

The Transfiguration - Where do you find the real Jesus?

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[0 : 00] Well, tonight I'd like us to turn to look together at what we read in Luke chapter 9 and focus in particular on the transfiguration of Jesus. We can read again from verse 28.

Now, about eight days after these sayings, he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray and as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered and his clothing became dazzling white. These verses that we read are recording for us that remarkable moment when Jesus took Peter, James and John up on the mountain and there before them, his appearance changed, he was transfigured. It's a remarkable event and it has a huge amount to teach us and as I think I often say, although we'll be looking at this together tonight, we will only just be scratching the surface of an amazing topic. Now, over the years, in many different contexts, people have asked the question, where do you find the real Jesus?

And often that kind of question has arisen out of the view that what the Bible tells us is not necessarily completely true. So some people might look at the Bible and they think, well, maybe some of that's true, but some of it probably isn't. So people will say, well, the real Jesus was just a good teacher. He wasn't the son of God at all. Others might say, the real Jesus didn't do miracles. He was just a good example of moral conduct.

Others go even further and say, Jesus didn't die on the cross. And I think there are some people who, for some bizarre reason, have even said Jesus didn't exist at all.

Some people thinking along these lines have argued that the historical Jesus is not the same as the Jesus who is recorded for us in the Bible. And you might have come across these views because they can work their way into popular culture in books and in films and in all sorts of things like that. And so it's something that we have to deal with, the argument that what the Bible says about Jesus is not necessarily the real story. And the reality is, is that there are many, many reasons why that whole mindset and these suggestions that there's a contrast between the historical Jesus and the Jesus of the Bible, these suggestions are unsound for many, many reasons.

[2 : 48] And perhaps most important of all is the fact that the New Testament makes constant reference to eyewitness testimony. The New Testament is full of what people saw for themselves.

And not only that, when many of the documents of the New Testament were written, people, the people who were the eyewitnesses were still alive. And so any inaccuracies could easily have been corrected. For example, you could have had somebody who was there when Jesus fed 5,000 people reading the account of it in the Gospel of Luke and that person might have said, that didn't happen. I was there. But these corrections didn't take place because the witnesses and the record, the witness, what the witnesses saw and what the Bible records coincides.

And it's something that we see again and again and again. Have you ever noticed that the major incidents in the New Testament all have multiple witnesses? So the baptism of Jesus, the miracles of Jesus, the transfiguration here, the healings, the betrayal, the trial, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension, all of these were in front of multiple witnesses.

It's all open. It's all publicly rareifiable. It's not a record of secret activities that took place behind closed doors. And that's a really important point because the Bible is not asking you to believe unverifiable secrets. The Bible is asking you to listen to eyewitness testimony.

And that's a really, really important thing to remember because often today people say, well, I don't believe the Bible, but if I saw a miracle for myself, I would believe the Bible or I would believe in God. I'm sure you've heard people say it. Well, if I saw a miracle, then I would believe.

[5 : 02] Well, just imagine that for a moment. Imagine that actually happened. So imagine you were all sitting here saying, if we saw a miracle, then we would believe the Bible. And then right then, in front of you, a miracle happened. That would be remarkable, wouldn't it? It would be amazing.

And you would say, well, I didn't believe before, but I definitely believe now. Then imagine that it's 50 years from now. And you meet somebody who says, well, I I'm not going to believe the Bible because I've never seen a miracle. You would say, I saw one.

I was there. I saw it. And you would expect the person who's doubting to believe your testimony and to listen to you. And so if we saw the miracle, we would expect the generations after us to listen to our testimony because we had seen it and we will be the one recording it.

And of course, the truth is, that's exactly what's happened because God has done the miracle. It's called the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And the New Testament is the record of the of the eyewitness testimony of that miracle and of the many other remarkable events that took place in the days of Jesus Christ. It is here before us as a historical record so that you would know that it's true as well. And so the Bible is a collection of eyewitness testimony. And all of that is reinforced by the fact that even Jesus's enemies acknowledged that he did miracles and that he claimed to be the Son of God. That's why they killed him. They didn't kill him for being a good teacher. They didn't kill him for being a good example. He was crucified because he claimed to be the Son of God. So don't ever be intimidated by the argument that says the Jesus of history and the Jesus of the Bible aren't the same. It's a load of nonsense because the New Testament is a thoroughly reliable collection of multiple eyewitness testimonies.

But what about that question? Where do you find the real Jesus? It's a really, really interesting question. It's a really important question. You could always, you could frame it differently. You could say if you want to know who Jesus really is, where do you go? And there's probably many answers that we could give to that question. If you were all here tonight hearing about Jesus for the first time and thinking, well, who is this Jesus and where do I find out who Jesus really is? Where do you go for the answer to that question? Well, tonight I want to suggest that if you want to find out who Jesus really is, then you need to go to the top of the Mount of Transfiguration.

[8 : 19] Now, that probably straight away sounds a bit strange because when you read about what happened at the Transfiguration, it all seems a bit unreal, doesn't it? Because Jesus' appearance changes.

Moses and Elijah appear. This cloud comes down and they hear our voice from heaven. None of that is normal. But the astonishing truth is that all of these things are giving us a glimpse into what is really true about Jesus, what's really true about the Bible and about humanity and about salvation. In other words, if we want to know the real truth about Jesus and about life and about the gospel, this is where we need to go to the Mount of Transfiguration.

And there's a lot that we could say. I want us tonight to just highlight six things very briefly. So let's go. Number one, here on the Mount of Transfiguration is where we see who Jesus really is. You'll notice I've highlighted the phrase there eight days after. When we're introduced to this narrative, we are told that it's eight days after something that's just happened.

And that phrase is referring back to the great confession that Peter made in verse 20. Remember Jesus had asked the question, who do men say that I am? Peter replied and said, you. No, Jesus had rather asked, who do you say that I am? And Peter replied, you are the Christ of God.

This is now eight days after that. Now, we don't know much about what's happened in those eight days. But I want you to imagine that you were there and you bumped into Jesus and his disciples during those eight days. And if you had done that, what would you have seen? Well, you would have seen a normal looking man named Jesus and you'd have seen a group of normal looking people with him.

[10 : 28] Back in Isaiah 53, we read a prophecy about Jesus that says that there's nothing remarkable about the way he looks. And the followers of Jesus, the disciples, if anything, they would have looked perhaps weak and tired and perplexed. You could have walked past that group and not really noticed anything different about them. And that, of course, is part of what's involved in Jesus becoming a human. His body was a normal human body. His appearance was a normal human appearance. And for most of his life, he lived and worked a normal human life. But the truth is, although Jesus looked perfectly normal, if you'd walked past him in those eight days, the reality is that he is utterly unique. And in taking a human body, there's a sense in which Jesus had to come down to a lower level. And he did not hold on to the status that he truly had.

That means that if you walked past him during those eight days or at any other time, whilst he was here on earth, you would have thought to yourself, well, there's a normal man, but in reality, you would not have seen the whole truth. In other words, you would not have seen who Jesus really is. But if you had gone up this mountain with Peter and James and John, then you would have seen the truth. Because as we read up on that mountain, Jesus, his face changes and his clothing became dazzling white. And there's this remarkable emphasis on extraordinary brightness and dazzling whiteness. There's this picture of stunning glory radiating from Jesus.

For a moment at the top of that mountain, the astounding glory of God was visible in the person of Jesus Christ. Now that should make perfect sense to us for two reasons. Firstly, because Jesus is truly God, he is the Word made flesh, he is God himself dwelling among us. But secondly, Jesus is also truly human in the sense that he is the perfect human. And what's the great goal of humanity? To bear the image of God. And so here on the Mount of Transfiguration, we see who Jesus really is. He is God himself within this normal looking man dwells the astounding glory of God himself. And he is the perfect man bearing the image of God so that he is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature. Now, remember, we said that phrase eight days after it connects this incident with the confession that Peter made in verse 20. Peter said, you are the

Christ of God. Here on the mountain, Peter and James and John are seeing what that really means. Jesus is God himself within him lies dazzling glory, spotless purity and astounding splendour.

That's who Jesus really is. Not just a normal carpenter walking along the wilderness of Judea. He is God himself. And I'm fairly sure that's part of the reason why John could say the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory. Surely he was thinking about the Mount of Transfiguration when he wrote that glory as the only son from the Father full of grace and truth. So when you think of Jesus of his life here on earth, yes, remember him living and walking and talking among normal people in a normal way. But at the same time, always remember the Mount of Transfiguration because that is where we see who Jesus really is. Number two, here we see what the Old Testament was really saying because alongside this dazzling transformation of Jesus' appearance, the other remarkable thing we see in this incident is the appearance of Moses and Elijah and Elijah. Behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure. Now this is fascinating. Why would Moses and Elijah appear? What are we being told by this incident? Well, again, we can only look at it briefly. And I just want to highlight the fact that Moses and Elijah are two of the key figures from the Old Testament era. So Moses was the great leader at the time of the Exodus. He was the man through whom God led Egypt out of slavery and he was the one through whom God gave his law to the people. Elijah was the great prophet who called the people of Israel back to God and back to God's law after they had abandoned him.

[16 : 11] In Elijah's time, the nation had turned away from God and abandoned the law that Moses had given and Elijah's role was to call them back. So if you look back at the Old Testament, these are two of the greatest figures. Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the prophet.

And yet here we find them talking to Jesus. And at a very simple level, I would say that that's telling us that Moses, Elijah and Jesus are friends. Now, what do I mean by that? Well, what I mean is that Jesus has not come in conflict or in contradiction to what Elijah and Moses stand for. Jesus has not come to abandon what they fought for in the Old Testament. He's not come to replace or correct or contradict the Old Testament. He has come to fulfil it.

And the fact that Moses and Elijah are here talking to Jesus is showing us that all the great words and works of the Old Testament figures are pointing forward to their fulfilment in the coming of Jesus Christ. You could almost imagine Peter standing there and going up to Moses and Elijah and saying to them, do you know Jesus? And their reply would be, of course we do. He's the one we've been waiting for. He's the one who's coming we have been looking forward to. And so these three men stand on the top of the Mount of Transfiguration as a powerful demonstration of how the whole Bible fits together. The whole of the Old Testament, the law through Moses, the prophets represented by Elijah, they are all pointing towards the coming of Jesus. It is in him that the law and the prophets find their fulfilment. But there's an important point that's highlighted in these verses at the same time. There's a very clear, if you look closely, there's a very clear emphasis that Jesus is superior to these two great figures of the Old Testament. In verse 32 we read that when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. It's Jesus who the glory belongs to. And when Peter suggests building a shelter for all three, it implies that perhaps he sees them as three equals, one tent for the three of these because they're all three great figures. But the emphasis is very clear that that Peter's suggestion is wholly inappropriate.

And then when the voice comes from heaven, there's no mention of Elijah or Moses. The focus is entirely on Jesus. It's all pointing towards the fact that the Old Testament finds its fulfilment in Jesus Christ. That's what the Old Testament is really about and that's something that we want to always remember when we read or sing from the words of the Old Testament. Number three, here we see what Jesus has really come to do. In verse 31 we read that Jesus and Elijah and Moses were talking about a particular topic. Behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Now, it's a really, really interesting word that's used here. Does anybody know the Greek word that's used here in this verse? It's the word Exodus. It says they appeared in glory and they spoke of his Exodus. Now, that's a really, really interesting word. It immediately points us backwards, doesn't it, to that great act of salvation performed in the Old Testament when God rescued his people out of slavery in Egypt. But at the very same time, we are being pointed forwards because it says this Exodus is about to be accomplished in Jerusalem. So, Moses, Elijah and Jesus are talking about the fact that in the coming days, Jesus is going to go to Jerusalem and there he will accomplish a great Exodus. What does that mean? Well, at one level, it's speaking about the death of Jesus because in dying, he will depart from this world. But at the same time, it is speaking about the rescue of God's people because that's what the Exodus was in the Old Testament. It was a rescue and that is exactly what the cross is going to accomplish. In fact, the Exodus from

[21 : 46] Egypt in the Old Testament is just the shadow of the real Exodus, the real rescue, where God provides us with salvation and deliverance from our slavery to sin through the cross. The reason they're talking about it is because that is what Jesus has really come to do. And again, we're seeing a connection between the Mount of Transfiguration and the confession that Peter had made eight days earlier. After that confession in verse 22, Jesus told his disciples that he was going to suffer, that he was going to be killed. So Peter makes this great confession, you are the Christ, the Son of God. And from that moment on, Jesus starts to explain to them, yes, and the whole reason I've come is to die on the cross. And when Peter heard that first, he was horrified. You read the parallel passage in Mark and Matthew, Peter takes Jesus aside and tries to rebuke him saying that'll never happen to you. But Jesus says no. Jesus never entertained the thought that the cross could be avoided because that's the whole reason he's come. And that's being emphasised here on the Mount of

Transfiguration. When Jesus speaks with Moses and Elijah, these two great figures from the Old Testament, they're not trying to tell Jesus that his death won't happen. They do the very opposite.

They openly talk about his departure because they know that that's the real reason why Jesus has come.

So Jesus didn't come to be a good teacher. He didn't come simply as a good example. He didn't even come to point people towards God. He came for an exodus. He came to rescue us from sin by dying on the cross and rising again. That's what Jesus really came to do. Number four, here on the Mount of Transfiguration is where we see what heaven and earth really need. The fact that Moses and Elijah appear on this mountain is fascinating, not just because they're talking about the exodus and because they were great Old Testament figures, but also because here we're getting kind of a glimpse into the whole interface between heaven and earth. Because you read about Moses and Elijah, you think, where did they come from? Why are they here? What happens to people in the Old Testament when they die? How does all that work? These versions are giving us a great glimpse into that whole realm. And it's important to note that there's different views about this. And some people are of the view that in the Old Testament, when people died, they went to what's referred to as

Shetl. You often see that word, S-H-E-O-L, Shetl in the Old Testament, which people regard as like a realm of the dead, even as a realm of hell. And so people suggest that when the people in the Old Testament died, they died and they went into this realm where they were stuck until Jesus came. And the argument is, is that Jesus, when he died on the cross, descends into hell and rescues them from that realm. Some people are of that view. I'm not. I don't agree with that view. I don't think that that's the correct understanding. And I think that passages like this highlight for us that that is not the case. I think that in the Old Testament, when the people of God died, yes, their bodies went to the grave. That's what I think Shetl refers to, to the grave. I don't think it refers to hell. I think it refers to the grave. But their souls went to be with God in heaven.

[26 : 05] However, in that period before the coming of Jesus, I think, and I'm not necessarily able to sort of completely prove this, but I'm just giving you my own opinion. I think that these souls in heaven were still looking forward to the day when Jesus would come and die on the cross.

Now, as I said, I can't necessarily prove that. And there's always going to be an element of mystery about that. But I think that's what the Bible is revealing to us. Because here you have Moses and Elijah who have been taken to heaven. Their souls have dwelt in heaven since the day they died. But they are still looking forward to what Jesus is going to accomplish on the cross.

Because they know that that is what they depend on. They know that's where their full salvation is going to be accomplished so that for them to have full salvation, body and soul, they depend on Jesus fulfilling his work on the cross. In other words, it's not just the people on earth who were looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. It was also the souls in heaven.

Both heaven and earth were looking forward and longing for the day when the power of sin was going to be broken, when victory over death would be won and when the kingdom of God would be established with Jesus on the throne of heaven. Because that is what heaven and earth needs.

And I think this is proved by the fact that think back to when Jesus was born. What did heaven do? Heaven filled the sky with angels and proclaimed good news and rejoiced because the moment that heaven and earth has been waiting for has finally come. And that's why Moses and Elijah are looking forward to the cross talking about what Jesus is going to accomplish. Because it is through that cross that both heaven and earth are going to be renewed and restored and our full salvation is going to be accomplished. And I think this is fascinating because it reminds us that it shows us that that the Bible is not just concerned with saving the world. We often think the Bible is just talking about saving the world, but I think the real truth has been shown to us on the mount of transfiguration.

[28 : 48] Both heaven, both earth and heaven are waiting in anticipation for the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross. And the great point been highlighted in all of this is that every single person, whether it's from the days of the Old Testament to the era of the New Testament, right up to the last days today, every single person needs Jesus. Moses needs Jesus. Elijah needs Jesus just as much as you and I need Jesus. It is all totally centered on the cross.

And that is why Jesus came down from this mountain. Now just think about that for a moment.

Jesus went up that mountain, here we get a glimpse of who Jesus is, here we get a glimpse of the glory that he really has. This is the realm where Jesus really belongs. Jesus belongs in the realm where his clothes are dazzling white and his face and appearance is absolutely radiant. He belongs in that glorious stunning splendor. That's where he belongs. And he went there at the top of the mount of transfiguration, but he came back down. And the reason that he came down is because humanity desperately needs him to go to the cross. And that was why we read all the way through to verse 51, because what did Jesus do after this great moment? You think of that, he had that stunning moment at the mount of transfiguration. And if that was me, whenever something great happens in your life, you tend to look back at it, don't you? You look back to the great moments, you think that that was brilliant and you look back and you look back and you think, wow, that was amazing. Did Jesus do that? No, he didn't. He came down from the cross and what did he do? He set his face for Jerusalem.

He said, I'm going to that cross, because these people need me to die for them. On the mount of transfiguration, we see what heaven and earth really need. Number five, here we see what humanity is really like.

So on this mount on top, you've got this wonderful record of the dazzling splendour of Jesus. You've got the remarkable appearance of Moses and Elijah. You've got the whole Bible coming together. You see heaven and earth looking forward to the cross and then in amongst all of that, you see three weak, tired, pathetic disciples who don't really know what to say or what to do.

[32 : 12] Peter made an attempt to speak. He said, let's make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah, not knowing what he said. And here we are being reminded of what humanity is really like. Here you have Peter, James and John. They don't know what to say and they don't know what to do.

So on the mount of transfiguration, you've got the glory of Jesus alongside the weakness of humanity. And we maybe look at Peter and James and John and you think, you know, you can think critically of them, but would we have done any better? Of course not. Standing there, they must have been utterly overwhelmed. Standing in the presence of God, they must have felt like dust.

And if you remember from the Old Testament, Isaiah had exactly the same experience. He saw the throne room of heaven and he said, woe is me, for I am lost. And we are being reminded that before God, we are nothing. We have no words, no worthiness, no claim on him, no right to come anywhere near him.

We seem just so tiny and like nothing before him. And for Peter, James and John, this must have been the most humbling experience of their lives. And that's what humanity is really like. We are nothing before God. We are really helpless. And so you see these frail, weak people and they remind us of humanity that is lost, broken and helpless. And yet when Jesus spoke about his exodus with Elijah and Moses, and when Jesus came back down from this mountain, and when Jesus set his face to Jerusalem in order to die, who was he doing that for? He was doing it for these three helpless men, and for you, and for me. And that's why on the one hand, Christianity will humble you more than anything else. Because Christianity shows you that you are nothing before God. That's why a lot of people hate Christianity, because the human race is a proud race. But the truth is, every claim of greatness that humanity makes is absolutely nothing before God. It's pretty much laughable. Even the greatest men and women of history, if you had put them on the top of that mount of transfiguration, they would have been just as humble and just as pathetic as Peter,

James and John. True Christianity will humble you, because it shows you that you're nothing in comparison to the God of heaven and earth. But the amazing thing is that at the same time, as it humbles you, Christianity shows you that you are more precious than you ever imagined.

[36 : 08] Because the God who shone in dazzling splendour at the top of this mountain came down, and he went all the way to the cross to give his life as a ransom for you. He set his face on that path to death because he loves you so much. Because that's how precious you are.

So yes, Christianity should humble you, but it also tells you that you are astoundingly precious to God. And that means there's a really, really important point. It is never possible to be too pathetic for God. That's a really important thing to remember. It's never possible to be too pathetic for God. So often we feel like we are so pathetic before him, so useless, so rubbish that he would never want us. But that is not true. It has never been true. Because in all of your weakness, your frailty, your failings, and your mistakes, Jesus says to you, come to me. It is impossible to be too pathetic for God. But do you know it is possible to be too proud for God?

Because you can think, I don't need him, and I don't want him. And please make no mistake. Pride like that is what takes people to hell. So if you feel rubbish and pathetic before God, then that's a good thing. Just run to him. Because that's exactly what he is looking for.

And please don't be proud before God and don't ever think that you don't need him. And if you do think like that, pray that God would change you. Here at the top of the Mount of Transfiguration, we see what humanity is really like. So we've seen what Jesus is really like. We've seen what the Old Testament is really all about. We've seen what Jesus has really come to do. We've seen what heaven and earth really need. We've seen what humanity is really like. Last of all, on the top of the Mount of Transfiguration, we see what God really wants from us.

The climax of the Mount of Transfiguration comes in verse 34 to 35. As you were seeing these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud, and a voice came out of the cloud saying, this is my son, my chosen one. Listen to him. Now again, this is a remarkable incident. That glory cloud makes us think back to the Old Testament with the presence of God manifesting itself so powerfully here on earth. I want to just focus in two minutes on the fact that here is where we see what God really wants from us. And that's what we find in the words at the very end of verse 35. It says, listen to him. And that is immensely important.

[40 : 00] What does God really want from you? He wants you to listen to Jesus. And it's so vital that we recognize this because this is something that people get wrong again and again and again.

People think that God wants us to try hard to be good enough to work ourselves up to a standard, not true. People think that God wants us to wait for some remarkable experience to happen in our lives, not true. People think that God expects us to grow and to have a certain level of knowledge, not true. People think that God really doesn't mind what we do or what we think, not true.

God wants us to listen. And that makes perfect sense because he is God, and we need to learn from him.

He is the one who needs to tell us what's right and wrong. He's the one who needs to tell us what's true. He's the one who needs to show us the way. He wants us to listen to him.

And that is exactly why he has left us with words. Think about that. There in the top of the Mount of Transfiguration, God says, listen to him.

[41 : 23] And that's why Jesus has left us with words. That's why the church proclaims a message, the good news of Jesus. That's why faith comes by hearing. That's why the Christian life is lived by obeying God's instructions. God wants us to listen. And that is why it does not matter.

And please, please, please, please listen to this. It does not matter if you do not have a remarkable experience like Peter and James and John. So often that is a stumbling block for us.

We think that we need to see some crash of lightning. We need to have some remarkable experience to prove that we are saved. We need to wait for this massive moment in order to prove that we are a Christian. Not true. It's not true. Because how many disciples were at the top of the Mount of Transfiguration? Only three. The majority of them didn't see this. And the majority of Christians across the ages of history do not have experiences like this. And that's because seeing a vision like that is not the priority. God says, listen to my son. And that's summed up in a really good quote that I found written by a minister called G. Campbell Morgan, who was a minister in London way back about just over 100 years ago. He said, to many, there is no Mount of Transfiguration.

But there is, for all, the speech of the Son. And that is so true. Some people do have remarkable experiences. But most of us probably won't. The important thing is that we listen to what Jesus says. That's why if you were to come and profess faith in this congregation, the elders are not looking for you to come and recount some stunning experience or some remarkable event in your life.

We are looking for you to come and say, I heard the voice of Jesus say, come unto me and rest. God wants us to listen to Jesus and to respond to his call by trusting in him.

[44 : 14] So where do you find the real Jesus? It's at the top of the Mount of Transfiguration. And there we see why he's come. There we see what he has come to do. There we see how much we need him.

There we see what God wants for us. And again tonight, we are all being called to trust in him. And the amazing thing is that if you do trust in Jesus, one day you will see the Son of God.

In all of that splendour for yourself. Let's pray. Our Father, we thank you for the words that are recorded for us in Scripture of that remarkable moment at the top of that mountain. And we pray, oh God, that we would have a clearer understanding of who Jesus is and of why he's come and that we would all listen to him and follow him all the days of our lives. Oh Lord Jesus, please, draw us all to yourself. May your spirit be at work in your hearts and make the beauty and the simplicity of the gospel just be so clear before us tonight.

And from this moment on until the day that you bring us home, we pray that every one of us would have our eyes fixed on you and our hearts devoted to you in everything.

Please have mercy on us and thank you God for everything. Amen.