

**THE VISION SUMMIT –
STAGE 6. ATTAINING THE SUMMIT**

Matthew 17:1-20
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PREFACE

There is a biblical event found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Matthew 17:1–8, Mark 9:2–8, Luke 9:28–36), and alluded to in John (1:14) that we refer to as the Transfiguration of Jesus. Today we will be using Matthew’s account.

SCRIPTURE

Six days later Jesus took Peter and the two brothers, James and John, and led them up a high mountain to be alone. ²As the men watched, Jesus’ appearance was transformed so that his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light. ³Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared and began talking with Jesus. ⁴Peter blurted out, “Lord, it’s wonderful for us to be here! If you want, I’ll make three shelters as memorials—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁵But even as he spoke, a bright cloud came over them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy. Listen to him.” ⁶The disciples were terrified and fell face down on the ground. ⁷Then Jesus came over and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” ⁸And when they looked, they saw only Jesus. ⁹As they went back down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” ¹⁰Then his disciples asked him, “Why do the teachers of religious law insist that Elijah must return before the Messiah comes?” ¹¹Jesus replied, “Elijah is indeed coming first to get everything ready for the Messiah. ¹²But I tell you, Elijah has already come, but he wasn’t recognized, and they chose to abuse him. And in the same way they will also make the Son of Man suffer.” ¹³Then the disciples realized he was talking about John the Baptist.

¹⁴At the foot of the mountain, a large crowd was waiting for them. A man came and knelt before Jesus and said, ¹⁵“Lord, have mercy on my son. He has seizures and suffers terribly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. ¹⁶So I brought him to your disciples, but they couldn’t heal him.” ¹⁷Jesus replied, “You faithless and corrupt people! How long must I be with you? How long must I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.” ¹⁸Then Jesus rebuked the demon in the boy, and it left him. From that moment the boy was well. ¹⁹Afterward the disciples asked Jesus privately, “Why couldn’t we

cast out that demon?”²⁰“You don’t have enough faith,” Jesus told them. “I tell you the truth, if you had faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it would move. Nothing would be impossible” (Matthew 17:1-20 NLT).

INTRODUCTION

Mountains are mentioned frequently in the Bible because they dotted the landscape where the stories in the Bible take place. As a result, mountains and hills are mentioned more than 500 times in Scripture. Climbing up to a mountaintop can also be symbolic of the life of faith both for individuals and the community. It seems like the primary (positive) reason for going to the top was to see what was not previously seen. On Mount Nebo Moses got to see the promised land (Deut 34). On Mount Tabor Peter, James, and John got to see the transfigured Jesus (Mt 17). These visions had a profound impact on the journey that followed.

Throughout this series we have been using modern mountain climbing as an analogy for the mission of the church. Mountain climbing is carried out in stages. Each week we have been looking at a different stage. The sixth stage is attaining the summit. But reaching the summit is not the end of the journey. After all, when you reach the summit you’re only half way there! You still have to go back down the mountain. Many an expedition has failed because they did not adequately prepare for what happens after you reach the peak.

Previously I have mentioned Nepalese mountaineer Tenzing Norgay and New Zealander mountaineer Edmund Hillary as being the first confirmed climbers to reach the summit of Mount Everest. They were part of an expedition of more than 400 people led by John Hunt. When the time came, only two people would be chosen to make the final ascent to the top. Interestingly enough, Norgay and Hillary were not the ones chosen. Instead, two other climbers were selected: Tom Bourdillon and Charles Evans. However, they did not succeed and had to return early because they did not have enough oxygen to make it to the peak and return alive. Hunt then directed Hillary and Tenzing to attempt the summit and the rest is history.

You would think that being the first person to climb to the top of Mount Everest would be the crowning achievement of one’s life. But this is not the way Edmund Hillary thought. Instead, he made this remark:

“I believe that of all the things I have done, exciting though many of them have been, there's no doubt in my mind that the most worthwhile have been the establishing of schools and hospitals. . .”

Reaching a summit can be very exciting, but for Hillary what really mattered in life was what you did when you came back down. For a church to reach a summit can be exciting – and in this extended metaphor that we have been using that means we see where God wants us to go. But the summit is not the destination. In order to reach that we need to go back down and continue on in the journey of faith.

1. THE GLORIOUS GLIMPSE ON THE MOUNTAINTOP

We see this principle at work in our Scripture reading. The glorious transformation of the appearance of Christ can give us a reassuring glimpse of Jesus' heavenly splendor and our future hope. Those who were first attracted to Jesus during his three plus years of ministry believed that he was the hope of Israel. But they thought of that hope in materialistic terms. There were many rabbinical writers who spoke of the future salvation of Israel as the "new exodus." In the first exodus, you may recall, God through Moses put down the power of Egypt and liberated the Israelites and sent them on a journey to the Promised Land. In the new exodus, God through his Messiah would put down the enemies of Israel and set his people free. So when people saw Jesus as the hope of Israel what they wanted was for Jesus to raise an army, overthrow the Romans, set the people free and bring wealth, power and prestige to the nation.

However, when Jesus spoke about his destiny he never quite mentioned these things. In fact, one day he told them that he was going to be rejected by the religious authorities in Jerusalem and be killed. Furthermore, if they wanted to come after him, each of them would also have to take up the cross.

Please try to understand how shocking this statement was to the original hearers. For many people today the cross is nothing more than a type of jewelry to wear around the neck. But two thousand years ago it was a one way ticket to an unpleasant destination. A condemned criminal was forced to carry his cross to the place of execution. The cross was an instrument of painful and humiliating death. To "take the cross" was to carry the horizontal beam (the *patibulum*) of the cross out to the site of execution, usually past a jeering mob. To carry a cross meant you were going to die.

Jesus said:

"If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me" (Mt 16:24 NLT).

What kind of hope is that?

Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and went up the top of a mountain to pray. There on the mountain his appearance changed and his clothes became blinding white. At

once, two men were there talking with him. They turned out to be Moses and Elijah.

However, later in this passage, Jesus talks about Elijah in a secondary sense, and this may cause some confusion. What he is saying is that John the Baptist came in the spirit and power of Elijah to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. The disciples could not grasp that the Messiah had to suffer so Jesus reminds them that Elijah himself suffered at the hands of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 19:1-10), and John the Baptist suffered and died at the hands of Herod and Herodias (see Mark 6:14-29). Jesus is shattering the illusion that the Messiah would come with worldly power and easy victory.

Anyway, going back to the real Moses and Elijah, we know from the parallel account in Luke that “they talked over his exodus, the one Jesus was about to complete in Jerusalem” (Luke 9:29-31 MSG). Yes, they spoke of his exodus. That is a more exact translation than “departure.” By exodus they meant Jesus’ death on a cross. Ironic, is it not, the descendants of Moses thought of the new exodus in terms of worldly power but Moses himself spoke of the new exodus in terms of divine sacrifice? The Messiah would lay down his life for us. This is the basis of our hope.

In what or in whom do you place your hope? Luck? Happy thoughts? Religious sentiment? Political leaders? Money? Good looks? Health? Sooner or later all of these things will let you down.

People can hope in the strangest things. I remember a time when Jim Stafford was on the Merv Griffin Show and Griffin asked him, “Jim, what is your religion?” Stafford answered, “Frisbeeterian.” Griffin said, “Presbyterian?” Stafford said, “No. Frisbeeterian.” Griffin asked, “What is a Frisbeeterian?” Stafford replied, “We believe in Frisbees and when you die its like you sail up on a flat roof and never come down.” Frisbeeterian.

The Christian hope is a real hope. First of all, this means it is a biblical hope. Moses was the great law-giver of the people of Israel; Elijah was the greatest of the prophets. Their appearance with Jesus was an affirmation of his destiny. Whatever we believe about our future must be consistent with what is taught in Scripture.

Secondly, to say that the Christian hope is a real hope is to say that it is a hope that applies to the real world. God does not promise to remove all pain from our lives but to see us through the trials of life.

Thirdly, to say that the Christian hope is a real hope is to say that the outcome is assured. Putting your trust in Jesus Christ is not the same as believing Elvis lives! It is a hope based on credible evidence and the clear promise of God. It is a hope in a real Savior who

lived, died and lives again.

Peter and the others were rather excited to see Moses and Elijah, especially considering that both were supposed to have been dead for centuries. Peter then suggests they erect shelters to commemorate the occasion. This may be an allusion to Israel's tabernacles in the wilderness, by which the Israelites recognized God's presence among them in Moses' day. But this was not Moses' day.

In fact, Peter's suggestion is a foolish idea and this is because you cannot really capture a special experience and expect it to be preserved for all future gatherings. If you focus on a particular feeling or experience you once had in worship, two things will be true: you will not recapture the feeling and you will not worship. Special experiences are wonderful when they happen but they are not the norm and they must not become an end in themselves. Mountaintop experiences are rare. Most of life is spent in the valleys.

But this was a foolish idea for another reason. Three shelters implied that Moses and Elijah and Jesus were all equals. This is not true. Moses and Elijah, who represent Scripture, are but witnesses to Christ. The New Testament is clear and unequivocal: "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (see Phil 2:10,11).

2. THE GUTTY REALITY DOWN IN THE VALLEY

Jesus and the three disciples came back down the mountain and re-entered the messy and confusing existence we call "normal" life. In this case "normal" life meant an anxious crowd, a worried parent, a troubled child, and nine clueless disciples who had not gone up the mountain.

A man came to Jesus pleading for help for his son:

"Lord, have mercy on my son. He has seizures and suffers terribly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. So I brought him to your disciples, but they couldn't heal him" (17:16).

Jesus' first response is to be critical of the nine disciples and the crowd in general:

"You faithless and corrupt people!"

In order to understand why Jesus reacted this way we have to understand what was the common practice in those days for dealing with demonic influence. Fear of the demonic was part and parcel of the milieu of the 1st century. Some Jewish teachers of the time presented themselves as exorcists, that is, they claimed they could drive out evil spirits

from persons possessed by them. It was a 4-step process.

First, they would try incantations – or elaborate chants. If that did not work, they tried spells which were lengthy verbal formulas that had to be said in the right tone and in the right order. If that did not work, they used charms which were physical objects said to have magical powers. If that did not work, they tried trepanning. Trepanning involved drilling a hole into the person's skull. The theory was that the evil spirit would escape through the hole much like air from a punctured tire. Remember, this was ages before anesthesia, modern surgical tools and antiseptic procedures so it may be hard for us to appreciate the full horror of this. We know from archaeological evidence that trepanning was not just a theory but was actually practiced. Try to imagine the kind of fear that gripped people that they were willing to do such things to others, or more to the point, would allow others to do such things to them!

Along comes Jesus of Nazareth. He does not use incantations. He does not use spells. He does not use charms. And he does not drill holes in people's heads. He addresses the evil spirit in the person directly and says, in effect, "You there! Shut up! And get your hell out of here!" And it would do so!

No one had ever seen anything like that before! They didn't even know it was possible. Is it any wonder they said:

"What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (See Mk 1:27).

Jesus had such authority because he spoke and acted with divine authority. The words and actions of Jesus were the words and actions of God. He was critical of the nine disciples and the crowd because they had faith in the wrong things. They were expecting that a superstitious ritual, that had never before worked, would bring healing to this boy. What was needed is faith in the living God as revealed and displayed in Jesus Christ. And with hyperbolic emphasis that is consistent with Aramaic, the teaching language of Jesus, he declares, "With such faith you don't have to climb a mountain – you can move it!"

On the mountaintop Peter, James, and John got to see who Jesus really is – the fulfillment of prophecy, the Lord of creation, and Savior of the world. Back down in the valley they got to see what living for Jesus in a messy and confusing world really means – putting aside superstition and empty ritual, trusting in Jesus the embodiment of the love and power of God, and selflessly bringing real hope to a world in need.

CONCLUSION

Raphael was an Italian Renaissance painter who is considered one of the greatest and most

popular artists of all time. His works often depicted biblical or ecclesiastical themes. When he was half way through his painting of the Transfiguration he suddenly broke down in tears and was overcome by a great sense of unworthiness and despair. He never finished the painting and not long afterwards he died in Rome on his 37th birthday (April 6, 1520). They carried the half finished painting in his funeral procession almost as a symbol of the incompleteness of his life.

But there is even more tragedy to the story. According to art historian Giorgio Vasari (painter, architect and writer on art, Arezzo 1511- Florence 1574), Raphael was not a Christian believer and did not even think there was a God. He did not paint what he felt was true but what he thought would be acceptable to the church and the public.

It makes me wonder what exactly happened to him when he was painting the Transfiguration. The Transfiguration on the mountaintop is a brief glimpse into the true nature and glory of Jesus Christ. Such a glimpse would mean despair for those who reject God. But for those who trust in God such a glimpse would mean the reassurance that Jesus Christ is truly the Savior of the world and once we know he is the Savior, this changes forever how we journey through life.

God has a plan for us on this journey. And he promises to be with us as we work the plan. So I am going to ask you a question and if you know the answer and believe the answer, say it aloud and with conviction.

Q: Why can we as a congregation have confidence in our future?

A: God is not done with us yet!