

Eyewitness of His Majesty

Matthew 17:1-13

By [Claude McRoberts](#)

It's a remarkable event; one of the most, if not the most, remarkable event in the life of our Lord, in which His courage was strengthened. Inevitable trials not too far off, in the not too far distant future, not very far away; He would be handed over, He would be betrayed, He would be scourged, beaten; He would be crucified. This event strengthened His resolve. It reminded Him of the love of the Father for Him — the eternal, constant, unfailing love of the Father. It reminded Him that there was going to be glory after the suffering, glory after the cross. And for these three disciples that were part of this event — Peter, James, and John — they would look back. This would be a time when they would remember the profession, the great confession of Peter, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." So I humbly submit this text to you. My prayer is that the same thing would happen to you, that your courage would be strengthened because of this event, that you would be reminded of the Father's love for you, that you would be reminded of the glory that awaits those who are faithful, that this is not all there is. And this sanctuary can prove that. This sanctuary can be a constant reminder to you that this is not all there is, that there's something greater. There's a greater glory than what I'm experiencing here in this flesh even. And that finally it would serve to confirm your faith that He is Jesus, He is real, and He is your Lord and Savior; that He is Christ, the Son of the living God.

God's word is infallible. It is inerrant. It is our only rule of faith and practice, and it is the very mind of God in print. Beginning in verse 1 of Matthew 17:

Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If You wish, let us make here three tabernacles, one for You and one for Moses and one for Elijah." 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." 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 when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

We'll end there this morning. The grass withers, the flowers fade away, but the word of our God stands forever. Let's pray.

Our God, we would ask that You would open our eyes, our ears, that we might understand; that we might have wisdom that comes from You; that we might behold wonderful things from Your law; that You give us the faith to see Christ in His glory; that the veil might be pulled back just a bit for us, that we might see; and that we might be reminded of Your love and Your grace, and Your mercy. Give us faith. We know that without faith it is impossible to please You. We want to please You now. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

If you're not familiar with where we are in this particular context, I would encourage you to go back today and read chapter 16. Chapter 16 is just chock full of familiar teaching from Jesus, and He's told the disciples about half way through that chapter that He is about to be handed over, and that He's going to be crucified. He would be scourged and crucified. He would rise on the third day. Peter has something to say about that, but we'll get to that in just a moment.

But after that, toward the end of the chapter, at about verse 24, Jesus begins to tell His disciples, 'If you want to follow Me, you must deny yourself' — take up the cross and follow Him. If you want to lose your life, then try to save it. If you want to save your life, lose it. Lose yourself. And then He asked them, "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?" What could a man possibly give in exchange for his soul? I mean, it's a no-brainer! What could a man possibly give in this world, what could he possibly desire more than his own soul? What exchange could he make, and then that exchange would be profitable for him if he were to lose his soul? And having just instructed them in that, the last verse of chapter 16, He says, "Assuredly I say to you there are some standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."

Come to find out, that "some" is Peter, James, and John. Verse 1, chapter 17: Now after six days, Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them on a high mountain by themselves." Why Peter, James, and John? Why...? There are a lot of questions around this text. Unanswerable questions. Why are they in the inner circle? Why ...they, including Andrew a lot of times...why were they there at the raising of the daughter of Jairus from the dead? Why were they there? Why were they privileged to be in the Garden of Gethsemane? And now here they are on the mountain with Jesus. Why these men? What mountain? How high did they climb? How did they recognize Moses and Elijah? We don't know. What's the significance? What are the ramifications? I want to suggest to you Peter, James and John didn't know either, as they climbed and climbed and climbed with Jesus. We might imagine up a pathless incline...maybe some grassy foothills, and then above the tree line...I mean, we've got to believe they went thousands of feet above sea level. They were getting away from the crowd, away from all

those people, all that controversy...pushing and crowding around and draining Him, and wanting to be healed, and 'Give me this and give me that' and 'We want to make You king'....away from all of that to a place where they could rest and pray.

To the west would have been the plains of the Promised Land, and to the east the blue Mediterranean, and to the south the Jordan valley. You can imagine that it was picturesque. And again just imagining, a gentle breeze blowing. I say that because Luke and Mark tell us that Peter, James and John went to sleep. So it must have been a very nice, peaceful place.

Jesus goes off to pray. Don't you know He prayed for strength? And He prayed for hope, and He prayed for courage, and He prayed for resolve, and vision, and commitment. And then we're told in verse 2 that He was changed before them. He was transfigured. I can try to describe it...I'm not sure that you can, but just an attempt to describe it would be to say that the outer garment of His flesh was lifted for just a moment; that curtain, the veil was lifted for just a moment. And what's under? You want to peek, you want to see! What's underneath? You know what's there? Glory. Divine glory. It says His face shone like the sun. His face was radiating this glory, and you know what it did? It illumined His clothes. White. His clothes became as white as the light. You think that maybe that's what awakened the disciples? We don't know. It's another one of those questions. What woke them? Could it have been the ray from the glory of Jesus' face? You know what it is to be asleep and someone turns on the light, and you squint...and you might even be confused for a moment. And the disciples are being awakened — what is going on in front of us? Verse 3 says, "And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared before them." They're coming out of their sleep, and all of a sudden this unbelievable event is happening before them.

And it says they are talking with them. The privilege! The privilege of these men! I told you I feel privileged to be here today. I feel privileged to stand in this pulpit of this church. This is nothing compared to the privilege of Peter and James and John in the presence of Jesus, in the fullness of His glory...Moses, the greatest leader of men in the history of the world, except for Jesus; Elijah, the greatest of Old Testament prophets. I mean, he's the man with the courage. He's the man who walked with God. He had this zeal. He was just taken to heaven. MacArthur describes and says of Elijah, "...to the Jews the most romantic Old Testament personality." And there he was standing before Peter, James and John: the lawgiver, Moses; the greatest protector of the law in Elijah; and the fullness, or the fulfillment of the law, in Jesus.

Incidentally, you know what they're talking about? Luke tells us. His death. He prays for...perhaps He prays for courage, He prays for strength. Moses and Elijah appear in bodily form, and they're talking about His death. It's no wonder that John would one day write,

“And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

It's no wonder that Peter would say...Peter wrote this:

“For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the excellent glory, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’”

[And you think Peter didn't remember this event?] And he says,

“We heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.”

They'd never forget. It was this event that would have this long lasting, indelible impact on the hearts and the minds of these men who would later be church planters and missionaries and preachers, and they would give their lives. And they would never forget this moment that gave them strength, that gave them resolve, that gave them hope. It was an event that would provide them with this perspective that I mentioned a moment ago, that this is not all there is. All because the veil is lifted for just a moment, and they were able to see Jesus the way the Father sees Jesus.

It made all the difference in the world to a little group of men who needed all the help they could get. Can you identify with that?

May I suggest that this sanctuary can be such a place? Where you come in it, and you know that when I enter this place it's a place of reverence; it's a place where I'm going to have respect, and I will see it as a place that reminds me of the glory of Christ, it reminds me of His majesty. It reminds me that this is not all that there is. And we need to be reminded of that, because we forget out there where we spend hours and hours and days and days and weeks and weeks. What's one morning? An hour? And an hour in the evening on a Sunday evening and Wednesday night to come back into this beautiful edifice to be reminded of His majesty and His friendship? To be reminded of His glory and His condescension, His holy other-ness and His compassion, His love for me? Amidst all the sin and the things that cause me to doubt and the things that make me question...and I'm bombarded, and it's all I see. And we wonder if we're all alone. ‘Nobody thinks like me. Nobody acts like me. I'm different than everybody else.’ We're a minority. You realize that: we're a minority. In the Bible Belt we're a minority. Only 22% of Alabamians go to church. Doesn't that surprise you? I don't know what it is in Mississippi. Twenty-two percent of people in Alabama care to acknowledge the Creator on the Lord's Day morning. We have crosses to bear, and we have weaknesses, and we have conflicts. And there are struggles, and

we need a place. We need something. We need words. We need to be reminded of His glory and the sense of awe and this reverence. And we need to be in a place where we're reminded this is not all there is, and to hasten the day when the veil is pulled back forever. We long for that day. That's why we worship. We're hungry. We desire it. We're not content until we have it.

“Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God. Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be. But we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”

Guess who wrote that? John. You think this event didn't have an impact on him?

And there's a promise. There's a promise here that there is life after death. There's hope, because we bury our loved ones and we put them in the ground, and they return to dust. And we long for them again. We want to talk to them. We want to ask them questions about family history. You know. We want to embrace them. We want to talk about old times. We want to perhaps even share with them the day of their death and what impact that had on me, you see. Will I ever get to do that? Moses was buried 1,480 years prior to this event. Guess who buried him. Jesus. Elijah left this earth some 900 years earlier, and here they are having a conversation with Jesus. You think you're not going to see your loved one? You think you're not going to have a conversation again with them, embrace them and talk about old times, and how much you loved each other and continue to love? You will. Because God is not a God of the dead, He's a God of the living.

The sacredness of this moment on the mountain is interrupted by impetuous Peter, who, in a very clumsy attempt tries to memorialize the moment in verse 4, when he “...answered and said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here. If You wish, let us make here three tabernacles, one for You, one for Moses and one for Elijah.’”

Sounds very good. Sounds very pious, very thoughtful. He's reverent. He calls Him “Lord.” He defers — “if You wish.” But it's wrong. It's wrong because at best...best case scenario, Peter wants to stay on the mountain, build a tabernacle, worship Jesus, and keep Him from going to Jerusalem to die for our sins. Best case scenario, ‘Jesus, let's stay on the mountain, we'll worship You here, and You'll not go to Jerusalem...especially if by “leaving” You mean death...let's just stay on the mountain.’ That's best case scenario. Boice seemed to think that Peter was actually lowering Jesus to the status of Moses and Elijah; that somehow Jesus was on the same footing as Moses and Elijah, and that He should be honored to be speaking with these prophets. Now I wouldn't go that far. But it is obvious that Peter did not grasp the significance of the glory of Jesus. Luke even tells us Peter spoke “not realizing what he was saying.”

How often do we do it? It sounds good. It sounds pious. It sounds...you know, you're praying, and this person you're praying with is going to say, 'Oh, how godly! What a wonderful thing to say!' And it's not biblical. It just sounded good. We ought to be perceptive. We ought to have discernment from the televangelist (who we might say all these red flags are thrown up as to what they may be saying) to even your own prayer partner. Is what I'm saying correct? Is what I'm saying right? Is it true? Is it from God's word? Peter missed that. Peter jumped to conclusions. He is overzealous and he doesn't see it. What does Jesus want? Obedience. Love. Broken heart. Contrite heart.

You know, Peter had spoken out of turn in chapter 16 when Jesus had talked about going and being crucified. And Peter said it'll never happen. And what did Jesus say? He rebuked him and said, "Get thee behind me, Satan!" Jesus doesn't rebuke him this time. Guess who rebukes him this time. It's the Father. It's really amazing, in verse 5: "While he was still speaking..." Can you imagine? While he's still speaking. He's going on and on about the tabernacles and the worship and how we want to do this for you, Jesus. And God interrupts him! God the Father comes down in His Shekinah glory. It says, "Behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them." No new phenomenon to Moses! You know God has spoken to Moses through the Shekinah cloud numerous times. The Shekinah glory is mentioned 58 times in the Old and the New Testament. Ten different books. It says,

"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."

Are those words familiar to you? Same, almost identical words God the Father had spoken of His Son at His baptism. "This is My Son. This is the one I love. This is the one with whom I am well pleased."

Ken Guire — I don't really know a lot about Ken Guire, I've got one of his devotional books, and it's good. He does take liberty, though. It's one of those that "what if?"—sort of tries to fill in the blanks and just setting the picture, more or less. And he talks about how the voice of the Father had the settling effect that it had on Jesus. He said,

"They were what He needed to hear three years ago before He faced the temptations of the wilderness, and they are what He needed to hear now before He faces the tortures of the cross. He needs to hear those words. But maybe more than the words themselves, He needs to hear the voice, the familiar inflection, the fatherly tones so rich and resonant, so full of eternity. Just the sound of the Father's voice infuses Him with strength."

If I can just hear the voice, it will give me peace. Do you have somebody like

that? I talk to my wife. I call her two or three times a day. I just want to hear the voice. It's almost the same thing, almost every time. You know: "Hello." "Hey." "What'cha doing?" I love that! I want to hear it. It gives me peace.

When I was growing up, my Dad had a regular tennis match every Saturday morning at nine o'clock. And he would get home about 10:30 or 11:00, and I was in the bed, typically! And he would see...from my room I could hear him pulling up in the carport, and I would probably turn over and say 'Oh, no!'—you know. And then he would see, I'm sure, that the storage room door was not unlocked, and the lawn mower wasn't out. And if you know my Dad, this is very typical: He yells up the stairs, "That yard's not gonna get cut by osmosis!" And I'd turn over. But, boy, if I heard him hit the stairs, and he would say, "Those feet better touch the ground!" boy, I was up! I told them at 8:30 that I would imagine that if he came to my house today and said...and I heard him somewhere in my house today, 'You'd better get up!' I'd be jumping up!

But you know, in college, or after, maybe even today, to call with something and to feel alone, and not having experienced this before, and need wisdom from my Dad, to hear, "Hello." Peace. Because I know the father is going to take care of me. The father is going to give me some wisdom. And the Father says to the Son, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Now the addendum, "Hear Him." See that addendum? That's more the tone, 'Those feet better touch the ground!' And that's the idea. 'You'd better listen to My Son! Quit talking, Peter! Quit trying to figure it out. Quit trying to be something you're not. Quit all the pettiness, and having your little empire within the empire of the church at First Presbyterian.' And just saying, 'Quit talking. Quit and listen! Just listen to My Son. If He says He's going to Jerusalem, suffer many things, and be crucified, and be buried, He's going to Jerusalem! He's going to suffer, He's going to be buried. If He says He's going to be raised to life, He's going to be raised to life! If He says take up the cross and follow Him, then you better take up the cross and follow Him. He is My Son. With Him I'm well pleased. If He says that you're going to lose your life if you try to hang on to it, then by all means, let loose! Let go of who you are. Die to self. And if He asks you a question — if Jesus, My Son, says to you, 'What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and yet loses his soul?' you'd better well have an answer for Him, because He's My Son, and with Him I'm well pleased.'

You'll come into this sanctuary — [which, by the way, it's twelve, and we're going over twelve, OK? Just settle in. I'm not through.] When you come in this sanctuary, there are times when you need to hear...I might as well say every time you need to hear: 'You are My son, you are My daughter; with you I am well pleased.' It's the gospel! I mean, you need to be here, you need to be in this beautiful edifice, and you need to hear Him say, 'With you I am well pleased. No matter what you have done, you can't change it. You can't even do anything good now to make Me love you more. I'm well pleased with you.' That's the

gospel, through Christ. And there are times you need to hear Him say, 'Hear him! Hear him! Hear the messenger. Hear the herald in the pulpit. Hear the proclaimer, hear the prophet. Listen! Quit talking.' But whatever the case, whichever the two, the response is the same: it's worship and awe and reverence, and respect and prostration and obedience. Every time you enter the sanctuary, new chapter.

I understand now things are a little bit different than they were twenty years ago or so, but there's more of a greeting kind of time as you come into the sanctuary. Sort of the architecture of the coming in may lend itself to that. But I did notice "At the time of the greeting and the announcements and during the prelude, the congregation is invited to a season of silent and reverent preparation for corporate worship." Everyone is already here and seated. Bowed heads. And so people visiting... First Pres has this reputation. Not only about this beautiful sanctuary... "Did you hear about the sanctuary that First church has built? But I tell you, when you go there, they're serious. And when you walk in there's a reverence, and people aren't walking around and coming in late. Their heads are bowed and they're reading the word, and they're looking at the hymns they're going to sing. There's this anticipation that the veil is going to be pulled back a little bit, and they're going to see the glory of Christ."

It says the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces, and were greatly afraid. And Jesus doesn't leave them there. He never does. In verse 7 it says,

"But Jesus came and touched them, and said, 'Arise, and do not be afraid.' When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only."

That's probably my favorite verse in the text. They're cowering in the dirt, and that's where He finds us so often. And He touches them, and He says, 'Get up.' He says, 'There's nothing to be afraid of.' It's Aslan! You know (those of you who know *Chronicles of Narnia*) it's Aslan... "Safe?" [Who said anything about safe? He's not safe.] "Of course He's not safe. But He's good. He's the King, I tell you." And they opened their eyes, and Moses is gone, and Elijah is gone, the Shekinah glory is gone, the light is gone. It's just Jesus and His face, and His eyes.

And don't you know that His face and His eyes sustained them until their final hour? James would be the first to be martyred. His head would be taken off his body. Peter would be crucified, according to tradition, upside down...didn't feel worthy to be crucified as his Lord. Tradition also says that he was forced first to watch his wife be crucified, and at the foot of her cross he kept saying to her over and over, "Remember the Lord, remember the Lord." John of course is banished. They never saw Him again the same, in a sense. They'd never seen Him like that before, and they'd never think about Him the same again. For the glory that was set before them...it was for that glory.

It was on that mountain, and it is to be here in this place. It's for the glory that

was set before them. As I said at 8:30, I wish Ligon was here. I'd point to him, I'd point to Derek, the other ministers...and say, "Sir, we would see Jesus." And you need to say that to them. If ever you feel there is any arrogance in a minister who stands in this center pulpit, you have every right to go to that man. And you say, "Sir, we would see Jesus." Not Ligon. Not Derek. And you'll never prostrate yourselves at church until Ligon and Derek and the other ministers and staff are prostrating themselves. And before they come in they ought to be in the dirt, cowering in the dirt and saying "How can I stand in that pulpit?" And Jesus touches them and says, "Don't be afraid. I'm going to preach through you." And you leave this place, since we're

"...surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, lay aside every weight, and the sin which so earnestly ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

There's a road to glory. We're all on this road. And I've shared this road with you, been brought up in this church. Things do change. It's so nostalgic, it's wonderful. We're on the road to glory that connects this life to the next life.

There's a tunnel in that road, and it's the tunnel of suffering. And Jesus stands at that tunnel, and He bids you come. He bids you come and suffer, because that's part of what it means to be a Christian, is that we suffer with Him. Bonhoeffer said, 'When Jesus bids a man come, He bids him come and die.' He bids you come and suffer, and lay down your life and follow Him. I know you're suffering. Even if life is good, I know you're suffering, because we live in a fallen world. And there're hardships and trials and depression, and it's hard to get out of bed. And we have fears....and what I'm...I'm not even suggesting, I'm preaching to you that the transfiguration is the light at the end of the tunnel. It's the event in history that you could look at and say, 'I know that this is not all there is. There's a light at the end of the tunnel. There's glory that awaits me as a faithful follower of Christ. He's not going to let me down.'

To the unbeliever: They're suffering because it goes with the territory, but your suffering is different. It's a masked kind of suffering because you're not living in reality. And it's misery. There's no peace with the wicked, because there's no light at the end of the tunnel! I can't imagine, but you know it. And you've been there. And I'm here to offer that to you. I'm here to offer you light and glory, and hope. I'm here to say that the transfiguration can make a difference in your life today, if only you would have a relationship with Jesus Christ. I mean a real...not a relationship with First Presbyterian Church, and not a relationship with the ministers, or the reputation of the church, or whoever you think you are. I'm talking about a real relationship with a personal Savior, Jesus Christ, God's only Son, who came to take away your sin. You can have that by faith, by trusting that He died for you.

This is my preaching book, and I carry a lot of things in it. It's gotten pretty heavy over the years because I keep all these Post-It's from my children when they were little. And they say things like, 'Hey, Daddy" and "You did a good sermon" and "I love you"...and I can't throw them away. You know there's no way to take them off. And I have a letter from my Dad that says, "Keep your temper. Don't lose your temper just because you're a McRoberts." And a picture that a girl drew of me sitting in the pulpit at Trinity, and I married this girl to a godly man about two weeks ago. She was in ninth grade when she drew that. Those are the things that mean so much. But I keep two pictures. I know you can't see it from where you are, but Claiborne...I buried Claiborne. He was 17 years old, and drowned at his family reunion. And Stephanie Harmon was 20 years old. She was a sophomore at SMU, and was home after her sophomore year in late May, and she'd gone down to Florida with some friends. And she was driving back, and a drunk driver hit the median...they said that his car was airborne, and when he hit Stephanie, he was going about 110 miles per hour. The only child of Barry and Laura Harmon.

I keep them in my book because it just reminds me that life is short, and eternity is long. And that's why I stand here. I don't want to be a speaker. I don't care about...this is not...I just want to preach the word. And I want to tell people that life is short. This is nothing, and then there's eternity. And so if I had one thing to say....well, you go back home and you have this opportunity, and you say what's the one thing you tell your home church? It would be the question of Matthew 16:

"What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and yet loses his soul?"

What would a man possibly give in exchange for his soul? Come to Christ. Speak to me afterwards...Jeremy...the elders meet, do they not, in this room to my left? Talk to somebody. Don't leave this campus until you're sure of the glory that awaits you.

As we pray together,

Father, I thank You personally for the privilege of growing up in a church like this, with this leadership—these elders, these ministers, this choir master in Bill Wymond. Men, people that stand here today. I thank You personally for the privilege. But Father, most importantly we thank You for the word, the Lord Jesus, His sacrifice, salvation that is found in Him. We worship You for this truth...for this truth. And we pray in Jesus' name Amen.

The hymn is *Come, Christians, Join to Sing!* It is hymn No. 302. We'll stand together as we sing.

[Congregation sings.]

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit descend and rest in your hearts until the day breaks and all these shadows flee away. Amen.

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