“LISTEN TO HIM”

Matthew 17:1–13

Key Verse: 17:5

“While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!’”

We human beings tend to be full of our own ideas. We’re sure of what we think we know, and we have our own assumptions about many things. On top of that, Confucianists and Buddhists refer to “the Seven Emotions and Six Desires” of all human beings, which seems pretty accurate. With our own ideas, emotions and desires, we ignore the things that don’t fit in with how we think or feel or what we want. In other words, it’s hard for us to listen and learn. Jesus experienced this with his disciples. He’d been with them for three years by now, showing them his miracles, his compassion and his teachings until they were sure he was the Messiah. Then, when he started talking about the way of self-denial and self-sacrifice, the way of the cross, they strongly rejected it. But Jesus wouldn’t give up. In today’s passage he takes three of them with him and gives them a very special preview of his glory. They wouldn’t understand it for a long time. But Jesus wanted them to see this glory so that eventually they could accept the way of suffering. It’s still hard to accept that following Jesus means taking the way of the cross. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

Look at verse 1. Jesus gave his disciples six days to digest what he’d just said. During that week there’s no record of anything being said. It must’ve been very awkward silence, not just for a few minutes, but for six whole days! The disciples realized that Jesus was being totally serious. Most of them must have started looking at Peter differently after Jesus had severely rebuked him. Then Jesus took Peter, James and John with him up a high mountain. They were the first disciples he had called. In the midst of ministering to crowds of people and training twelve disciples, Jesus tried to get really close only to these three. He focused on helping them, believing that they would someday help the rest.

Read verse 2. In Greek the word “transfigured” is “metamorphosis,” the same as the word “transformed” in Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18. In those two verses, we’re the ones who are supposed to be “transformed” and “transfigured.” But here, it’s Jesus who was “transformed” or “transfigured.” What does it mean? Verse 2 specifically tells us that his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Until now Jesus didn’t look like that. Jesus had poured himself into ministering to people, with no concern for himself, healing the sick and needy and making friends with sinners, until his face looked drawn and his clothes looked shabby. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him; instead, he became a man of suffering, and familiar with pain (Isa53:2,3). But now, up on this high mountain, alone with these three disciples, his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. His shining face reminds us of Moses, whose face was shining after he spent time with God on the mountain (Ex34:29–35). His white clothes suggest he’s a heavenly being. But Jesus was more than a heavenly being, more than Moses; he's revealing his original glory as God the Son, the glory he alone had with the Father before the world began (Jn17:5). It was the glory he would have after his death, resurrection and ascension to the Father's right hand. Many years later, in his famous Book of Revelation, John would describe this same glorious appearance of Jesus: “The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow…His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance” (Rev1:13–16). Wow! Jesus had just predicted that he would suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and be killed (16:21). But here, in sharp contrast, he appears in glory.

But what does his transfiguration have to do with us? Earlier Jesus had predicted, “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (13:43). When we live by faith, we too will someday shine like the sun in heaven! But it also happens to us now. When we open our hearts and receive Jesus as our Savior and King, he gives us the hope of glory within us (Col1:27). And when we follow him practically, sharing in his sufferings, we have the real hope to share in his glory (Ro8:17). Paul said our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Ro8:18). He said “our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2Co4:17). So, seeing the glory of Jesus changes us forever. This world and its glory no longer appeal to us. In fact, as we contemplate his glory, we’re actually transformed from the inside out. Even sinners like us begin to take on the most gracious image of Jesus (2Co3:18). As we contemplate his glory we become more and more like him. Getting a glimpse of his glory gives us the hope that one day we will see him face to face (1Co13:12).

In this world we see so many things so different from Jesus. We see people living for themselves. Sometimes we see dark and evil things that scar us and leave us feeling full of guilt or fear or hate. We see people who ignore and despise us, and sometimes even betray us. We can become so discouraged and so hurt that we want to give up. We all need to see the glory of Jesus. And for those who’ve seen it before, we need to rekindle his glorious image in our hearts. But how can we really see the glory of Jesus? The only way is to pay close attention to the Bible. We need to take time to meditate on God’s word and reflect on it. We need to consider it preciously, as if it were a light shining in a dark place. As we do, the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts (2Pe1:19). A good way is to spend quality time each morning meditating on the word of God. Another good way is to write a personal reflection each time we hear a Bible message or study a Bible passage. What are we allowing into our minds and hearts? What kinds of things are we dwelling on? May God help each of us to really dwell on the glory of Christ until our souls are filled with his glory.

Look at verse 3. Moses was a model for the Prophet God promised to send, whom all his people should listen to (Dt18:18). Elijah was a model for the forerunner of the Messiah (Mal4:5,6). Both Moses and Elijah suffered much and were rejected when they led God’s people. Together, they summarize all the Old Testament Law and the Prophets. Jesus came to fulfill them both (5:17). And here on the mountain, Jesus’ transfigured glory far surpasses theirs’. Jesus is far greater than Moses and Elijah because he’s the one and only Son of God. How did Peter respond to this? Read verse 4. He really liked this glory. He wanted to capture this moment of glory on the mountain forever. He wanted to skip all the suffering and jump right into glory, just like we would.

Look at verse 5. Here, the bright cloud symbolized God’s own living presence, the God who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see (1Ti6:16). Can you imagine being surrounded by the very presence of the holy Creator God?

This awesome God had a message for Peter and the others: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” (5) What does it mean? First of all, it tells that Jesus is God’s Son. God loves him and is well pleased with him. It’s the same thing God said from heaven when John the Baptist baptized Jesus (3:16–17). At that time God was pleased because Jesus was accepting his mission from God. This time God is pleased again because Jesus is renewing his resolve to go the way of suffering, the way of the cross, in obedience to the Father’s will. Of course God loves everyone. But God is especially pleased when we decide, like Jesus did, to obey his will, taking the path of suffering and following Jesus in the way of the cross.

This experience was something the disciples never forgot. Later Peter wrote: “He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain” (2Pe1:17–18). This image of Jesus in glory captured their hearts and remained in them as a secret.

Second, it tells us what to do. Read verse 5 again. As we’ve said, the disciples really didn’t want to hear about Jesus’ sufferings and the way of the cross. But this was the very thing God really wanted them to hear. We all tend to hear only what we want to hear. Sometimes, God has to rebuke us: “Listen to him!” Are we really listening to Jesus when he tells us we have to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him?

2 Timothy 4:3 says, “For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.” Today some emphasize a health-and-wealth gospel. Some design their ministry around catering to people’s needs so that they’ll come to church and stay. While we should definitely be serving people and caring for their needs, we also need to be listening to Jesus, accepting his challenge. Sometimes we hear amazing Bible teaching, but we let it go in one ear and out the other. We take no action. We keep living the same old way, for ourselves, avoiding suffering. God is saying to each one of us: “Listen to him!”

Jesus transfigured in glory and God’s rebuke shocked the disciples so much that they fell facedown to the ground, terrified (6). But Jesus touched and comforted them not to be afraid (7). In the end, Moses and Elijah were gone, and only Jesus remained (8). In the same way, though we may want to love and hold onto this or that person, in the end only Jesus remains to each of us. Jesus instructed them to keep this glorious experience a secret (9). Then disciples began asking about Elijah coming first and restoring all things (10). They wondered how that prophecy fit in with suffering first. Jesus again repeated the way of suffering. The prophecy about Elijah had already been fulfilled in the life and ministry of John the Baptist (11–13; 11:14). John the Baptist had suffered at the hands of evil men, and Jesus would, too (12). The disciples are finally understanding a little bit more (13).

In today’s study we saw how Jesus was transfigured in heavenly glory. He wants us to get a glimpse of this glory and accept his teachings about the way of the cross. So what are we dwelling on in our minds and hearts? What images are we looking at and allowing in from day to day? May God help us to focus on the glory of transfigured Jesus, a glory that erases all the darkness of sin, death and evil from our souls. May God bless each of us to experience his glory that fills us with heavenly hope and with new strength to follow him.