

Friends On Top • Matthew 17:1–13

The first house that Charleen and I owned was in an unincorporated part of Boulder County in Colorado. About a mile south of where we lived, within the city limits of Longmont, Colorado, there was a federal facility. If you were to drive by it, you would probably hardly notice it. It's a place that everyone referred to as the "Denver Center," owned and operated by the federal government, and more specifically by the FAA. It is from there that air traffic controllers control the traffic that goes across the skyways in that part of the country.

Until I first visited the Center and eventually got to know personally many of the air traffic controllers who worked there, I had never given much thought as to how commercial flights got from one place to another without running into each other and crashing. I discovered when I went there, on the first of many visits, that it was far more complicated and sophisticated than I had first anticipated. I went into a large, dark windowless room, and there men and women, air traffic controllers, were seated around the perimeter looking at radar screens that showed the indication of every flight, its number and its airline. They wore headsets to communicate with the pilots. There was, I discovered, a very strict protocol on how everything was to be handled and especially how flights were to be handed off from one controller to another as the flight progressed from one control sector to the next. There is also a taped record that is kept of every sight, every sound, every transaction.

When you and I get on a plane and fly to Denver's International Airport, for example, we're thinking about whether the flight's on time or not, we're wondering if we turned off the stove or we're wondering if the business meeting to which we are going will be a success, but there are all kinds of other things that are going on behind the scenes. And if it were not for those people behind the scenes, we could never safely, successfully make it to our destination.

One of the most amazing events in the Bible gives us a fleeting glimpse behind the scenes in the running of the universe — from the movement of planets down to the finest details, the minutiae of every one of our own personal lives. It is something about which few of us know anything at all, and only a little bit of information is given as the curtain is parted only an inch or so. Through it, for

a few seconds, the brilliant, blinding light of the glory of God shines through. The event is called the transfiguration. Its sights and sounds are recorded in Matthew 17.

Let me tell you, you need to adjust your eyes to see what is here because in some ways it's like looking right at the sun. It's almost too bright to see.

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters — one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

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

When the disciples heard this, they fell face-down to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

The disciples asked him, "Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?"

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Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah

has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.

Let's climb that mountain along with Peter, James, John and Jesus. Let's see if we can see what they saw. Let's see if we can catch a glimpse of the supernatural glory that is behind and beyond the material world that we are far more used to dealing with. Let's walk through the seven step sequence

of this astounding story.

The first step is to the spectacular sights that they saw. I want you to notice the first words. They seem rather routine, but are very important. “After six days Jesus . . . led them up a high mountain.” Why is the time line so important? It’s because of what took place in the previous chapter, in Matthew 16. Understand that the people of that day, including the disciples of Jesus, were waiting for a Messiah who had been promised centuries before and their hope was probably at an all time high. Excitement ran everywhere. They were expecting a capable king, a political power, a spiritual Christ; and they all hoped it might be Jesus.

In Matthew 16:16, Peter just blurted it out. He said, “Jesus, you are the Christ, you are the son of the living God.” Everyone gasped and waited to see what Jesus would say. And he said, “You’re right. I am the Christ.” And they were ecstatic. The euphoria ran high; everything that they had hoped for and dreamed about was true. They were more excited than campaign workers at party headquarters on election night when their candidate wins. All of history had come together right there at that moment in their presence.

But then Jesus added a p.s. that just about blew them away. In Matthew 16:21 we are told, “From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things . . . that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”

Peter was so offended that Jesus would even suggest that the Messiah had to suffer or die that he took Jesus aside to straighten him out. Matthew 16:22 says, “Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ‘Never, Lord!’ he said. ‘This shall never happen to you!’” Jesus shot back to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.” And then Jesus laid some very heavy news on his disciples. He said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

Those disciples were in shock for six days. They expected to be winners, victors. They expected everything to go well and that they would be triumphant. They expected that they would have it made in the easiest fashion. But Jesus said it’s going to be tough and you’re going to suffer; and they couldn’t believe it. A lot of people still don’t believe that Jesus means it. Many are convinced that Christians should have the easiest of lives and when they read the words of Jesus, that suffering is an integral part of the Christian life, they go into

complete denial. They skip those parts. They say, “No, it just can’t be true. What Jesus is supposed to do is chase all of life’s problems away. It’s too much of a shock because I don’t want to suffer; I don’t want it to be hard.” Six days they struggled; they were depressed.

Six days later Jesus took them up a mountain, probably Mount Herman, to the top, to the highest point. He did it in order to give to them hope that on the other side of the suffering, the difficulty, was a glory that they never dreamed of. There, on the top of that mountain, before their eyes, they saw Jesus transfigured. The Greek word is “metamorphosis” which means change. It’s the word we learned in high school biology to describe the change of a caterpillar into a butterfly. Think about that. If you had never seen a caterpillar and you discovered one crawling up your leg one day, in your wildest imagination you would never guess that that thing would ever end up a butterfly. And if butterflies were flying by as you were trying to figure it out — you’d probably never make the connection. Even when you know it’s true, it is still such a change of form that it is very difficult to grasp.

Before their eyes Jesus was transfigured... a metamorphosis. His face turned brilliant, like the sun. His normally colored clothes turned white as light. It was like heaven on earth. It was the glory of Jesus, the son of God, showing him as he really is, not as he had been for 30 years since his birth in Bethlehem. Then two other men appeared with him it seemed from nowhere: Moses, the first lawgiver and Elijah, the first prophet.

You read this and you think to yourself, “This sounds just too weird.” Understand, this is not weird; this is reality. This is the reality of heaven, the reality of God, the reality of the way that the universe really works. It’s the reality of eternity. It is the reality of behind the scenes. Jesus let them see it so they wouldn’t be so discouraged, so they wouldn’t think that suffering was all there was. He wanted them to know that behind all that we experience on an ongoing basis is a brilliant, magnificent, genius God, brighter than 10,000 suns, more intelligent than a million Einsteins, more powerful than every atomic weapon. This is the God who is in charge of all of life, that we only darkly and inadequately see. This is the reality that controls the circumstances of our world and of our lives. It was a spectacular sight.

Now Peter had to say something. Peter, as you may know, had a mouth problem. He should have kept quiet because what he said was just stupid. To

make a comparison, suppose somehow you were chosen to be an honored guest of the president of the United States at his State of the Union Address. You are seated on the platform with the speaker of the house and the vice president of the United States. The members of congress and the cabinet, ambassadors, the most powerful people in the country were all seated there in the jammed room. Then the sergeant-at-arms comes in and shouts, "Ladies and gentlemen, the president of the United States." Everyone stands and applauds, the Marine band plays "Hail to the Chief" and the president walks up to the platform. There's a moment of expectant silence and you say, "Hi Mr. President, nice tie." He doesn't know what to say because that was a stupid thing for you to say.

Peter was equally stupid. Here was the glory of God revealed — it was magnificent. And Peter said, "Lord, it's certainly nice to be here. Why don't I put up three tents for you — one for Elijah, we could put that over here; one for Moses, we could put some tablets in, in case he wants to write another commandment or two; and we'll have one for Jesus over here." Nothing more was said about Peter's stupid remark because he was interrupted by God. Rather than let Peter babble on, God the Father enveloped them in a cloud of light that was even more spectacular than what they had already seen.

And God himself spoke out loud for them to hear. He said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" In two sentences God said so much. He declared that Jesus was no ordinary man, that he was the Son of God, that he was God himself. That God the Father loved him and was pleased with all he had done and would do, and his disciples ought do nothing else but hear him and listen to him.

The sights those disciples could handle, but the voice of God knocked them flat. When the disciples heard this they fell face down to the ground, terrified, because that is what the voice of God does. The voice of God is a terrifying thing and the brilliance of the presence of God is overwhelming because God is awesome, God is bigger and greater and more magnificent and powerful than anything we could ever imagine. To hear him, to sense his presence is beyond anything of human comparison; it drops all mortals to the ground before him just because of who he is. The presence and the words of God can terrify the calmest and

most confident persons on earth.

But, wait a minute, is this the same God that we sometimes call friend? Were they terrified by the same God who allows people on the street to routinely profane his name, to deny his existence and defy his laws? Yes, it is the same God before whom some day we shall all stand. We will all some day experience what Peter, James, and John experienced that day. And I expect that our response will be exactly the same. When we recognize that we are in the presence of God and when he speaks a single syllable, we, too, will fall face down before him, overwhelmed, shaken and terrified by this awesome God.

Only Jesus is as human as we are human, yet as divine as God is divine. So only Jesus could do what he did and that was to tenderly touch them and warmly speak to them, telling them not to be afraid. There's a powerful line that comes later in the New Testament, in I Timothy 2:5. It says that there is one mediator between God and man and that is the man, Christ Jesus. He is the only one who can bridge the gap between us and the awesome God. He is the only one that can stop us from being blown away by who and what God is. He is the only one who can make it possible for us to genuinely and rightly refer to God as our friend.

They did what Jesus said. They got up. They went down the mountain but did not speak because they didn't know what to say. It was too fresh in their minds — the brilliance and the glory of God was burned into the screen of their memories. They would be able to see it forever. The sound of the voice of God still echoed in their ears. They would know that sound better than any sound that they ever heard before or would ever hear again. They had seen the other side of reality, that which really makes the universe

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work. Life was more than jobs, family, houses, pain and pleasure. The mundane, every day realities of life that fill our minds would never be the same for them again. Now they understood that behind it all was this great, magnificent, brilliant, articulate, awesome God.

It was Jesus who first spoke. He said to them, "Don't tell anyone what you've seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." At first they must have thought to themselves, "Don't worry, we're not going to tell anybody because we don't have any idea what to say. We don't have any vo-

cabulary for something like this. We don't have any basis of comparison. We wouldn't know what to tell them." But on second thought, they must have said to themselves, "How can we keep quiet? How could anyone who has experienced God ever be silent? We need to tell the first person we see, we need to run to our family and to our friends — anyone and everyone needs to know — we have experienced God!" But Jesus told them to keep silent. He did that because he didn't want to be a spectacle. For Jesus had set himself on a course to the cross. He had come to suffer and die, to pay the price for human sin, and he wanted nothing to distract him from his central mission in life. And so, he told them to be quiet until after the resurrection and then they could tell it all.

When they finally did speak, it was to ask a really picky question — one of these trivial technical questions, not totally inappropriate, not wrong, but really trivial. It would be like a person winning the Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes. They show up at your door with the giant check. You think to yourself, "How am I ever going to fit it through the drive-in window at the bank?" The cameras are clicking and rolling and you are looking at this check for millions of dollars and you turn to the guy who is presenting it to you and say, "What bank is this drawn on anyway?" Now that's not a bad question. But under the circumstances you would think you would be more excited about the \$10,000,000 you just got than about the bank on which the check was drawn.

The disciples asked Jesus, "What about the lawyers' teaching that Elijah has to come before the Messiah?" It was a technical, theological question but I think there was more behind it than that. They were trying to figure it all out. They were trying to make sense out of life which, by the way, is what most of us do most of the time.

Jesus was so gracious. He didn't say that they were out of line; he answered them. He acknowledged the question and gave them an answer. He said, "John the Baptist filled that role. He was the prophet like Elijah in the Old Testament prophecies." But then Jesus redirected the conversation and used the "s" word: suffering. He reminded them that suffering is a part of what it's all about. He wouldn't let them forget that John had suffered, that Jesus would suffer and that those who were his disciples would suffer as well. It was more than a reminder. It was telling them one more time that suffering is part of what it means to be a Christian, but the other side of suffering is the glory of God himself.

What do we learn from this true story of the supernatural? Well, let me give you five quick lessons, and then you decide how to apply them to your life. Lesson 1 is that there is supernatural glory and power behind the scenes. Never be so ignorant, so narrow, so blinded to the truth as to think that what you see is what you get. There is a whole lot more to reality than anything that we see. The other side of reality, beyond what our physical senses see, is God himself and that awesome God is in control.

Lesson 2 is the lesson that God is overwhelming and we must never underestimate how great he is, but Jesus is always there to help us. Jesus, who is both human and divine, is the mediator, the go-between, between us and God. He is always, even to this day, ready with his tender touch — with his warm words.

Lesson 3 is that suffering goes with glory. Never be surprised by suffering in this life, but never give up expecting the glory that God promises to come.

Lesson 4 is that Jesus has the answers to our trickiest and most technical questions. He is not put off by them; he is not offended. He is willing to have us ask and willing to answer any question we have. And he will not get hung up on some technical trivia.

The fifth and final lesson is that mountain top experiences, whether on the Mountain of Transfiguration or some other mountain in our own experiences, are wonderful indeed. They are those moments in life when in an indescribable way we also experience God. But understand that normally, no one lives on top of a mountain. Life is lived on the plains and in the valleys, in the ordinary circumstances of life. But it is the memory of the mountain that gets us through until our eternal heavenly home. The same Jesus who is with us in our suffering in the reality of this life is the Jesus who was transfigured on the mountain to show us the other side — the victory and the glory of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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