

## Week 19: *Matthew 17:1–13*

### Hook



**Main Point: Jesus is not just a king; He is the King, the God of the Universe in the flesh.**

What are the most significant historic events in your lifetime? This question was posed to members of different generations in a 2016 Pew Research survey. See results below.

Millennials (born 1981–1996)

1. September 11
2. Obama election
3. Iraq/Afghanistan wars

Generation X (born 1965–1980)

1. September 11
2. Obama election
3. Fall of Berlin Wall/end of Cold War

Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964)

1. September 11
2. JFK assassination
3. Vietnam War

Silent Generation (born 1928–1945)<sup>i</sup>

1. September 11
2. WWII
3. JFK assassination<sup>ii</sup>

**Q: How would you have answered the question, “What are the most significant historic events in your lifetime?”**

**Q: How did these events shape who you are as a person?**

**Q: What have been some of the most significant, personal and spiritual moments in your life?**

**Transition:** In today’s lesson, three disciples will be witness to a never-before-seen event – the Transfiguration.

## **Week 19: Matthew 17:1–13**

**Main Point: Jesus is not just a king; He is the King, the God of the Universe in the flesh.**

**Matthew 17:1–3 (also look back at 16:28) [Read]**

**Talking Point 1:** Jesus is not just a prophet or teacher or human king; He is God Himself.

**Q: Why do you think Jesus would take Peter, James and John up a mountain for this experience?**

**Q: How would seeing the glory of Jesus have changed the way they saw Him? How would it have affected their commitment to His mission?**

This scene happens on a mountain, like many other significant events in Matthew – the temptations, the Sermon on the Mount, the final discourse on the Mount of Olives, and the Great Commission. In Acts, the Ascension happens on a mountain. Also, Jesus often went to the mountains to pray and be alone with God.

In the Old Testament, God's people often met Him on a mountain. Abraham encountered God on a mountain when he almost sacrificed Isaac (Genesis 22). God appeared to Moses in the burning bush on Mount Horeb, "the mountain of God" (Exodus 3). God appeared to Elijah on Mount Carmel when he challenged the 450 prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18). Elijah also encountered God on the same mountain after running from Ahab and Jezebel (the "still, small voice" account, 1 Kings 19). When Moses went to the top of Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, the people saw thunder and lightning and a thick cloud over the mountain and heard a very loud trumpet blast. The mountain was covered in smoke, and the whole mountain trembled violently. The sound grew louder and louder as Moses spoke with God (Exodus 19). It fits that Jesus would be transfigured on a mountain. This makes Christ's Transfiguration also a *theophany*, a visible manifestation of God, which means that Jesus is God Himself.<sup>iii</sup>

Three times in Scripture, we see Jesus take Peter, James and John with Him for a special experience the rest of the disciples don't get – when He raised Jairus's daughter from the dead (Mark 5:37), when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32–35), and here at the Transfiguration. Why were these three men in His inner circle? Peter, James and John were not men of polish, prestige and influence. They lacked formal education and rhetorical training (Acts 4:13). And they all had significant character flaws as well. Peter was erratic and impulsive, slow to listen and quick to react. He regularly misread situations and misunderstood the Lord's purpose, requiring seemingly constant rebuke and correction (Matthew 14:31; 16:22–23; 26:33–35; John 13:6–8; 18:10–11; et al.). James and John, due to their fiery temperaments,

earned the nickname “sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17). They were impatient, intolerant, and quick to judge (Luke 9:54), not to mention prideful and self-seeking (Mark 10:35–44).

Yet it was precisely their “unworthiness” that made them such great examples of the power of God in them. The book of Acts says that when the religious leaders “saw the boldness of Peter and John and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). Because they had no credentials of their own, when they spoke with such boldness and power, it brought glory to God – not to themselves – just as Jesus spoke on this subject in the Sermon on the Mount when He said to let our light shine before others (Matthew 5:16).

At the end of the last chapter, Jesus told them He would suffer and die, but that one day He would come back again in glory and judge the world. That chapter ends with His saying, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (16:28). Some scholars think Jesus was talking about the future second coming at the end of the time and “taste death” metaphorically refers to the second death, not a physical death.<sup>iv</sup> Other scholars think He meant the kingdom coming at Pentecost<sup>v</sup> or Christ’s Resurrection<sup>vi</sup>, but considering that the Transfiguration is the very next thing that happens in Matthew, He most likely was referring to this event.

The Transfiguration is a foretaste of the glory of Jesus when He will come to judge the earth. The term “the Son of Man” (16:28) refers to this heavenly being that “comes with the clouds of heaven” (Daniel 7:13). The story clearly emphasizes His glory. “His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light” (v. 2). This would have been reminiscent of when Moses encountered the glory of God, and his face then shone with that glory (Exodus 34:29–35). But Jesus’ glory doesn’t just *reflect* God’s glory; it is His *own* glory. By the very definition of the word *transfigure* (“change form”), we know He didn’t just shine; his whole body (form) was changed. Moses and Elijah appeared with Him, but only Jesus shone. Jesus is not only greater than Solomon and the temple (Matthew 12:6, 42), He is greater than Moses and Elijah as well.<sup>vii</sup> As the writer of Hebrews said, Jesus is not just a human being, He is “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Hebrews 1:3).

As Jesus was transfigured into His heavenly glory, so we will all one day be transformed into heavenly bodies. “For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:35–54). This will happen to us physically in the future, completed kingdom of God. But even now, in His kingdom here on earth, we are transfigured on a spiritual level. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are not just an improved version of our old selves; we are made a completely new creation. The transfiguration is a physical manifestation of what happens in our hearts spiritually. “When one turns to the Lord, ... we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another.... from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:16–18). The Transfiguration gave the disciples a glimpse of the magnificent glory of Christ, of His divinity. It

also reminds us that we will one day be transformed in body, and how we are being daily transformed in spirit into His image more and more by His Holy Spirit.

**Q: How would seeing the glory of Jesus change the way you relate to Him?**

**Q: How would knowing this is the same divine being who will one day come in judgment affect your commitment to Him and His mission and the way you live your life?**

**Q: If we lived in a way that reflected Jesus' image to the world, how would that change the world around us?**

**Matthew 17:4–8 [Read]**

**Talking Point 2:** God calls us to listen and obey Jesus' words the same as we would His law.

**Q: Why would Peter offer to build them three tents?**

**Q: Why are Jesus' words equivalent to the Word of God?**

Peter's offer to build three literal tents – for Jesus, Moses and Elijah – may have been simply to provide shelter while they were on the mountain, hoping they would stay there for a while. But the Greek word here is the same word used for “tabernacle,” so he most likely was talking about building a place of worship,<sup>viii</sup> which is a proper response to seeing this kind of overwhelming glory. When Ezekiel saw God's glory on the throne, he fell on his face in worship (Ezekiel 1:28). Isaiah immediately confessed his own uncleanness compared to God (Isaiah 6:5). Seeing the glory of Christ would have elicited the same kind of response.

The very presence of Moses and Elijah pointed to Christ's being much, much more important than they, and God's voice soon said the same. Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus because they represent the Law and the Prophets<sup>ix</sup> (the term Jesus often used to refer to the entirety of the Old Testament) and because they signal the coming of the kingdom of Messiah. Deuteronomy taught that a prophet such as Moses would return (Deuteronomy 18:15–19), and the very last prophet in the Old Testament, Malachi, taught that Elijah would return to usher in the kingdom of the Messiah (Malachi 4:4–5).<sup>x</sup> But these texts point to Moses and Elijah only as heralds of the Messiah. As such, they point ahead to Him, but He is greater than either of them. As Peter had just confessed in the last chapter, Jesus is greater than Elijah or any other prophets; He is the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:16). God Himself spoke from a bright cloud over the mountain saying the same thing – “This is My beloved Son” (17:5).

This bright cloud is reminiscent of the cloud of God's glory that the people followed through the wilderness and that appeared over the tabernacle and the temple – the “Shekinah” (Exodus 13; 33; 2 Chronicles 5).<sup>xi</sup> The tabernacle was the home of God's Spirit, where His Spirit dwelled in

the Holy of Holies. But when Jesus walked this earth, He was the tabernacle where God's Spirit dwelled – "God-made flesh." "The Word became flesh and dwelt (literally 'tabernacled') among us, and we have seen his glory" (John 1:14). Though Peter had not built a physical tabernacle, the tabernacle of Jesus' body was there and God's Shekinah – glory cloud – appeared above Him. After Jesus died, rose again, and sent His Spirit at Pentecost, we became the tabernacles, the temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). The Holy Spirit now dwells in us.

When God spoke, He used the same words He had said at Jesus' baptism – "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," but He added, "listen to Him," just as Deuteronomy had said about the "prophet like Moses" who would come (Deuteronomy 18:15). Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets – God's Word in the Old Testament. But God tells them to listen to Jesus' words. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, He did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, He came to fulfill them. His teachings did not contradict God's Word; His teachings explained what they had really meant all along and revealed how the people had misinterpreted them (Matthew 5–7). The last line of the Sermon on the Mount says the people were amazed by Jesus' teaching "for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes" (Matthew 7:29). Christ taught with authority because He was the Son of God. We must listen to His words because He was God Himself in the flesh. Those who hear Jesus' words and put them into practice are those who will enter the kingdom, because His commands are God's commands, "the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21–28).

At the glory of Jesus, Peter wanted to build a tabernacle, but at the sound of God's voice, the disciples fell on their faces in fear. Not just awe and worship, actual fear – "they were terrified" (v. 7). This is a typical response when people in Scripture saw an angel or any manifestation of God; angels and God always responded with "have no fear" or "fear not." When human beings see God, the natural response is fear. He is holy, perfect and completely other than us. He is almighty, a more commanding presence than we could ever imagine. Yet He tells us not to fear. He wanted to be in relationship with us, so He made a way, first through the Old Testament sacrificial system, then permanently through the sacrifice of Jesus (Hebrews 9–10). He wants us to fear Him but not be afraid of Him. To give Him the awe and reverence He is due, but also be confident in His love for us, to know that we can approach His throne with confidence (Hebrews 4:16).

Jesus showed this great love of God for us in His response to the disciples. He not only told them to *rise* and have no fear, to be not afraid to stand in His presence, but He also came over to them and touched them. Jesus didn't have to touch them; He could have done anything with just a word or a thought. But as He so often did, Jesus showed compassion, care and relationship by reaching out, coming *to* them, meeting them where they were, and touching them.

**Q: What would it look like for you to obey the teachings of Jesus – actually put them into practice – in *all* aspects and areas of your life? What changes would you need to make?**

**Q: Why is it significant that Jesus came to them and touched them? How can we show the same kind of care and compassion when we reach out to those who are far from God?**

**Q: If God’s Spirit now dwells in us, how can we reflect God’s glory to the world? In what ways is your life bringing glory to God? In what ways is your life not reflecting His image?**

**Matthew 17:9–13 [Read]**

**Talking Point 3:** Jesus was not the Messiah they were expecting.

**Q: Why would Jesus not want anyone else to know about the Transfiguration?**

**Q: How is John the Baptist like Elijah?**

As we said, both Moses and Elijah would have pointed to the coming of the Messiah. The people of Jesus’ day, and Jews today, are specifically waiting for Elijah to return to usher in the coming of the Messiah. The very last prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi, announced that God would send “my messenger to prepare the way before me” (Malachi 3:1). Then, at the very end of the book, he says, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes” (Malachi 4:5). Each year at the Passover meal, even today, the fifth and final cup of wine poured is left untouched in honor of Elijah, who will arrive one day to herald the advent of the Messiah. During the Seder dinner, Bible verses are read while the door is opened to welcome Elijah, who will resolve all controversial questions about the Law when he comes.

The disciples knew Elijah must come before the Messiah (v. 10), but Jesus told them Elijah had already come, referring to John the Baptist (vv. 11–13). He had already told them all of this back in Matthew 11, quoting Malachi 3, “My messenger . . .” and ending with “[John the Baptist] is Elijah who is to come” (Matthew 11:7–15). These three disciples had been there, and they were some of the few who had “ears to hear” (11:15), yet they still seemed slow in putting it all together. Jesus said John the Baptist was the Elijah spoken of in Malachi, yet they had just seen the actual prophet Elijah on the mountain with Moses and Jesus. Both Elijahs pointed to Jesus as the Messiah, the son of the living God. Not to mention that God the Father had just called Him that!

Yet Jesus told them not to tell anyone about it. *Yet*. Not until He had been raised from the dead. The term “Messianic Secret” was coined in 1901 by William Wrede, referring to the tendency Jesus had, especially in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, to tell His disciples to keep His messiahship a secret. Many scholars believe He did this because He was so different from the people’s expectation of what the Messiah would be.<sup>xii</sup>

Different sects of Judaism interpreted Old Testament prophecies differently. The Pharisees and the Zealots believed the Messiah would deliver people from the heavy-handed rule of the Romans in a political day of reckoning. Others thought the Messiah would be an apocalyptic force of cataclysmic proportions who would destroy the world to usher in a utopian paradise ruled by God Himself. Others believed Messiah would come as king or priest. The Essenes even believed there would be two Messiahs, one to fulfill each role. They all believed the Messiah would usher in the Day of the Lord, the final Judgment Day of punishment for the wicked, and vindication for the righteous.<sup>xiii</sup>

Jesus' First Coming did not bring the Day of the Lord, but His Second Coming will. This two-part coming of the kingdom of God is called "inaugurated eschatology." Jesus' First Coming ushered in the spiritual kingdom of God, defeating sin and death on the Cross. But the complete physical kingdom of God, when He will conquer all His enemies, rid the world of evil, and reign on the throne in the new heavens and new earth, is still yet to come. So the kingdom of God is both here "already" and also "not yet" here in all its fullness.<sup>xiv</sup>

If the disciples started going around and telling everyone what they had seen on the Mount of Transfiguration, the crowds would certainly be expecting the final Day of Judgment, the Day of the Lord to be coming. They would have expected the physical kingdom of God in which Jesus defeated all their enemies and sat on the throne of Israel. This wasn't what Jesus came to do, and their telling everyone about the Transfiguration might ruin His mission – to die on the Cross and rise again. Once He had risen, they could tell everyone, but for now, this experience was just for the three of them, His inner circle, to give them the confidence they needed to believe in Him, follow Him, and continue His mission to start His Church after He was gone.

Christ's mission was not to ride into Jerusalem on a war horse and overthrow the Romans. He would ride in on a donkey and go to the Cross. He was completely different from their idea of what Messiah would be, a victorious king. He was the upside-down king of an upside-down kingdom. When they cheered for Him on Palm Sunday, they were cheering for a king who would save them from the Romans, but He wanted to save them from so much more. They were looking for political freedom, but He wanted to give them spiritual freedom. When Jesus wept over Jerusalem after the Triumphal Entry, He said they didn't understand the things that made for true peace. They did not recognize the time of God's coming to them (Luke 19:41–44). Just as they had not recognized John the Baptist as Elijah when he came, they did not recognize Jesus as Messiah (v. 12).

They were looking for peace in all the wrong places. They were looking for a military king who would ride through the city, victorious after battle. Jesus was fighting a whole different kind of battle. He would be victorious, but it wouldn't look like military victory. It would look like death. They expected peace to come through military victory. With Jesus, it would come through sacrifice (v. 12). And it wouldn't be political peace; it would be spiritual peace, eternal peace. Jesus wanted them to keep it a secret until after He had risen, after He had fought His battle and accomplished His mission.



**Q: In what ways do we have wrong expectations of who Jesus is, why He came, and what He does for us? In what specific ways do we focus on earthly victories when Jesus wants to fight our spiritual battles?**

**Q: Does the American Church live as if sacrifice is a mark of a life with Jesus? Why or why not? In what ways do we misunderstand what “victory” in Christ really looks like?**

**Q: How can we live a life of humility and sacrifice, following in the footsteps of Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist, the other prophets and apostles and Jesus Himself?**

## **Week 19: Matthew 17:1–13**

### **Took**

**Main Point: Jesus is not just a king, He is the King, the God of the Universe in the flesh.**

The average NFL fan spends 46 hours per month thinking, talking or reading about his or her favorite team, according to 2019 research. Ticketmaster® conducted a survey of 2,000 NFL fans to gather their information. These fans certainly prioritized game day with 35 percent saying they would drop dinner plans, 25 percent would be willing to skip a birthday party, and 20 percent shared they would stand up a date if it meant they could watch their team play.<sup>xv</sup> Imagine if believers took sharing the glory of Jesus with others as seriously as we take sports. Consider what Jesus has done in your life, the *incredible* things you've seen Him do! Isn't that worth sharing?

**Teacher – take a moment to share the 3 Circles method of evangelism on the board and provide your LifeGroup time to practice.<sup>xvi</sup>**

### **CHALLENGES**

**THINK:** Does my life look like the lives of the disciples, the prophets or Jesus Himself? Do I live a life of humility and sacrifice, serving others, and giving my all for the mission of the kingdom of God? If not, in what ways does my life need to change to look like Jesus?

**PRAY:** Spend some time in praise and worship of Christ in all His glory. Use the words of Colossians 1:15–20, which was one of the first Christian hymns, focusing on the supremacy and divinity of Christ. Focus on His glory, His love and His sacrifice in giving up all His glory to come to earth and sacrifice Himself for us. You could also use the words of Philippians 2:6–8, another ancient Christian hymn, or your own words.

**ACT:** We have the opportunity to share His glory with the world! Choose someone who is far from God this week and talk to that person about Jesus. You don't have to share the four points of the Gospel or convert him/her or anything; simply tell someone how amazing Jesus is and why you love Him.

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- <sup>i</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>
- <sup>ii</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/12/15/americans-name-the-10-most-significant-historic-events-of-their-lifetimes/>
- <sup>iii</sup> N. T Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part II* (London, UK: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2002).
- <sup>iv</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28, Word Biblical Commentary 33B* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1995).
- <sup>v</sup> James D. G. Dunn, “Spirit and Kingdom” *The Expository Times*, 82 (1970).
- <sup>vi</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Message of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1972).
- <sup>vii</sup> W. D. Davies, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).
- <sup>viii</sup> W. D. Davies, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).
- <sup>ix</sup> Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1952).
- <sup>x</sup> C. F. D. Moule, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).
- <sup>xi</sup> W. D. Davies, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).
- <sup>xii</sup> William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret* (Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1971).
- <sup>xiii</sup> Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York, NY: Random House, 2013).
- <sup>xiv</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1993).
- <sup>xv</sup> <https://nypost.com/2019/01/17/nfl-fans-spend-46-hours-a-month-obsessed-with-their-team/>
- <sup>xvi</sup> <https://lifeonmissionbook.com/conversation-guide>