

(mis)Understanding Jesus Part 7

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as you know, in our morning services just now, we are doing a series that has got two titles. Our main title is Understanding Jesus, and we've been going through some of the key moments in the Gospel narratives in order to better understand who Jesus is and why he has come. But the other title is Misunderstanding Jesus, and what we're trying to do is recognise the ways in which Jesus has been misunderstood both by people around him in his own day, but also still by people today. Today we're going to turn together to the passage we read in Luke 9, and we're going to look at the transfiguration of Jesus. Let's read again at verse 28. Now, about eight days after these sayings, Jesus 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. Over the years, many people have asked the question, what was the real Jesus actually like? And that kind of question arises from the fact that lots of people come to the Bible and they're actually quite suspicious. They think, okay, well, it says all this stuff here, but, you know, is it all correct? And are some bits more accurate than others? Are there some bits that, that, you know, were maybe original and other bits were added? Maybe there's things about Jesus that, that, you know, are a bit different to what the Bible says. You know, people ask themselves, well, what was Jesus really like? And so some people might say, well, the real Jesus was just a good teacher. You know, miracles don't happen, but the teaching was good, and that's what Jesus did. And others would say, you know, what Jesus was a good example. You know, he's like one of these great religious figures of history who's shown us a better way to conduct ourselves. Other people will maybe focus in on more specific aspects of Jesus's ministry. Perhaps the most notable of those is that some people say, well, Jesus didn't actually die on the cross, even though the Bible says it. So sometimes people have argued that the historical Jesus is not the same as the Jesus that was recorded for us in the

Bible. And these kind of views have worked their way into our culture through books and through films and things like that. And the result is that there's a whole pile of confusion and misunderstanding about the true identity of Jesus. And so if we were to walk along the streets in Stornoway tomorrow and survey everyone, some people might have a really strong biblical understanding of who Jesus is, but other people might say, well, he was a good teacher or he was a good teacher, a good example from history or something like that. So what was the real Jesus actually like? In other words, if you want to know who Jesus really is, where do you go? Well, what I hope we'll see today is that one of the best places to go to answer that question is to the Mount of Transfiguration. Now that might seem a bit strange because when you read about what happened on the Mount of Transfiguration, it all seems a bit unreal, doesn't it? Jesus' appearance changes. Moses and Elijah appear, a cloud descends and a voice speaks. None of that's normal. But the astonishing truth is that all of this is giving us a glimpse into what is really true about Jesus, about the Bible, about humanity, about our salvation. In other words, this is where we get to see the real truth about Jesus and about all that he has come to do. Now there's loads that we could say in relation to this passage and it's a fascinating section of scripture. Today we're just going to look at five misunderstandings that this passage helps to address. Number one is that we can very easily misunderstand Jesus' identity. You'll notice in verse 28 that it says eight days after. You can see that there in red and that's referring to the great confession that Jesus made in verse 20 in response to the question, who do you say that I am? You can see that just at the very end of verse 20 there. Peter's great reply was the Christ of God. Now for Matthew, Mark and Luke, that's really a key turning point in all of their gospels. Whenever you read Matthew, Mark, Luke, you can really divide them all into two big sections and they all transition on that great confession that Peter makes. Now we don't know much about what happened in those eight days between Peter's great confession and the Mount of Transfiguration, but if you had been walking through the villages that they were in and you'd bumped into Jesus and his disciples, what would you have seen?

Well, he'd have seen a very normal looking man called Jesus and he'd have seen a very normal group of people with him. Back in the Old Testament Isaiah 53 prophesies about Jesus and tells us that there was nothing remarkable about the way he looked and for the followers of Jesus, if anything, they probably looked a bit weak, maybe perplexed and maybe a little bit uncertain about everything that was going on. So you could have walked past them and you would probably not have noticed anything different about them. And that of course is an important part of what it meant for Jesus to become human. His body was a normal body, his appearance was a normal human appearance and for most of his life here on earth he lived and worked a normal life. But if you conclude that because Jesus looked ordinary, ultimately he's nothing more than an ordinary person, if you reach that conclusion then you are totally misunderstanding Jesus. Because the truth is, even though in for the bulk of those eight days and for the rest of Jesus' ministry, even though he would have looked perfectly normal, the reality is he is utterly unique. And in becoming human, in taking a human body, there's a sense in which Jesus came down to a much lower level than what he truly possesses, he did not hold onto the status that he truly has. All of that means that if you had walked past Jesus and the disciples in those eight days and you thought to yourself, oh well there's a normal man, then you are not seeing the whole truth. If you read the Bible and you think, oh well, I'm reading about a pretty good but on the whole normal man, then again you're not seeing the whole truth. In other words, you're misunderstanding Jesus. Because if you had followed Jesus up this mountain, there you would have seen the real truth. Because as we read, up on that mountain Jesus' face changes, his clothes became dazzling white and the imagery here is of extraordinary brightness and whiteness. I want you to think about, imagine that in your mind, you know sometimes when the sun can dazzle you, sometimes the sun can dazzle you through these windows when it's low enough, that kind of brightness, a stunning description of glory. And it's telling us that for a moment, for a short spell at the top of this mountain, the astounding glory of God is seen in Jesus. That means that here on the Mount of Transfiguration we see who Jesus really is. He is God himself. Within this normal looking man is the astounding glory of God. And he's the perfect man, bearing the image of God, the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature. Now I want you to just notice the significance of what's happening here. We said a moment ago that eight days earlier Peter had said, you are the Christ of God. Now on the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter, James and John are getting a glimpse into what that really means. Jesus is before them in dazzling glory, spotless purity, astounding splendour. And I think that's part of the reason why John

could say in the verse that we read at the start of the service, we have seen his glory. So when you think of Jesus, yes, I want you to think of him living and walking and talking among normal people in a normal way, but at the same time we must always think of the Mount of Transfiguration because this is where we see who he really is.

Second thing we can misunderstand is how the Old Testament and the New Testament fit together. So alongside this dazzling transformation in Jesus' appearance, one of the other remarkable things about the Mount of Transfiguration is that Moses and Elijah appear. And we see that in verse 30 to 31, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah. Now why would these two men appear? And what's this telling us? Well again there's lots we could say, but I want to just notice the fact that Moses and Elijah are two of the key figures from the Old Testament era. And this is where we can often fall into many different misunderstandings.

[11 : 02] We can misunderstand this whole question of how the Old Testament and the New Testament fit together. So sometimes people think that the Old Testament is completely done away with with the New Testament, that the Old Testament was a bit of a failure and something that we want to get rid of and the New Testament completely replaces it. Some people say, well in the Old Testament there was one way of being saved, you had to work and do good things in order to be saved, the New Testament is different, we are saved by faith. There's lots of misunderstanding about how the Old Testament and the New Testament fit together.

This passage helps us. Moses was the great leader at the time of the Exodus, that he was the one who led God's people out of Egypt and he was the one through whom the law, the Ten Commandments was given to Israel. Elijah was a great prophet and he called people back to God. So the people had been given the law by Moses, they then spent generations disobeying it. Elijah was calling them back to God and back to the law. So if you look at the Old Testament, two of the biggest figures are Moses the lawgiver, Elijah the prophet and yet here we find them talking to Jesus. And I think that's telling us something crucial.

It's telling us that Moses, Elijah and Jesus are friends. Now what do I mean by that? Well what I mean is the fact that Jesus has not come to kind of abandon what Moses and Elijah fought for in the Old Testament. He's not come to replace it or correct it or contradict it. He has instead 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 the great works that were done by these Old Testament figures are pointing forward towards the coming of Jesus. You could almost imagine Peter walking up to Moses and Elijah and saying, do you guys know Jesus? And they would be like, of course we do. He's the one that we've been waiting for. He's the one that we were looking forward to all this time. And so these three men standing at the top of the Mount of Transfiguration are a powerful demonstration of how the whole Bible fits together. The Old Testament is all pointing forwards towards the coming of Jesus. He is everything that Moses, Elijah and all of God's people in the Old Testament longed for. But we need to notice something. Although these three men are together on the top of the Mount of Transfiguration, there's a clear emphasis on the fact that Jesus is superior. In verse 32 we see it saying that Peter and those who are with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory. And oh, sorry too far back. They saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Notice that if this is, Jesus is the one with the glory. He's the one to whom glory belongs. And when Peter suggests a shelter from all three, for all three of them, it maybe implies that he kind of sees them as equals. Oh, Moses,

Elijah, Jesus, we need a shelter for all three of you. But his request is clearly inappropriate. And when the voice speaks from heaven, there's no mention of Elijah and Moses. The focus is entirely on Jesus. All of this is pointing us, showing us the fact that the Old Testament is pointing towards Jesus. It finds its fulfillment in him. That's a really helpful thing to remember when we read the Psalms and sing the Psalms. So much of what's been spoken about there is pointing towards Jesus. And so many of the events that take place in the Old Testament do so in order to teach us about what Jesus was going to do. And that takes us to the third misunderstanding. We can misunderstand what Jesus has come to do.

In verse 31, we see that Moses, Elijah and Jesus are speaking 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, that word departure is absolutely fascinating because the original word in Greek is the word Exodus. And that's a fascinating word because it's immediately pointing us backwards to the great act of salvation performed in the Old Testament when God rescues people out of slavery in Egypt.

[16:17] And yet at the same time, it's pointing us forwards because Jesus's Exodus is about to be accomplished in Jerusalem. So when Moses, Elijah and Jesus are talking, they're talking about the fact that in the coming days, Jesus is going to Jerusalem and there he is going to accomplish a great Exodus. Now, at one level, that speaks about the death of Jesus because he's going to leave the world. But at the same time, it speaks of the rescue of God's people because that's exactly what the cross is going to accomplish. In fact, the Exodus in the Old Testament is just a shadow of the real Exodus, the real rescue that God provides us with, where God provides us with salvation, deliverance from our slavery to sin. And the reason why Moses, Elijah and Jesus are talking about this is because that is what Jesus has really come to do. And again, here's a really interesting connection with the fact that eight days earlier, Peter had said, you are the Christ. And immediately after that, Jesus told his disciples that he was going to suffer and be killed. We know from

Matthew and Mark's Gospel that Peter was horrified at that. So Peter said, you are the Christ. Jesus says, I'm going to suffer. And then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, Far be it from you, Lord, this shall never happen to you. But Jesus immediately rebuked Peter for saying that. Jesus did not entertain for a moment the fact that the idea that the cross could be avoided. And that's emphasized by the fact that when we get to the Mount of Transfiguration, when Jesus speaks with Moses and Elijah, they don't try to tell him, oh, your death is not going to happen. This will never happen to you. They do the opposite. They openly talk about his departure, about his Exodus, because they know that that's the real reason why Jesus came. So Jesus didn't come to be a good teacher. He didn't come simply as a good example. He didn't come to point people to God. He came for an Exodus.

He came to rescue us from sin by dying on the cross and rising again. And this is where we discover that the most amazing thing about the Mount of Transfiguration is not the dazzling face and clothes. It's not the appearance of Moses and Elijah. It's not the cloud. It's not even the voice of God speaking. The most amazing thing about the Mount of Transfiguration is that Jesus came back down again. If you think about it, here we are getting a glimpse of who Jesus really is, a glimpse of the glory that he really has. This is the realm where Jesus really belongs in dazzling light, in glorious splendour. Yet he came back down again.

And the reason he came down is because humanity desperately needs him to go to the cross. And that's why later on in this chapter in 9:51, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem.

Fourth misunderstanding is that we can misunderstand what humanity is really like. So on this mountain we get the dazzling splendour of Jesus, the remarkable appearance of Moses and Elijah. We see the whole Bible fitting together, but at the same time we see three disciples who don't really know what to say and don't really know what to do. Peter speaks for them, saying, oh, it's great that we're here. Let's build three shelters. We're told he didn't really know what he was saying. And I just want to highlight the fact that I think that that's a very clear demonstration of what humanity is so often like. So often deep down we think that we can make a half decent show of ourselves before God. So we think, well, yeah, I'm not perfect, but we could probably hold it together reasonably well. So if we were all to appear to God, if we were all to appear before God right now, I'm sure we're kind of, there's part of us that thinks, well, you know, I'm sure I'd maybe be able to sort of say enough or make a half decent show of myself. Is that true? Well, here you have Peter, James and

[21 : 23] John, and they don't have a clue what to say or do. And we might feel like criticising Peter, but we would have been exactly the same. Standing there, they must have been utterly overwhelmed standing in the presence of God like that. They must have felt like dust. Earlier in the Bible in the Old Testament, Isaiah had exactly the same experience. He saw the throne of God and he said, woe is me for I am lost. It's all reminding us that standing before the splendour and glory of God, we are nothing. We've got no words, no worthiness, no claim on him, no right to come anywhere near him or just like nothing in front of him. And so when you think of Peter and James and John here, this must have been the most humbling experience of their lives. And yet that's teaching us what humanity is really like. We're absolutely nothing before God. And 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 just nothing before God. If anything, it's almost laughable. Even the greatest men and women in history, if you could have placed them on the top of the mount of transfiguration, they would have been just as humbled and just as pathetic as Peter,

James and John. And it's reminding us that through Christianity will humble you. It'll humble you like nothing else because it shows you that you're nothing in comparison to God.

Yet at the very same time as it humbles you, Christianity shows you that you are more precious than you could have ever imagined. Because the God who shone in dazzling splendour at the top of this mountain came down again and he went all the way to the cross to give his life for you. Jesus set his face on the path to death because of how precious you are to him. Now this raises a really, really important point. It's telling us that it's never possible to be too pathetic for God. Often we can feel very pathetic before him. We think, well,

God would never want me. I know we're near good enough. I've messed up too much. I've missed my chance. I'm just not the way I should be. It's so easy to feel that God would just never want us. That is never true. In all your weakness, your mistakes, your frailty, your failings, Jesus says to you, come to me. It is impossible for you to be too pathetic for God, but it is possible for you to be too proud for God. You can think to yourself, I don't need him. I don't want him. And make no mistake, pride like that will take you to hell. So if you feel useless and pathetic before God, if you feel like you've mucked up your life a thousand times over, that's a good thing. Just run to him. But if you're proud before God and you think that you don't need him, then please pray that you would change. So we can misunderstand Jesus' identity, misunderstand how the Old Testament and New

Testament fit together. We can misunderstand what Jesus has come to do. We can misunderstand what humanity is really like. Lastly, we can misunderstand what God really wants from us.

[26 : 19] The climax of this comes, this incident comes in verse 34 to 35. As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them. 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.

That cloud is pointing us back to the glory, presence of God in the Old Testament. The voice of God speaks from this cloud. Jesus is focused on, he's identified as the son of God, the chosen one. Again, that's highlighting how special and unique Jesus really is. I want us to focus, however, on the fact that these verses are showing us what God really wants from us. Now, this is incredibly important because this is something that countless people get wrong. This is one of the biggest misunderstandings of all. People think that God wants us to try hard to be good enough in order to impress Him. So you think, well, be a better person, be kind of holy, be this, be that, be the next thing that will impress God, not through.

People think that God wants us to wait for some remarkable experience, a kind of crash of lightning, a moment of astonishing conversion that tells us that I'm now saved, not through.

People think that God expects us to have some kind of remarkable level of knowledge. You need to know this, that and the next thing, not through. Or some people think that God doesn't really mind what you do. He'll save us anyway. Again, not through. So what does God really want from you and me? The answer is at the end of verse 35, listen to Him.

And that makes perfect sense. He is God. We need to learn from Him. We need Him to tell us what is through. We need Him to show us the way. And that's exactly what He's done.

[28 : 36] That's why Jesus has left us with words, with the Bible. That's why the church proclaims a message, the good news of the gospel. 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's why it does not matter if you never have a remarkable experience like Peter, James and John. So often this is a huge stumbling block for people. And I'm sure I am, not that there's much in them, but I would put my life savings on it to say that there's somebody in here who thinks to yourself, well, I want to be a Christian, but there needs to be some big thing that happens. So often there's that stumbling block. There needs to be this crash of lightning that proves we're saved. That's not true. And I read a wonderful quotation that summed this up perfectly from G. Campbell Morgan, who was minister in London about 100 years ago. He said, for many, there's no amount of transfiguration, but there is for all the speech of the sun. In other words, the number of people who are going to have an experience like the amount of transfiguration is tiny. But for everyone, we have his words. And that's the question that you need to ask yourself. It's not, have I had some massive experience?

Because most of us don't have massive experiences like that. The question is, are you listening to him? And that's why if somebody wants to come and be baptised to profess faith or somebody who's been brought up in the church and wants to profess faith, we're not looking to hear you say, I had this stunning, remarkable experience. We are looking for people who come and say, I heard the voice of Jesus say, come unto me and rest. And that's the question we've all got to ask ourselves today. Are we listening when Jesus says, come unto me and rest? Amen.

Father, we thank you for these words. We thank you even more for your son. We pray, oh God, that every one of us would listen to him. Amen.