're even told in this story of the apostles' fear.

And this again is we find in the Old Testament. It's a fear of the presence of the Lord. In Exodus 20 verses 18 to 20 for instance which is after the Ten Commandments are given Moses tells the people not to be afraid.

The same reassurance that's repeated here by Jesus himself. But there is a difference here actually because the presence of the Lord in Exodus 20 was made generally known.

We find it in those verses that people saw something of the glory of the Lord. Here only the apostles at this stage are permitted to see it and they stand as it were for the people because the message was not yet ready.

but the apostles have that fear which is the natural reaction to realizing you stand in the presence of the Lord.

[20:38] Moses had it himself when he saw the burning bush. the church. But the reassurance comes that God is coming not in judgment at this stage but in grace and that if they turn to the Lord they need not fear but rather rejoice in the presence of the Lord.

God is good. But then we have what I guess is the strap line, the punch line of this vision and I'm sure preachers for the last 2000 years have been making this point.

At the end of the vision Moses and Elijah disappear as rapidly as they'd appeared and the apostles see Jesus only.

Moses had established the old covenant but his job was done. Now Jesus would bring in the new covenant. The spirit of Elijah had come as we read in the form of John the Baptist prophet but now John was dead and largely as Malachi had suggested his message had been ignored.

Now there was Jesus only, the only hope. If they don't listen to him then Malachi's curse would come into play for those who rejected Jesus and of course it did as some 40 years later the land was more or less destroyed by the Romans.

[22:28] And yet the role of the Messiah was still not fully understood even by those apostles. We've already read that Peter certainly misunderstood. Even the apostles could not see the necessity for the cross.

How could the general population be expected to? If Jesus revealed that or if the apostles revealed that vision they'd seen of Jesus at that time the pressure to make Jesus king by force would have been almost irresistible.

And so we find the revelation must be kept secret until Jesus' death and resurrection. That's the second time that Jesus has made this point. His full revelation as Messiah could not yet be made public because if he did the people would take it in the wrong way.

So that's the vision. They see Moses and Elijah they see all the accoutrements of glory as they were seen in the Old Testament but then they're left with Jesus only.

Jesus alone. They saw only Jesus we are told. So what are we to make of all this? We could ask what was the significance for the apostles and if we ask that question hopefully it will tell us what was the lesson that we are supposed to see from this, to learn from this.

[24 : 09] And so the apostles had been promised a revelation of Jesus' glory and power in chapter 16, 27 and 28. But what they got was not what they expected.

It was not the kind of glory and power they thought that the Messiah should have, at least not at this stage. It wasn't an insurrection against the Romans.

It wasn't the re-establishment of the law of Moses amongst the people. Malachi had told them to go back to the law.

In fact, on several occasions in the Old Testament, the law had been read and revived. But it turned out the effect was always short-lived. People soon went back to their old ways, or else like the Pharisees, they found new and creative ways to undermine the law.

Because the law in itself was not powerful enough to change people's hearts. And what about Elijah?

[25 : 27] Elijah had faced down and destroyed the priests of Baal. But a few days later, he was running away from the wrath of Queen Jezebel, if you read the story.

Even that great victory that Elijah had was not really enough to turn the hearts of the people back to God. They said the words, the Lord, he is God.

But as soon as they went away, they just forgot it again. So, what was there to be?

Surely now, Malachi's curse would have come into play. And indeed, as I say, it did 40 years later, when the Romans destroyed the land.

But notice that it is not Jesus who brings judgment at this stage. He will do, we're told, in chapter 16, 27, but not at this stage. Because first of all, the new kingdom had to be established.

[26 : 41] If the old kingdom is to be destroyed, then the new kingdom needs to be set up. And if you have a new kingdom, you need a new kind of king, a new kind of law, a new kind of prophet.

Just as when the colonists left Britain to go to America, they wanted to set up a different kind of kingdom there. To some extent, they did. Unfortunately, of course, they just took all the old bad habits with them.

But a new kingdom needs a new kind of king, and a new kind of law, and a new kind of prophet.

And that is what Jesus would bring. And you notice that all this theatrical stuff, the bright clouds and the shining faces and so on, that's all gone.

It's had its day. Glory looks different now. The apostles saw Jesus only.

The greatest revelation of the glory of God, the greatest revelation of the glory of the Son of Man, is what in appearance, at least, with an ordinary Middle Eastern man.

[27 : 59] They saw Jesus only. And in that revelation, the glory of God is shown. And of course, Jesus is reminding us that his way is the way of the cross.

The way to life is to take up the cross. And a man carrying a cross in that society at that time was a dead man walking. A man on his way to execution.

And this message, as Jesus makes it clear, is not just for the apostles, but for anyone and everyone. He said, if anyone will come after me, he must take up his cross and follow me.

Amen. The call is to become a dead man walking, as it were, to invest in the death of Christ, the way of the cross.

And in fact, if you think about it, the whole of Matthew's gospel, the whole New Testament is about Jesus only.

[29 : 18] That's what the message is about. And properly understood, even the Old Testament is not really about Moses or Elijah, important people though they were in the narrative, but about the prophet who was to come, Jesus only.

And so Paul would later write, Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews, they couldn't get their heads around it.

How could their great king, promised king, go the way of the cross? And he didn't make a lot of sense to the Gentiles either. It's foolishness to the Gentiles.

But he goes on to say that those whom Christ called, it is the Christ, the power and the wisdom of God. And the writer to the Hebrews encourages us with similar words.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

[30 : 46] The pioneer, perhaps, is a better translation of that word author, the one who went the way of the cross before us. But if we're going to follow him, that's the way he's going.

And so he says, if any man will follow me, let him take up his cross and follow me. We have to go through the cross, but not of course the death of the cross ourselves.

Rather, we have to invest in the death of Christ. Jesus' way was the way of the cross, and any disciple must take up that cross.

But still, that's not to say that there was no sign. Elijah and Moses had had signs to authenticate their ministry, hadn't they? And there is a sign, and Jesus refers to it here.

He says, 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. Because until that sign is given, the rest of it doesn't make any sense.

[32 : 01] If the way to life is through death, then the resurrection is a logical necessity. You can't ditch the resurrection from the Christian message as if it's some embarrassing fairy tale.

People try to do that and say, well, of course, people are not really raised, people just thought it was as if Jesus had been raised. It makes no sense.

You cannot remove the resurrection from the Christian gospel. It just doesn't make sense. Because if there is no resurrection, then you're better off sticking with Moses, aren't you?

Elijah, they did some good to some extent in this world, they did achieve some things, but ultimately they can't change hearts and they can't bring people to the true promised land.

Their message was powerful, but their message was not enough. Because in the end, it couldn't change the human heart. Only a death and a resurrection. can do that.

[33 : 17] So to quote Paul again, we were therefore buried with him through baptism. That's how it works. We were buried through baptism. It means not that we're literally buried of course, but when we're baptized, we're investing.

We're saying we trust in the death of Christ as the way to go. We were buried with him through baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

The resurrection is the sign. And so these are the questions that this Matthew is asking us here. Are you walking the way of the cross? Are you dead and buried so that you can share in the resurrection life of Jesus?

us? And are you trusting in Jesus only? Do you see Jesus only, not trusting in anything else that you might be tempted to look at?

Of course, there are lots of useful things. Moses and Elijah were very useful. And there are useful things in this world around us. It's useful to study law, to study science, or to study psychology.

[34 : 32] All these things are useful. people, but they can't give us the ultimate answer. They can't walk the way of death for us. They can't lead us to that resurrection because they can't change our hearts.

Jesus only can change our hearts and cause us to be the disciples, to follow him in the way of the cross. Of course, I could give a whole new sermon about what that means, but I'm not going to do that because we're going to first of all sing about Christ alone.