

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 17:1 - 17:8, 17:14 - 17:21



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this message, Steve Gregg delves into the significance of Matthew 17:1-8 and 17:14-21, where Jesus momentarily changed his appearance in front of his disciples and was accompanied by Moses and Elijah. Gregg explains how this event shows Jesus as the spokesman of God and the fulfillment of the Old Testament law and prophets. He also notes the importance of listening to and following the teachings of Jesus, rather than solely relying on the Old Testament law. Overall, Gregg's study provides valuable insights into the symbolic meaning of the transfiguration of Jesus.

### Transcript

In the opening verses of Matthew 17, we have a story from the life of Jesus that is significant enough to have caused it to be included in three of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and also to be alluded to by Peter in his second epistle in 1 Peter 1. Its significance is not perhaps immediately apparent, that is, what it means or why it is significant, but a study of it I think will yield some valuable information and insight. We are going to look at that story right now, beginning at Matthew 17 in verse 1. While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them. And suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

Hear him. And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. But Jesus came and touched them and said, Arise, and do not be afraid.

And they lifted up their eyes, and they saw no one but Jesus only. Now, here is a very interesting story. Jesus changed his whole appearance momentarily before his disciples.

But what does it mean? The meaning may simply be that the disciples got a chance to see the glory of Jesus in a way that the rest of us will never see it until he returns. In fact, it is possible that this was to encourage them, because not too much earlier, Jesus had fed a multitude and then had offended the multitude by his statements about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. And really, most of the multitudes abandoned Jesus as a result of that.

And the disciples may well have been very discouraged about that. After all, they saw

themselves as perhaps the cabinet under the king. And that, you know, when he was riding high in the popularity scales, that would make them feel pretty important too.

But now that the kingdom seemed to be decimated by Jesus having offended all these people, and there were very few people following now, the disciples might have been discouraged. And remember, Jesus had just before this predicted for the first time to his disciples that he would die. And that had bothered them.

That had bothered Peter especially. And Peter had rebuked the Lord and said, No, this won't happen to you, Lord. And then Peter was rebuked himself when Jesus said, Get behind me, Satan, you're an offense to me.

So, I mean, here we have a situation where the disciples are no doubt perplexed. First, they've seen the huge crowds that were following Jesus disperse and no longer following him. Then they hear Jesus predicting his own death.

And they must think this is turning into a rather gloomy sort of a fellowship here. And yet, they need some encouragement. And Jesus takes three of them, the leaders, Peter, James, and John, up on a mountain and they get to see a side of Jesus that no one had ever seen.

And that was, no doubts, a bit of a glimpse of the glory that he had before when he was with his father before he came to earth. Remember, Jesus was the embodiment of God himself. And before coming to earth, Jesus existed in the form of God, according to Philippians chapter 2. But he was veiled in human flesh so that most people, when they saw him, just saw an ordinary human being and nothing more.

That is what he appeared to be. On this occasion, the disciples, however, got a glimpse behind that veil and got to see the glory of Jesus radiating in a visible form. So, this might have simply been a case where Jesus was encouraging the disciples by a revelation of himself.

But, that would not explain the significance of Moses and Elijah coming there. And of their conversation. And of Peter's reaction.

And of the final turnout where Moses and Elijah vanished and only Jesus was left and the Father said, This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased to hear him. What is the significance of all of that? Well, I'd like to suggest to you some possibilities here. Let me first of all talk about the details of the story.

And then we will talk about what I consider to be its principal significance. It says, After six days, Jesus took Peter, James, and John, his brother, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. How long did this occur after the events of the previous chapter? Matthew says it was after six days.

Mark tells us the same. Some people are a bit confused though when they come to the parallel statement in Luke chapter 9. Because instead of saying the same thing that Matthew and Mark say, Luke says, About eight days later. And basically all three of these are given the time that has lapsed from the prediction at the end of Matthew 16.

That some of you standing here will not taste death before you see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. And the events of the transfiguration. Matthew says it was after six days.

Mark says the same, but Luke says it was about eight days. Now, what can we make of this discrepancy? Well, first of all, it is not really a discrepancy at all. Because to say after six days would suggest that this happened on the seventh day, would it not? I mean, you've had six days and then after those six days is the seventh day.

So to say after six days this happened, and by that you mean it happened on the seventh day. That's one set of data. Matthew and Mark gave us that.

Now Luke tells us it was about eight days. He actually used the word about eight days. In other words, it was not exactly eight days.

He doesn't know the exact number of days, but it was somewhere around eight days. Of course, it could be nine days or seven days, and it would still be about eight days. It would be as close to it as you could be without being exactly eight days.

So if, let us say, the transfiguration happened seven days after Jesus made his recorded prediction, then that would be agreeable with all the accounts. It would be about eight days, and it would also be after six days. So the accounts are actually not inaccurate.

They actually give information that is quite harmonious with each other. But what's interesting about it is that Luke uses a different way of marking the time than Matthew and Mark, which indicates that Luke was acting very independently of them. You know, some people think that Luke and Matthew relied upon Mark's gospel for their information, but that does not appear to be true at all.

If Luke was writing and using as his source Mark, then he would no doubt give the same information Mark gave. Mark said after six days. Luke, however, instead of just copying that out, says about eight days later, which is a very different way of saying something similar.

And it is so different, in fact, that it does not appear that he was influenced at all by Mark in his information. It sounds like Luke had independent sources other than Mark. And basically what it shows is the independence of the writers from each other.

It's true that Mark and Matthew use exactly the same term, but Luke does not. And that shows that although they all tell the same story and give really the same information,

they do so as independent witnesses. And that's the value of having the four gospels, is that we have confirmation from independent witnesses about things.

Now, all the gospels agree in telling us that there were three disciples that Jesus took up on the mountain. They were Peter, James, and John. These men were among the twelve who were called apostles, but they were what some would call the inner circle of the apostles.

Not all of the apostles had equal privileges with Jesus in terms of access to him. Jesus took these same three men, Peter, James, and John, on certain situations, in certain places where he couldn't take them all or did not choose to take them all. This is one of the cases, but we've previously read a case where they were involved at the house of Jairus, whose daughter had recently died.

It says that Jesus took Peter, James, and John and took them in to view the dead body, and they got to witness him raising her from the dead. The other nine apostles had to wait outside. And now the same thing.

The other nine apostles are waiting at the foot of the mountain while Jesus takes these three men up to the top. Likewise, we find later on that when Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, he took these same three men into the garden with him and left the other nine at the garden gate. And he asked these three men to pray with him.

It's clear that Jesus had a, well, he showed what could have been called preferential treatment toward these three men over the others. Did this cause jealousy among them? It may well have. We know that there was a time when James and John, two of these men, actually argued among themselves as to, well, actually several of the disciples argued as to who was greatest.

And James and John actually asked to have the highest positions in the kingdom at the right and left hand of Jesus. We are told that the other disciples were angry at the two men for making that suggestion. So there probably was some jealousy that occurred.

But that didn't prevent Jesus from nonetheless giving special privileges to certain men for whatever reasons he had for doing so. As it turns out in the book of Acts, these three men did become the prominent spokesmen for the church more than the other apostles. And that may be why Jesus, foreseeing this, would give them special experiences of insight and revelation that the others did not have.

In any case, these three men, Peter, James and John, go up the hill with Jesus. And while there, Jesus' appearance changes. He takes on a form of one glowing.

He still has the human form, but his face is shining like the sun. His clothing is white and glistening. He is glorious.

He is radiant. And that's not all they see. They see also, of course, two men from the past, from the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah.

And they are there talking with Jesus. Now, Matthew doesn't tell us what they were talking about, but Luke does. In Luke chapter 9, we are told that they were talking to Jesus about the exodus which he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem.

It was speaking about his death. It's interesting, though, that it's referred to as the Exodus in the Greek New Testament, because Moses was the leader of the Jews in the first exodus. And Jesus, of course, accomplished a second exodus, a second deliverance of his people, this time from sin.

Moses led the people out of Egypt. Jesus leads his people out of the bondage of sin. But here's Moses, who was the leader in the first exodus, and Elijah, and they are talking to Jesus about the exodus that Jesus is about to accomplish in Jerusalem.

Now, Moses and Elijah, as representatives of the Old Testament, were a pretty good selection, too, because Moses was associated with the law. He was the man who gave Israel the law. And Elijah was regarded by the Jews as the prince of the prophets.

And to the Jews, the law and the prophets represented the whole Old Testament and the authority of God's word in the Old Testament time. Moses and Elijah, therefore, representing the law and the prophets, were probably a representative of the whole authority of the law and the prophets in the Old Testament. And here they are, as it were, giving an endorsement to Jesus.

They are there talking about the significance of his ministry and what he's about to accomplish. They are there while Jesus is glorified. And we don't read that they were glorified, but they might have been.

The point is that we have here an endorsement of Jesus by the leaders of the Old Testament community in Revelation. If somebody wished to be a loyal Jew and loyal to the law and the prophets of the Old Testament, they could hardly reject Jesus because Moses and Elijah gave their endorsement to Jesus on this occasion. Now, a question has arisen sometimes among Christians as to whether it was okay for Jesus to meet with Moses and Elijah since the Old Testament law actually forbids talking with the dead or seances and conjuring up the dead and so forth.

And communication with the dead is all forbidden in the Old Testament. And some say, well, isn't Jesus here involved in doing something like that? Now, a couple of things I would say that are a little different. One is that Jesus did not conjure these men up.

Jesus did not go to a seance. Jesus did not, as near as we can tell, make any effort to contact them. If Moses and Elijah came to Jesus, they were sent directly by God without Jesus initiating it at all.

And that would be very different than a person going to a medium and trying to conjure up somebody. Another thing I would observe is that it's possible that all of this was simply a vision that occurred and that the literal men, Moses and Elijah, did not come back from their graves to meet with Jesus, but that there was a vision of Moses and Elijah meeting with Jesus that the disciples had. My reason for suggesting this possibility is because as they were coming down the hill, Jesus said to his disciples, tell this vision to no one.

That's Matthew 17, 9. When the disciples were coming down from having seen all this, Jesus said to them, tell this vision to no one, which suggests that maybe this was all just a vision, that it wasn't really that Jesus was really in communication with dead men come back, but the disciples experienced all this as a vision that they experienced together and that God gave them. That would then be more of a symbolic visual experience on the same par with a dream that might be given, which has more symbolic value than literal occurrence if it was just a vision. For example, Daniel had visions of four beasts coming out of the sea, a lion and a bear and a leopard and a ferocious beast with ten horns and so forth.

That was a symbolic vision. There were not literal animals coming out of the sea that were happening at that time, but he was having a visionary experience. The disciples may have been having a visionary experience here, which would mean that Jesus was not literally talking to Moses and Elijah at all, but that God was giving them a vision that would communicate a lesson, namely that Moses and Elijah, the law and the prophets, were giving their endorsement of Jesus as the Messiah of whom they had spoken.

You see, Jesus came as a fulfillment of the law and the prophets. And there was more to it than that, because Peter's initial reaction was, Lord, man, this is a good place to be. I've never seen Moses and Elijah before.

Now, let me just say this here. How did the disciples know that it was Moses and Elijah? They had never seen the men in their lifetime. Moses had died 1,400 years earlier, and Elijah had gone up to heaven about 700 years earlier.

None of these disciples had ever seen Moses or Elijah. How would they recognize them? How would they know these were them? Well, once again, that could have been part of the vision. It could have been revealed to them in a vision that this was Moses and Elijah, or alternatively, Moses, Elijah, and Jesus may have spoken to each other by name and called each other by name in their conversation as they were talking among themselves.

One way or the other, the disciples picked up who it was. It was with Jesus, and Peter said, Let's build three tabernacles. Now, when we think of the tabernacles, we think of the tabernacle in the Old Testament.

But the word tabernacle just means tent or booth. And what he means is, Let's build

three shelters. It's getting late, and we don't want to end this encounter.

Why don't we take it up again tomorrow? If you want, I'll build three tabernacles. Moses can be in one, and Elijah can be in one, and Jesus can be in one. Now, what it sounds like Peter is saying is, Listen, let's prolong this experience.

It's a great experience, and since it's getting late, why don't we just kind of carry it over tomorrow? Why don't we kind of hold it over through the commercial break and pick it up again next time? And I'll build the tabernacles if you'd like, so you guys can have places to stay. Now, the Bible tells us in another gospel that Peter said this because he didn't know what to say. He was overwhelmed, speechless as it were, but it's a problem when you're speechless, but you still speak.

And sometimes you end up saying the wrong thing. And Peter apparently missed the whole point in suggesting this, because when Peter had said it, rather than getting a verbal response from Jesus, he had a visual response. A cloud came down and covered up Moses and Elijah, and all that the disciples could see after that was Jesus himself.

That is, Moses and Elijah faded out of the picture, and Jesus remained. And a voice from heaven spoke and said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I'm well pleased. Hear him.

Now, when God said, Hear him, he means hearken to Jesus, acknowledge what Jesus says, and follow his teaching and his authority. And of course, in the context of this whole experience, it would seem to mean in contrast to Moses and Elijah. Peter was placing Moses and Elijah on the same level with Jesus, saying, Listen, we'll have a tent for each of you.

I'll make one for Moses, one for Elijah, one for Jesus. And probably he thought that he was saying something very flattering to Jesus to put him on the same level as these great men of the Old Testament. However, it was no flattery to Jesus.

In fact, it was entirely inappropriate, because Jesus had come to replace these men. They had come to give their endorsement, but their endorsement was more or less like the passing on of a baton. You see, the disciples had been Jews and were Jews all their lives.

They were part of the Jewish faith and followers of the Old Testament, of the law and the prophets. They had been rightly submitted to the law of the Old Testament and the authority of Moses and Elijah, as it were. However, Moses and Elijah, who had been the authorities in the lives of observant Jews for many hundreds of years, those men were now passing the torch, passing on their mantle, as it were, to Jesus.

And now Jesus would be the one that they should hear. Instead of hearing Moses and Elijah, it was time to hear this man, Jesus, who has now come to replace them. And that is why Moses and Elijah faded out of the picture and only Jesus remained.

It was all very symbolic, I believe. And I think the lesson is this, that the authority of the law and the prophets was valid and binding until Jesus came. But Jesus now is the one who has all authority in heaven and earth.

And we are to hear him from now on. When Jesus told us to make disciples, he didn't say, go and teach them to observe all things that Moses said. He said, go and teach them to observe all things that I have commanded you.

There are people, Christians today, who aren't quite sure what to do about the Old Testament law. And they do think, well, you know, you have to be a Christian, but you also have to keep the law. And so they're like Peter saying, well, we'll keep Jesus and Moses and Elijah here.

We'll keep them all on the same basis here. We'll build a tent for each of them and we'll just kind of live with all three. But the whole idea here is that Moses and Elijah didn't have a permanent position.

They had a position of authority that lasted for hundreds of years. But the time came where they were to pass along their mantle, pass along the authority, or surrender their authority by an endorsement of another, the Messiah, who is Jesus. And when Jesus was come, it was for the disciples to realize that it was no longer Moses and Elijah, no longer the law and the prophets that would have authority in their life.

It would be Jesus. God said of him, this is my son, hear him. Of course, they had rightfully heard Moses and Elijah for all their lives.

But now they were to hear Jesus instead. And so as I understand it, the symbolic meaning of this vision of the transfiguration was not only to give the disciples a glimpse of the great glory that Jesus shared with his father before he came to the earth, but also to show the relationship of Jesus to the earlier spokesman of God, the prophets and the lawgiver, Moses. And that is what happened.

The lawgiver and the principal representative of the prophets came. They passed along their mantle. They endorsed Jesus.

They commended him for what he was about to do. And then they faded out of the picture. After that, the father's announcement is we are to hear Jesus from now on.

And that is the Christian's responsibility, not to follow what Moses taught, but to follow what Jesus teaches. And that is something that many Christians have never quite figured out. We'll talk more about this next time.