

# Mountaintop Memories – Israel's Peak Moments

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, we sometimes talk about having a mountaintop experience, a moment from which we begin! to see everything else in all of life differently. We might use the language of an epiphany. Some of! you will be, I'm sure, avid Monroe baggers just loving to get to the very top of a mountain.

One of the most beautiful things is going up in Monroe in the clouds and then the clouds break and you can see for miles and miles and miles into the distance. It changes the way you see the path you've come from, the whole land around you. And so no wonder we use the term of a mountaintop experience to talk about something that changes our view. What we're looking at this evening really is a mountaintop moment in every sense of the word. This is something that would change the life of these disciples forever. It's a look behind the curtain to see Jesus as his heavenly glory is revealed. And it's a vision that Matthew has recorded to shape our understanding of the whole story of the gospel. And for us, it's a moment that if we understand it, should change the way we read the gospels every time we come to them and shape our view of who Christ is.

As I alluded to before, in Israel's history, mountaintop moments are significant. One writer says, if you take away all the meals and mountains from the Bible, you have almost no scriptures left. If you think over Israel's history, Abraham is up a mountain when he's called to sacrifice Isaac. Moses is up a mountain when he receives the law of God, as you've been seeing in your Exodus series. Elijah is up a mountain when he does battle with the evil pagan prophets.

Israel's temple is built on a mountain as if it's the meeting place of heaven and earth itself, high up. Mountaintop moments define the life of Israel. And therefore, they define something of who their God is. Yes, God dwells absolutely everywhere. He is on the present. Something of his immensity is almost incomprehensible. But actually being high up, being up the mountain reminds you that this God is big. And when you go up there, you know something significant is about to happen.

So let's join the disciples as Matthew pulls back the curtain and we behold the glory of the Son of God. It's our first point this evening. We behold the glory of the Son of God.

[ 2 : 36 ] Now, interesting, we start in verse one with the word six days later. Matthew wants you to consciously connect what has come before in this gospel to this moment. Over the last couple of chapters, if you read back, Jesus has started to talk about his coming crucifixion, all that will happen to him, but also the nature of discipleship for his disciples, what it will mean for them to carry their crosses after him. And Matthew wants you to connect that with what we see here. Here is Peter, James and John.

These three apostles, the foundation blocks of the early church, the writers of the New Testament, they are here with Jesus up the mountain. And they're unconsciously acting out exactly what happened with Moses in the Exodus. In the Exodus, Moses was called up the mountain by God so he could be given the law. And his assistant, Joshua, goes with him, the one who would one day carry on Moses' work in Israel. And so here is Jesus with his disciples, training them, showing them who he is, that they may carry on his work after he has departed.

And if I read a little bit from Exodus 24 here, you can maybe see some of the parallels. Exodus 24 verses 16 and 17 say, And so the question is, if you're up the mountain with the Lord, what are you going to see?

Well, the first thing is something that Peter will later describe as being eyewitnesses of his majesty. Because Peter, James and John see the transfigured Christ. Transfigured just means changed. Changed how? Well, changed to be shining, dazzling, with a brilliance that none of them have ever seen before.

[ 4 : 46 ] As the glory cloud of God descends and the Father speaks about his Son, so the Son shines before them. The disciples are seeing what few in history ever saw, a direct revelation of God's glory itself.

Jesus has the same gleaming glory here that you would see if you went to read the prophecy of Ezekiel as he looks at the throne of God shining with glory. Oh, when the prophet Daniel hears of the Son of Man coming, he sees a figure bedecked with the glory of God coming down from heaven in a cloud.

And here, if Peter, James and John have their Old Testament switched on, they are seeing the glory of God displayed in Jesus, the one who has been walking with them the whole time.

They are witnessing the veil between the heavenly and earthly reality being lifted, seeing Jesus as he truly is. The Lord of glory, the one the people of Israel have always seen up the mountain on his throne, is Christ.

This is Christ revealed to be the glorious God. And that in some ways is the first thing we have to take away from this, such a strong reminder.

[ 6 : 08 ] Very simply that Jesus is God. The creator of the universe is standing on a mountaintop with three Galilean fishermen.

The ones whose hands formed the very mountains themselves is now standing with his feet on their rocks. The presence of the glory of God is being revealed not in a temple, but in a person.

In Christ, the wandering holy place of God, who is the presence of God because he is God himself. It's a breathtaking moment.

It's hard to comprehend what it would have been like to be there. But it's a memory that defines Peter's ministry for the rest of his entire life. If you were to turn back, you would see it's been quite an intense couple of chapters for Peter.

He's the first person to finally see and say to Jesus, you are the Christ. And Jesus says, yes, Peter, and on that confession, I will build my church. And then Peter turns around and says, but you don't really have to die, that's silly.

[ 7 : 17 ] And Christ says, get behind me, Satan. It's a very intense couple of chapters if you were to read back. But yet Peter is still taken up the mountain.

Even though he's seen who Christ is in theory, he's seen that he's the Messiah, he's completely misunderstood what that will mean. And yet Christ has brought him up to see more. He's not said, Peter, you got this wrong, stay at the bottom.

But taken Peter up with him. And this is an event that Peter will come back to. Hear these words from the book of 2 Peter, chapter 1, verses 16 to 19.

Here Peter speaks about this. We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the book of 2 Peter, Peter is written a letter to strengthen the church, to persevere, undo.

And he's written a letter to the church, to the church, to the church, and to the church. And isn't it interesting he goes to this moment. This is the moment of the promises of God will be fulfilled for the future.

[ 8 : 48 ] You think he might have gone back to the cross, to the resurrection, to the ascension even. But Peter comes back here, to this moment.

To the revelation of the glory of Christ. As confirmation of everything the Father has said. And so beholding Jesus here should give us confidence as we hear.

Even confused sinners like Peter are invited to see Jesus in his glory. Because how often is our view of Christ diminished?

How often comfortable and unglorious? If we're honest with ourselves, sometimes we treat Christ as if he is loving but essentially impotent.

Not only would Jesus not harm a fly, he probably couldn't. And how utterly unlike those assumptions Jesus is here. The shining, glorious one.

[ 9 : 50 ] Revealed on the mountaintop to be God himself. Walking with his people. It's good to remember here, this isn't something Jesus became on the mountain.

But a revelation of who Jesus always was. Now we'll come back to Moses and Elijah and the voice of the Lord in a minute. But I just want us to stay with the disciples for a second.

After seeing Jesus shining in his glory. Hearing the voice of God in verse 6. We find when the disciples heard this. They fell on their faces and were terrified.

It shouldn't be a surprise. When Moses went up the mountain in Exodus. The place was so holy. And the Lord so powerful. That no Israelites, not even an animal could go near the mountain.

For fear of the holiness of the Lord breaking out. The presence of a holy God is dangerous for sinners. So imagine the moment of realization in the mind of a disciple.

[10:52] When they realize that they are sinners who are now standing in the glory cloud at the top of the mountain. The panic and the fear. How wonderful it is then to read in verse 7.

Jesus came and touched them saying, rise and have no fear. And when they lifted up their eyes they saw no one but Jesus only. Jesus shining in his glory.

It's the same Jesus who bends down to touch them, to lift them. There is grace for these weak disciples. They are safe with Jesus.

The one who walks with them though infinite in power and glory has stepped down and condescended that his people may walk with him. He has made himself safe to be with.

And what Jesus said he would do through his death and his resurrection will enable them to walk with him forever. The one who has just instructed them that he is going to die has also instructed them to take up their crosses and follow him.

[12:06] And that's firm proof that he cares for his disciples. But there is a flip side to that coin. If you just turn back to verse 21 of chapter 16 and just think of this verse in light of that moment.

What if I said the glorious Lord Israel's creator, sustainer and loving God must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised.

This moment of mountaintop glory exists in such stark contrast to the coming death of Jesus on the mountain of the crucifixion.

Because who are they about to crucify? The Lord of glory himself. The one who is no less glorious and shining even as they drive the nails into his hands.

Whilst Peter was absolutely wrong in the previous chapter to rebuke Jesus for going to his death. It is nonetheless such a terrible conclusion that the Lord of glory will suffer and die at the hands of his own people.

[13:16] The Apostle Paul later highlights this saying in 1 Corinthians 2 verse 8, None of the rulers of this age understood this. For if they had they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

In every age people have not understood the significance of Jesus' death, of his crucifixion.

One commentator puts it this way, The exalted Jesus with garments glistening, standing on a high mountain, flanked by two religious giants from the past where all is light.

Is also the humiliated Jesus, whose clothes have been torn from him and divided. The one lifted up on the cross, flanked by two common convicted criminals as darkness settles over the land.

And it is a sobering thought. But the Lord of glory went willingly to the cross.

[14:19] And he was then resurrected. And now rules. And at no point in the whole situation did he ever cease to be the Lord of glory. And here we get to behold his glory.

Which should lead us to a reverent fear of him. But also a deep comfort in knowing that he loves to comfort weak disciples like us. I think this is really worth meditating on when you read the Gospels.

I find it so hard to keep this thought in my head when I'm reading Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Who's battling with the Pharisees? It's the Lord of glory from the mountain.

Who's having perfume poured onto his head. The Lord of glory from the mountain. It's so hard to get into your head that the Lord of glory is always the one walking around.

But then how wonderful it is to read that through every page of the Gospels. And this is the vision that we need to remind ourselves of. That we may walk the Christian life. And so our first point has been.

[15:27] That we behold the glory of the Son of God. But secondly, therefore. We listen to the Gospel of the Son of God.

Now I don't know how many of you go camping very often. Such a came up at lunch at the McDonald's today. A big long chat about Duke of Edinburgh and how miserable it is if it rains continuously.

If the weather stays as cold as it has been the last couple of months, I may never go camping again. If I'm honest, I'm kind of a medium camping person. Like if there's a mattress in the tent and you bring a nice cast iron, I might go.

But I need a bit of luxury to enjoy it. But it's great to go to somewhere where there is a view you could only get by actually camping there.

Some people here, I'm sure, are some of the kind of Rambo camping people who will take the smallest tent and the most uncomfortable sleeping bag in the world and climb up a Monroe for three days to a valley that no one's ever been to.

[16:26] Just so they can unzip the door of their tent in the morning and see a glorious view that so few people have seen. When you're there, don't you just want to stay?

Have a beautiful sunrise and just watch it continuously? Don't you just want to not have to come back down to normal life where there's a desk and emails waiting for you?

That impulse to stay where things are most beautiful is something that we find in ourselves in lots of places. And it's something that we find with Peter here as well in this story.

Poor Peter, he had such a bad rep in the Gospels, but for good reason. He's so often first to speak, but rarely ever first to think. He sees Moses and Elijah in verse 4.

His impulse is just to stay. Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here. One for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah. Peter says, this is great.

[17:32] Let's just stay in this glorious cloud up this mountain with these saints of old. It's an attractive prospect, isn't it? Maybe we just set up the worldwide church here on this mountain, says Peter.

Like, bring everyone up the hill. We'll just live up here and it'll be great where the glory of the Lord is. But Jesus' ministry didn't stay up the mountain.

It lay in coming down to be with his people. Now, in the flow of Matthew's Gospel, this isn't even the first mountain moment.

The first mountain episode in Matthew is the Sermon on the Mount from chapters 5 to 7. Jesus' manifesto for his kingdom, showing the disciples what discipleship is going to be and what it would mean to follow him.

And right in the middle of chapter 5, Jesus says this in 5 verse 17. Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them.

[18:34] And here we are, up a mountain, with Moses and Elijah, the two figures that define the law and the prophets themselves. I would love to know what they talked about.

What does the Lord of glory talk to Moses and Elijah about? Moses was up the mountain for 40 days when he was given the law.

Elijah, in 1 Kings 19, goes to the mountain in distress so that he can hear from God again. These are the men that God has spoken to up the mountain. And yet there isn't anything new here.

Jesus has come to fulfill everything these two men pointed to. And what the Father says about his son on the mountain is a summation of everything that he has said before.

Fulfilling all the images and history, Jesus here embodies what it will mean to go back down this mountain. The disciples, whilst not understanding fully what's going on here, understand something.

[19:38] Because if we move on to verses 10 to 13 here, they start asking questions about Elijah as they go down the mountain. Verse 10, why do they say that Elijah must come first?

The answer is because of a prophecy in Malachi, chapter 4, verse 5, which says, Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.

So the scribes were in fact right about the sign, but they just missed it when it happened. Jesus says that Elijah has already come.

Not just the appearance of Elijah here at the Transfiguration, but actually in John the Baptist. But mere chapters ago, John the Baptist was brutally murdered in Herod's palace.

And the implication here is that what happened to John is coming for Christ. And yet those things are also going to be the thing that is the day of the Lord.

[20:40] What Malachi wrote is true. The day of the Lord is about to happen. And it does first at Christ's death, but also on through his resurrection and ascension, and will not be fully finished until the day of the Lord comes again.

And the confirmation of all of that is this transfiguration. Now we probably share Peter's impulse to want to stay right here, because life is harder down the valley.

If you go to read into the rest of chapter 17, you immediately meet demons and death and the tax man, which is kind of astonishing. Maybe we'd like a mountaintop experience of our own.

But let me say to you, if you're sitting there thinking, I would love to have been up the mountain with Peter. You don't need to, because you're being given that mountaintop experience here.

Jesus is being revealed to you through this word. Because later in the New Testament, Hebrews chapter 1, verses 1 and 2 say that God spoke to our fathers through the prophets.

[ 21 : 50 ] But in these last days, he has spoken to us by his son. And here God speaks directly about his son. What God says and doesn't say here are interesting, because it's so short.

This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him. It's a verbatim quote of what happened in chapter 3, when Jesus was baptized, but with one addition.

Listen to him. You want to know what God is like? Listen to Jesus, the one who reveals God's glory to us.

You want to hear God's priorities for the world? Listen to Jesus, the one with whom the Father is well pleased. You want to live in God's world, God's way, and glorify the God you believe in?

Then listen to Jesus, the one whom the Father loves. What a challenge to the disciples. Will they listen to Jesus' words about his death and their discipleship?

[ 23 : 08 ] If back in chapter 16, they are told they must take up their cross and follow him, and the next thing they hear is God the Father saying, listen to my son, they can't avoid those words. Jesus will have to die.

Following him will mean suffering unavoidably. But it's not the only thing. Not just the challenge, but the comfort.

Jesus has said that he will be resurrected, and that there will be eternal life for them. So when they're told to listen to him, they're being given confirmation to their great comfort that all that Jesus has promised will come true.

The fullness of the revelation of God is found in Jesus Christ. He is the image of God on display, speaking to us that we may know God for ourselves. So we must listen to him.

And if that's the case, we may find verse 9 a slightly strange request from the Lord. Tell no one the vision until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.

[ 24 : 21 ] And you think, after such a glorious moment, how hard it must have been for Peter especially to keep his mouth shut. There's so many ways for the disciples to get this wrong, though.

And Jesus says, tell no one until after the resurrection, until he has done his full work. Because imagine how explosive this would be if it gets out.

If Peter, James, and John just start running around telling every Pharisee they meet that this is God himself. Imagine how quickly the cries of blasphemy would come. But when he's raised from the dead, after that, they could look back at this moment and really understand what they saw.

Because in beholding him, they will see that everything that he has said is true. And as we ourselves behold him, we must also believe that what he has said is true and keep listening to him.

To finish the quote from the commentator from before, what a parallel we see between the transfiguration and crucifixion, light and darkness, two saints, two sinners.

[ 25 : 34 ] And between all this is him, the beloved son, says God on the mountain. And the pagan soldier will eventually say, truly this was the son of God.

Behold the son, listen to him. And beholding Jesus as he is gives us great confidence as we ourselves look ahead.

First, as we look to the resurrection, the revelation of his glory here shows us the glory that Jesus has always had and still has.

The ascended Christ sitting on the throne in glory. But that resurrection glory is a snippet of what's coming for his people. He will one day come to judge the world in power.

But the good news for us is if we see that is if you really desperately want to see the glorious Christ, if you wish you'd been there on the mountain, friends, one day you will see Christ as he is, revealed in his full glory.

[ 26 : 42 ] And on that day, faith will become sight and there will be nothing lacking or missing in your faith. It will be proved on that day that we were right to listen to him and that God will have kept all of his promises on the day that the resurrection comes.

And we get a sense of the truth of that in seeing Christ here. It's important as you think about the whole of Matthew's gospel, if this gospel ends in the great commission, that all authority in heaven and earth is being given to Christ and that his people are to go and make disciples of all nations.

Well, then we can see here that all authority indeed is in his hands. This is the grounds for his sending of the disciples later to be messengers from the mountaintop, those who've seen the glory of Christ and go and tell others.

And so the church in every age have been people who see Christ's glory, who listen to him, and go and tell others of him. And that same glorious Christ is still speaking to us now. Christian life is an overflow from beholding the glory of God displayed in the face of Christ, in listening to him as we take up our cross and follow him, knowing that everything that we ever need will be given to us in seeing him, listening to him, and following him.  
[ 28 : 11 ] With that thought, let's turn to prayer. Amen.