

The light shines in the darkness

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[0 : 00] Now, the scripture reading this morning, which covers that episode that we were just hearing about, is Matthew 17, verses 1-13.

If you're like me, retention is enhanced if the eye gate is engaged, as well as the ear gate, so I hope you'll read along with me. Matthew 17, verses 1-13.

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother and led them up a high mountain by themselves.

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

And Peter said to Jesus, 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.

[1 : 02] He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.

Listen to him. When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, Rise and have no fear.

And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.

And the disciples asked him, Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come? He answered, Elijah does come, and he will restore all things.

But I tell you that Elijah has already come. And they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.

[2 : 13] Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist. This is the word of the Lord. Amen. Good morning, everyone.

My name is Dave. I'm one of the pastors, if I haven't met you before. A kind of cold, but hopefully warm welcome to you. Why don't we pray as we come to God's word?

Let's pray. Lord, coming out of another week, or going into another one as well, I'm assuming that we're all coming from different places, from living in a broken world.

Lord, some of us will just be weighed down with a sense of guilt and failure. Others will just be overwhelmed, not sure what's going on.

Lord, others will be just so in love with something in this world that even as we come to your word, not expecting to get anything out of it.

[3 : 25] Lord, some of us, our sight of Jesus has grown cold. For some of us, we're just feeling shame. Lord, please speak to each one of us.

Send your Holy Spirit to speak through your word so that we might see the Lord Jesus as our life. In his name I pray. Amen. Well, a friend once asked me what my favourite song about heaven was.

And the song that came to my mind was I Know by King's Kaleidoscope. I don't know if you know it. I'll read a bit of the lyrics. I won't sing it to you. I've been given a taste for something that nothing in this world can satisfy.

But I know that a time is coming when I will be in glorious delight. I know I will run through heaven's streets of gold shouting hallelujah, Christ alone.

I know I will dance and sing and bow before the throne. This, yeah, this I know. Oh. Oh. Oh.

[4 : 42] But how do I know? How can you know? Especially when life is just not working out how you hoped for, which I'm assuming that's all of us in this room.

How can you know when the anxious thoughts aren't taken away, no matter how much you pray? How can you know you're going to be in glorious delight one day?

When you gradually lose all things in your older years, how can you know when you're surrounded by that kind of sense of darkness, when you commit the same sin this week as you did last week? How can we know when others who don't follow Jesus seem happier and healthier, when you try and speak Jesus' truth out of love into people's heart, but then the ones you love distance themselves from you because you're trying to do that.

It seems far from glorious. How can we know that one day we're going to be dancing and singing and bowing before the throne? I think this passage we're coming to, what we call the transfiguration, is just one gracious, God-given reason to help us know.

[6 : 12] Someone described this passage as like the whole gospel in a microcosm, so I feel a bit intimidated by that. We can't unpack everything here. There's just so much in here.

But amidst the darkness of living in a sinful world, we are given this glimpse into heaven. I think first, we can have no doubt about who Jesus is.

And second, we see that we can know that suffering is God's appointed pathway to glory. We can have no doubt about who Jesus is. And we can know that this is the pathway to glory.

So let's get into the story. It's really uncommon in the Gospels to find a specific time reference. So six days later in verse 1. So six days after he has been confessed to be the Christ, after he has made plain his plan to suffer and die, and after he has called all who would follow him to die to self and die to the world, we're given this six days later.

These are dark days. There's been wonderful things that have happened in the past three years of his ministry, all the healing and everything that has happened.

[7 : 38] But he's now talking about his death. He's now saying you need to die to self and the world. There's a lot of gloom. These are the last few weeks of his life.

But for a brief moment, we get to look into his nature before he entered this world. For a brief moment, we get to see what Jesus is like this very moment in heaven.

For a brief moment, we get a glimpse of what all people are going to see one day when he returns, when every knee will bow when they see him like this. They will confess he is Lord.

We get this glimpse. You don't need to wait for a dream or a vision by the Holy Spirit to see into heaven if you realise that this is recorded for you.

This is recorded for our sake. So Jesus takes with him Peter, James and John up a high mountain. These three were something of the inner circle of the twelve, but I first wondered why only three?

[8 : 46] Why not the rest of the disciples? But I think a better question is, why did he take anyone with him at all? There's other really significant events that happened to Jesus that no one was with him for, and the Holy Spirit records it for us, like his temptation in the wilderness, or him praying in the Garden of Gethsemane when the disciples are asleep.

Why did he take three with him? I think he took three. The fact that he takes three of the disciples with him suggests that what happens here isn't primarily for his sake.

He didn't need confirmation. It's primarily for their sake and for our sake, reading the Gospel today. There are plenty of people who claim to have had visions of heaven, but the problem with that is Scripture tells us the adversary, Satan can appear as an angel of light.

Can you really trust that, what one person says? Can you even trust your own experience? You've got to test it with a grain of salt, according to Scripture.

But here we have three witnesses. This isn't happening in their minds. Three witnesses are saying, this is what happened.

[10 : 14] This phenomenon happened. The word vision is used in verse 9, but that doesn't mean that this was some out-of-body experience. That word vision can just mean what they saw with their eyes.

Here we can have three eyewitnesses saying, this happened. You can have confidence in this. He was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.

How are you going to make sense of that? Where does that fit in your categories of reality? When we say a lady is, a girl is glowing and radiant, we are not meaning that we're scared that if we keep looking, our retinas are going to be burnt.

We're not meaning that. But they are. I just had a go. Preparing this week, I just had a go. I'm not encouraging this, especially children, but I had a go at staring at the sun for a second.

One second, I was like, no, I'm out. I don't want to go blind. His face shone like the sun. What is that? Where are you going to fit that in your category of Jesus, of reality?

[11 : 49] I think there could be two barriers to knowing what to do with this. I think one barrier is to make a joke of it, like the memes, and people say, like, oh, who does his laundry?

That's a pretty poor joke. Thanks, Matt. But why make a joke about this? I wonder if it's very similar to why we call the top student in our class a nerd.

Like, oh, we try and make fun of them. I think because they're a threat. Because their brilliance shines on our inadequacy, and they're a threat.

So I think if you make a joke about this, really, it's just you're trying to avoid the threat of what is going on here. Can I encourage you? Don't do that.

Just take a look. Take a long, hard look. The second barrier may be simply we don't know the Old Testament imagery that is just packed into this passage.

[13 : 07] And maybe we don't want to know, because it is threatening, but maybe we just don't know. That could be another barrier. Because when the Israelites were set free from Egypt, the Lord travelled with them in a bright cloud, the glory cloud, that looked like a cloud by day, but fire by night.

And this cloud destroyed Egypt's army. When they arrived at Mount Sinai, when this cloud descended on the mountain, it turned into like a volcano, and it was shaking, and no one was to go up that mountain.

If they did, God would break out against them. Even Moses said, let me have a look. And God says, no, you will die. He only saw the back of God, and he came back glowing, his face glowing, which dimmed over time.

Something like the moon reflecting the light. Then we've also got the prophet Elijah. In 1 Kings 19, he had an encounter with God up on Mount Horeb.

He heard powerful phenomena, and heard his voice, and here we are going up a high mountain again with these two men who encountered God.

[14 : 25] Here we have the bright cloud, the glory cloud, that produces terror when you hear his voice. But what's different?

What's different here to Moses and Elijah's day? The divine splendour is now radiating out of a person.

The Apostle Paul met this same blinding light during the middle of the day. He was blinded by it when Jesus showed himself. Psalm 104 says, you are clothed with splendour and majesty, covering yourself with light as with a garment.

This guy bursts any category of angel. He bursts any category of prophet. What we see here is what Hebrews 1 puts in a statement form.

He is the radiance of the glory of God. The exact imprint of his nature. He is not like a Moses and Elijah who point to ultimate reality.

[15 : 43] He is ultimate reality. I found what historian N.T. Wright said, I found it helpful.

How can you live with the terrifying thought that the hurricane has become human, that fire has become flesh, that life, capital L, life itself, became life and walked in our midst?

Christianity either means that or it means nothing. It is either the most devastating disclosure of the deepest reality of the world or it is a sham, a nonsense, a bit of deceitful play acting.

Most of us, unable to cope with saying either of those things, condemn ourselves to live in the shadow world in between. How are you going to make sense of this Jesus?

Why is it so threatening? I think it's threatening because it displaces self or anything else from the centre of your world, of my world. To know him, to live for him is what life is all about.

[17 : 09] He's a threat because he displaces self and the world. I think he's also a threat because it exposes any impurity in us.

And Peter, true to form, puts his foot in his mouth just to demonstrate for us.

But verse 4, he offers to build three tents, three tabernacles can be the word. One for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. And he might be thinking of the Jewish Feast of Booths, which was to remember the wilderness period before getting to the Promised Land.

And so that was, to live in tents was to look forward to the kingdom coming. So his offer to build tents was actually, it wasn't a bad one.

It's not what he said in terms of building tents that he was rebuked for. Mark's Gospel adds an interesting detail.

[18:07] Peter said this because he did not know what to say for they were terrified. They were terrified of the glory that they saw in this Jesus. And do you remember what the tabernacle was for?

What was the temple for? It was so that God could live with his people, but not too close. You had to keep distance from this holy God. Otherwise, he will break out and consume sinful people.

Now, that might sound a bit yuck and offensive that God would, that such brilliance would kill sinful people, but just like staring into the sun.

Like, my physical eyes just can't cope with the brilliance of that. So too spiritually, we were made to be in God's presence.

We were made for that, to be able to handle it. But because of our sinful nature, because of our sin, we just can't cope. The good news is that Jesus has come so that we can cope again, to restore us.

[19:20] So Peter's saying, let's build three tents, three tabernacles. I think what he's saying is, we want to stay and enjoy this, but we need protection. We need a bit of a barrier here.

There's too much glory for us to handle. And if they felt unworthy seeing Jesus' face shine like the sun, they must have been terrified when that cloud came towards them.

Like, they're with Moses and Elijah. They would know what, I assume they knew who was coming. And then they hear God's voice and they fell on their faces, filled with terror.

Stop speaking, Peter. You think you're being respectful, but you're uttering blasphemy to put Jesus alongside Moses and Elijah.

This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him. And then they only saw Jesus. His error was to try and reduce Jesus to lawgiver or prophet.

[20:37] No. They were servants. He is the son of God. They experienced the glory of God.

He is the glory of God. So how did these finite, sinful disciples survive this encounter with God? I think we get a little glimpse of it with Jesus coming and touching and restoring them and offering them a word of peace.

I think the opening to John's gospel helps us understand from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.

For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. A better mediator than Moses is here. A better mediator.

[21:44] One who in his own being combines God and man. A better mediator than the law. Because when the law comes close to you, it exposes all the ways that I've broken the law.

It condemns. But this mediator, when he comes close, we're terrified of him getting close. But what we find, if we let him, is he says, have no fear.

Rise, have no fear. You're in the presence of God. Have no fear. How is that possible? You are accepted.

It's possible because of what his mission is. The father's soul delights in his son and that includes his son's mission so that you and I can have no fear in the presence of God.

And that brings us to verses 9 to 13, which I'm not sure I fully understand it. I'm going to admit that. I don't know.

[22:57] I think overall, we can understand what's going on. But they're complex verses. These disciples have no doubt of who Jesus is.

But what is clear, they can't comprehend yet how God's pathway to glory includes suffering. So on the way back down the mountain, the lights have gone off, so to speak.

They're entering the gloom again. Jesus again talks about his death. Now how much they understood about Elijah, I'm not sure. But Jesus answers the deeper question.

Even if they weren't asking the deep question, he answers the question, at least they should have been asking. Because the last thing we read in the Old Testament is a promise that Elijah will come and restore all things.

He will turn the hearts back. Whereas the first Elijah who was sent, even though he was an awesome prophet, Israel didn't turn from idolatry to serve God again.

[24:05] Now there was some, there was a remnant who did, but overall it was a failure. But the last promise we get in the Old Testament is when Elijah comes, he will restore all things.

So the question is, how, if all Israel are restored back to God, how could then people cause God's king to suffer?

If they're worshipping God, how could they reject his king? I think, stepping back, they're kind of asking, how can success and suffering go together?

They seem mutually exclusive. So, trying to paraphrase Jesus' answer, yes, Elijah comes first, John the Baptist.

And yes, his mission was a success. People did repent. But, just like the prophets of old, God's will was for his mission not to avoid suffering and rejection, his mission was accomplished in the midst of, even because of suffering and rejection.

[25 : 16] So you should think of my mission. Don't think success and suffering can't go together. It is God's appointed pathway to glory.

If we compare how people in this world see suffering to success to what God does, we have totally different two points of view.

In the play, Jesus Christ Superstar, apparently, I haven't seen it, but I've heard this is the case. I watched the little clip on YouTube for this scene and when Jesus comes to Pilate, Pilate says these words, who is this broken man cluttering up my hallways.

So this is Jesus Christ. I'm really quite surprised. You look so small. Not a king at all. It's powerful. You look so small. You're not a king at all. I've got the power to crucify. That's how the world sees suffering and success.

[26 : 37] But when the father looks at his son choosing to go to the cross, he is pleased with his son. It's not in spite of suffering.

It's because he chose to suffer that his mission is his success. I think the big point we should take away from this is we can be sure that God's appointed pathway to glory is through suffering.

It's always been the case for the prophets before. Our life depends on the fact that Jesus died for us and his call for us to follow him and take up our cross, we should be sure it really is the pathway to glory.

So how should we respond to what we've seen in this event?

I'm going to suggest three ways. First, we should marvel at his self-humiliation for your sake. Like for a brief moment, we see who he is, like his nature, his face shone like the sun.

[28 : 01] Not only does he become an ordinary human being, not only does he associate with nobodies and sinful people, he became so small, not a king at all.

The light was extinguished for our sake, so that he could say to us, rise and have no fear. I've dealt with your sin, I've dealt with your impurity.

You don't have to be afraid of God. You can have full access to him and have joy in his presence, no fear, all because this blazing sun emptied himself.

even though we once loved the darkness, this son of God gave it all up so that he could unite us to himself.

This is something I've been blown away with. We're told elsewhere in scripture, we're united to Jesus closer than marriage, closer than one body. this is the Jesus we're united to.

[29 : 17] I can't quite get my head around that. He lost it all to bring us that far into glory. He's already told us in Matthew 13, the parable of the wheat and the chaff, is it?

That sounds right. The end of that parable is when the kingdom comes, the righteous will shine like the sun. That's incredible.

We're going to share in this glory. So the first thing is we need to marvel at his self humiliation for our sake.

And if we marvel at him, if we see that he is ultimate reality, he is life, capital L life, then we must listen to him to find life, to obey him.

Listen also means obey. To obey him is always choosing life. You never have to choose between life and following Jesus.

[30 : 25] They're the same choice. In comparison to his light, everything else is just like tinsel in Christmas.

We think it's gold. It's not. Look at his light. Now, it doesn't feel that way, does it? It doesn't feel that way when we just don't want to let go of what we know Jesus is calling us to.

It doesn't feel like that. But looking at him, we should trust that choosing to listen to him is always choosing life. And so I suggest invite him in.

Where don't you want him to speak into? Where's the last place you would want him to speak into? Why don't you go command me?

Because I know what you say is life. So we should marvel at his self-humiliation.

[31 : 23] We should listen to him because it's always choosing the path to glory. It's always choosing life. And finally, I think we ought to trust that when we follow him, no matter how dark it is, glory is at work.

Not giving up the struggle with our sins, even with sickness and anxious thoughts aren't taken away. When the relational cost of following Jesus is real and high, it will feel very dark. work, but we can be sure it's the pathway to glory. Glory is at work. In us, but also more than just in us.

If he is our life, if he is our joy, then we want others to see his life through us. And some of the best opportunities to do that is when we're in the darkness.

And people say, what is the hope that you have? So amidst the darkness, here in this passage, we've been given this glimpse of heaven.

[32 : 39] I've been given a taste for something that nothing in this world can satisfy. But I know, I know that a time is coming when I will be in glorious delight.

let's marvel at his self-humiliation. Let's listen to him because it's always choosing life and let's trust him that as painful as it is, glory is at work in us and through us to bring others into the life of knowing him.

Let's pray. Lord, in the splendour of how you've shown yourself in your word today, I pray particularly for those who are really afraid that their sin is too great and too constant to really have no fear in your presence.

I pray that your word would pierce through that and reassure that you really have paid it all and that we can call on you as father.

Lord, give that deep assurance so that we can let go of what we cling to so much in this world so that others might see the light that we have through us.

[34 : 03] I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.