

# THE TRANSFIGURATION: STRENGTHENED TO BEAR THE CROSS MATHEW 17:01–13

## *Introduction*

The transfiguration of Christ is a most unusual experience, but Christ and the disciples needed unusual strength to face the future. The future held the cross for both.

Christ had just entered the last stage of training for the disciples. It was most important that they grasp God's plan for the world: He was the Messiah and He was to save the world through death and not through earthly power and conquest (See *Christ, Messiah*, Mt. 1:18; *Baptism of Jesus and John*, Mt. 3:11; *Prophecy Fulfilled*, Mt. 11:5; *Messiah, Judgement*, Mt. 11:6; *No Publicity*, Mt. 12:16). He was to bear the cross for the sins of the world (1 Pet. 2:24), but they too were to bear the cross if they were to follow Him. For some days now He had been drilling this message into them. Soon He was to face the reality of the cross and they were going to fully understand the thrust of what He meant by their "taking up the cross". They both needed a very special strength to face what lay in front of them.

The transfiguration was God's answer to their need. God used five things to strengthen Christ and the disciples. The same five things are applicable to the great needs we face. God will use the same kinds of things to strengthen us.

- I Jesus was on a high mountain (v. 1).
- II The strength of God' glory (v. 2).
- III The strength of great saints (v. 3).
- IV The strength of a heavenly experience (v. 4).
- V The strength of God's presence (vv. 5-8).
- VI The strength of the resurrection (vv. 9-13).

### MATHEW 01:18 CHRIST, MESSIAH

The word for "Christ" and "Messiah" is the same word: *Christos*. Messiah is the Hebrew word, and Christ is the Greek word. Both words refer to the same Person and mean the same thing: *the Anointed One*. The Messiah is the *Anointed One* of God. Mathew says that Jesus "is called Christ" (Mt.1:16); that is, He is recognized as the Anointed One of God, the Messiah Himself.

In the day of Jesus Christ, people feverishly panted for the coming of the long-promised Messiah. The weight of life was harsh, hard, and impoverished. Under the Romans, people felt that God could not wait much longer to fulfil His promise. Such longings for deliverance left the people trusting. Many arose who claimed to be the Messiah and led the trusting followers into rebellion against the Roman State. The

insurrectionist, Barabbas, who was set free in the place of Jesus at Jesus' trial, is an example (Mk. 15:6f).

The Messiah was thought to be several things:

1. *Nationally*, He was to be the leader from David's line who would free the Jewish state and establish it as an independent nation, leading it to be the greatest nation the world had ever known.
2. *Militarily*, He was to be a great military leader who would lead Jewish armies victoriously over all the world.
3. *Religiously*, He was to be a supernatural figure straight from God who would bring righteousness over all the earth.
4. *Personally*, He was to be the One who would bring peace to the whole world.

Jesus Christ accepted the title of Messiah on three different occasions (Mt.16:17; Mk.14:61; Jn.4:26). The name Jesus shows Him to be man. The name Christ shows Him to be God's anointed, God's very own, Son. Christ is Jesus' official title. It identifies Him officially as:

- Prophet (Deu. 18:15-19)
- Priest (Psa. 110:4)
- King (2 Sam.7:12-13)

These officials were always anointed with oil, a symbol of the Holy Spirit who was to perfectly anoint the Christ, the Messiah (Mt. 3:16; Mk. 1:10-11; Lk. 3:21-22; Jn. 1:32-33).

**John 1:41** *The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ).*

**John 1:45** *Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote - Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."*

**John 1:49** *Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel."*

**John 4:25** *The woman said, "I know that Messiah (called Christ) is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."*

**John 4:26** *Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."*

**John 6:69** *"We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."*

**John 11:25** *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies."*

**John 11:26** “And whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

**John 11:27** “Yes, Lord,” she told him, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”

**Acts 8:36-37** As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” □

## MATHEW 03:11 THE BAPTISM OF JESUS AND JOHN

*“I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” **Mathew 3:11***

The word baptism (baptizein) means to dip, to immerse, to submerge, to place into. John’s baptism was with water, but Jesus’ baptism was “with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

1. John’s baptism was both a preparation and a symbol of the spiritual baptism that Jesus was to bring. John’s baptism of water meant two things.
  - a. It symbolized cleansing from all sin. A person was being prepared for the cleansing that Christ would provide.
  - b. It symbolized separation or dedication. A person was setting his life apart to God in a renewed spirit of dedication. He was committing himself to the Christ about whom John was preaching.

Note: John’s baptism is called “the baptism of repentance”; that is, the person who repented was baptised. There could be no question; it was understood: if a person repented and actually turned to the Lord, he was baptised.

2. Jesus’ spiritual baptism was a double baptism. (Only one preposition is used in the Greek for “the Holy Spirit and with fire,” the preposition “in.”)
  - a. Jesus baptises the person *in the Spirit*. He dips, immerses and places the person in the Spirit. Whereas the person was carnal and materialistically minded, he now becomes spiritually minded (Rom. 8:5-7). The Jews had looked and longed for the day when the Spirit would come. The prophets had predicted His coming time and again. Therefore, the people knew exactly what John was predicting. The Spirit was expected to awaken and excite the people to such a degree that they would mobilize behind the Messiah, following Him in the overthrow of all oppressors. The Spirit was to lead the people in freeing Israel and establishing it as one of the greatest nations on earth (see Eze. 36:26-27; 37:14; 39:29; Isa. 44:3; Joel 2:28).

- b. Jesus baptises the person *in fire*. Fire has several functions that graphically symbolize the work of Christ. It illuminates, warms, melts, burns, and utterly destroys. The difference between baptism with water and fire is the difference between an outward work and an inward work. Water only cleanses the outside; fire purifies within, that is, the heart. Jesus Christ separates a person from his former life and purifies him within by the fire of His Spirit. It should be noted that in John's mind the "baptism of fire" meant that the Messiah was to destroy the enemies of Israel. It was "the messianic fire of judgment" that was to come from the throne of David. □

### MATHEW 11:05 PROPHECY, FULFILLED

*"The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor."* **Mathew 11:05**

Jesus was referring to Scripture here. He was telling John that He was fulfilling the predictions of the prophets (Isa. 35:5-6; 61:1-2; see Psa. 72:2; 146:8; Zech. 11:11). Note, however, that Jesus stressed the personal ministry and *not the political*. He omitted the phrases of Isa. 61:1 that could have been interpreted as implying He was a political leader: "proclaiming freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners." He needed to get John's attention away from the wrong concept of the Messiah to the true concept. He was reaching out in the power of the Spirit to individuals, saving and restoring them, not reaching out to mobilize people for the deliverance of Israel from Roman enslavement. □

### MATHEW 11:06 MESSIAH AND JUDGMENT

*"Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."*  
**Mathew 11:06**

Jesus was saying that the Messianic blessing and judgment were coming. Today is the day of salvation, the day of Messianic blessing. Tomorrow will be the day of Messianic fire, the day of judgment against all those who are offended in Christ. The Messianic fire of judgment was John's concern. He did not see Christ's judging the world. But Christ assured John: "Blessing is coming; and *judgment is coming*. Do not be offended because you do not understand everything about me." □

## MATHEW 12:16 JESUS — NO PUBLICITY

*Warning them not to tell who he was. **Mathew 12:16***

Why did Jesus withdraw and charge the people not to make Him known?

1. Jesus wished to avoid confrontation with those who sought His life. His hour had not yet come. He did not wish to provoke the religionists to a deliberate conflict putting Himself in premature peril.
2. Jesus did not wish to be pushed forward by public acclaim to assume kingship of the nation. He understood His mission. He had come first to be the Suffering Servant, and He knew that the people were inflammable, aching for deliverance from the Roman conquerors. Too much promotion of His miracles might have caused an uprising. He had to prevent an uprising so that He could carry out His mission of dying for the world as the Suffering Servant. Jesus needed time to teach the people what true Messiahship meant. The people thought the Messiah was to overthrow the Roman conquerors and establish Israel as one of the great nations of the world. Jesus had to show that the Messiah's kingdom was spiritual, not material; present and future, not just present; permanent and eternal, not just mortal and temporal.
3. Jesus needed to teach humility. He refused to make a spectacle, to "be seen of men" (v. 19).
4. Jesus wished to give an example of the principle He had laid down: "When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another" (Mt. 10:23). □

### **I. *Mathew 17:01 Devotion***

Jesus was on a high mountain. Note that this event took place six days after drilling His disciples with the fact of His coming death and resurrection. Christ needed to get all alone with God. He took three disciples, Peter, James and John, with Him and climbed a high mountain. The place chosen is important. It was "a high mountain," an isolated place where they would not be interrupted. It was conducive, fitted for being alone with God. Four major things drove Christ to get alone with God. The same things should always cause us to get alone with God for an extended time:

- pressure (from facing the cross)
- a momentous decision (to bear the cross)
- intensive training
- the need for renewed strength

## MARK 09:02 PETER, JAMES AND JOHN

Peter, James and John apparently formed an inner circle around Jesus. Jesus revealed more to these three men than to the other disciples. They were with Him when He raised Jairus' daughter, when He was in the Garden of Gethsemane, and here on the mount of transfiguration. Why were these three chosen to receive these additional revelations?

What is known is this. Each was being chosen for a very special ministry role or call. They were not aware of it yet, but they were to fill unique positions in the ministry.

1. Peter was to be the leader of the early church, the one who was to open the door of the gospel to both Jew and Gentile after Pentecost (Acts 2:1f; 10:1f).
2. James was called to be an apostle and to be martyred for his faith in Christ (Acts 12:2).
3. John was to receive The Revelation from God to close out the Scripture. □

## II. *Mathew 17:01 God's Glory*

There was the strength of God's glory. The word transfigured (metamorphothe) means a change into another form; a transformation; a change of countenance; a complete change. Luke said, "the appearance of His face changed" (Lk 9:29). Note how the gospel writers described what happened.

*Mat 17:2 There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.*

*Mk 9:3 His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.*

*Luke 9:29 As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.*

Apparently *the glory* of His Godly nature was allowed to shine through His body. "The glory [which He] had with [God] before the world began" shone through His body right on through His clothes (Jn. 17:5). Peter said, "We were eyewitnesses of His majesty" (2 Pet. 1:16). In John's vision of Christ in *The Revelation*, he described the glory of Christ as the sun shining in all its brilliance (Rev. 1:16).

The scripture says:

*1 John 1:5 This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.*

*1 Tim 6:16 Who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honour and might forever. Amen.*

**Psa 104:2** *He wraps himself in light as with a garment; he stretches out the heavens like a tent.*

**Thought 1.** Believers experience some portion of the glory of the Lord.

**2 Cor 3:18** *And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

Of course, our sense of God's glory is very much dependent upon our doing what Christ did: getting alone with God in an intensive session of prayer and devotion. We are to be transformed into the image of Christ, transformed in all His moral excellence. But we must learn that the change is brought about only by the Spirit of God and only as we seek His face in prayer and genuine trust.

**Rom 12:2** *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

### III. **Mathew 17:03 The Role of Moses and Elijah**

There was the strength of great saints. Why did Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus? There seem to be two reasons.

1. To discuss Jesus' death (Lk. 17:31). Jesus needed to be strengthened to bear the weight and pressure of the cross (Mk. 9:2-13.)

At the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prostrated before God. He bore the weight of His own cup of suffering. In confronting death Jesus turned to God crying with *loud cries and tears* (see Heb 5:7). The human nature and will of Jesus is clearly seen in this experience. He was as much flesh as any man is; therefore, He begged God to choose another way other than the cup, if possible. The experience of being separated from God on the cross was too much to bear. God had to send an angel to strengthen Jesus. (Lk. 22:39-46).

2. To show that Jesus was the true Messiah, the Son of God, the One who was superior to the Law and the prophets. Moses represented the law; and Elijah, who was considered the greatest of the prophets, represented the prophets. These two men were honouring and ministering to Christ. By such they were symbolizing that the law and the prophets found their fulfilment in Christ.
  - Christ was the One of whom the law and the prophets spoke.
  - Christ was the One to whom the law and the prophets pointed. The old covenant was now to be fulfilled in and superseded by Christ who was to usher in the new covenant (Mk. 9:2-4; 2 Cor. 3: 6-18; Mt. 9:16-17.)

**Thought 1.** Christ was soon to fulfil His prophetic and priestly offices. Moses and Elijah were symbolically transferring the old prophetic and priestly offices to Him.

**Luke 18:31** *Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, “We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled.”*

**1 Pet 1:10 -11** *Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.*

**Thought 2.** Something very significant is seen here. Believers who have gone on before are as alive, if not more alive, than we are. They are living in a dimension other than our physical world, an eternal world that is perfect and free from all sin, suffering, and death. What a glorious hope!

**2 Cor 5:8** *We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.*

**Phil 1:23** *I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.*

#### **IV. Mathew 17:04 *Spiritual Experiences of the Disciples***

There was the strength of a heavenly experience. The three disciples were tasting glory. They were in the very presence of God Himself and were tasting some of heaven’s joy, peace, security, fulfilment and perfection. They did not want to leave this hallowed ground.

Note what Peter did.

1. He offered to build three shelters (skenas) for Jesus and the two prophets. By this act he hoped to extend the stay of the heavenly guests and the glorious experience. The shelters offered were the booths made of branches and grass which could be quickly built, the kind often built by travellers on their stops along the road night by night.
2. He said, “If you wish.” Peter, even in a moment as glorious as this, would not act against his Lord’s will. Imagine the devotion and loyalty!

**Thought 1.** There is a great need to learn something: God knows exactly how to meet every believer’s need. He knows just what kind of experience is needed, and God will do whatever it takes to meet our need — if we truly seek Him.

However, we must remember something: our experiences must conform to God’s Word. God will not go against His Word in order to give growth and experiences. The experiences that come from God are the experiences that conform to His Word. In fact, spiritual experiences and growth usually come about as a result of reading and studying God’s Word.

**Thought 2.** A deep spiritual experience with God is always a glorious time. Nothing can compare to a session of deep communion with Christ, and there is always the wish that we could remain in His presence.

But such is not our calling, not now. Our present call is to bear the cross and its message, not to wallow around in deep spiritual experiences. Our spirits do occasionally need to be spiritually renewed, but they are always renewed for a purpose: to strengthen us for going out and bearing a much stronger witness for our Lord.

*Isa 58:7* Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

*Acts 20:35* In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

*Rom 15:1* We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.

*Gal 6:2* Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.

*Heb 13:3* Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

*James 1:27* Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

*1 Pet 3:8* Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble.

## **V. Mathew 17:05–08 Spiritual Experience: Heaven**

There was the strength of God’s presence. The cloud also covered the disciples. It and the voice of God terrified the disciples and caused them to fall immediately upon their faces, prostrated and unable to look up. As mortal men, they were crouched in fear and paralyzed in terror. Note four facts.

1. The cloud was “a bright cloud.” This was the Shekinah glory, the cloud that symbolized God’s presence. It was the cloud that guided Israel out of Egypt and that rested upon the tabernacle (Exo. 40:34-38) and above the Mercy Seat or Atonement Cover in the Most Holy Place. God dwells in unapproachable light upon which no man can look. The Shekinah glory is a light so glorious and brilliant that there is no need for a sun. It is a light that radiates splendour (Rev. 21:11, 23). Peter later called it “the Majestic Glory” (2 Pet. 1:17).

*1 Tim 6:16* Who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honour and might forever. Amen.

The “bright cloud” overshadowing Christ was in contrast to the dark and threatening cloud that overshadowed the giving of the old covenant to Moses, that is, the law (Exo. 19:18; 20:21). There is a point to be made here.

- The law (old covenant) was dark and threatening (Gal. 3:10).
  - The new covenant (the love of Christ) is bright and is given to save and bless, not to threaten and condemn (Heb. 12:18-24. See Heb. 8:6-13.)
2. The voice speaking actually says in the Greek, “This is My Son, the Beloved One.” Note the two facts stressed: Christ is God’s Son and He is the One whom God loves. The idea is that Christ is the “one and only Son” who was to be given for the world (Jn. 3: 16).
  3. The disciples experienced a clear, intense sense of God’s presence. They fell prostrate on their faces before the Lord.
  4. The Lord stood there alone. The representatives of the Old Testament and covenant (law) had faded away. The bondage and darkness and terror of the law were now gone. Christ now stood in the law’s place (Note Mt. 5:17-18). The new covenant was soon to take effect; the new covenant of light, love, and liberty was now replacing the old covenant of darkness, fear, and bondage.

The disciples’ experience can be applied to the believer’s future, to his appearance before God in the great Day of Redemption. In fact, that is just what is happening to Peter, James and John. They find themselves in God’s presence. The believer’s experience when he meets Christ face to face will undoubtedly be very much like what they experienced.

1. The believer will experience the Shekinah glory and see its full manifestation upon Christ.
2. The believer will hear the voice of God proclaiming Christ to be His Son; expressing perfect approval of His redemptive work; and rejoicing that He has been heard and is to be heard throughout all eternity.
3. The believer will fall upon his face, prostrating himself before Christ in awe and adoration and worship.
4. The believer will experience the Lord’s intercessory work. He will feel the Lord’s hand reaching out to touch him and to lift him up, and the believer will stand in the Lord’s righteousness and perfection, living in a state of glory forever.

**Thought 1.** How often God would grant a clear, intense sense of His presence — if we would only get alone with Him for long sessions of meditation and prayer! How much power would be present in our lives and ministries if we often got alone with God for long periods!

5. The believer will witness and experience the Lord’s pre-eminence throughout all eternity.

**Thought 1.** The message of God was, is, and ever will be...

- this is my Son, whom I love
- in whom I am well pleased,
- listen to Him.

## **VI. *Mathew 17:09–13 The Resurrection of Jesus Christ***

There was the strength of the resurrection. The resurrection proves two things.

- First, the resurrection proves that Jesus Christ is definitely the Son of God.
- Second, the resurrection proves that the transfiguration actually happened — that it actually foreshadowed the supremacy of the new covenant and to some degree the believer's experience of heaven.

Jesus did not allow the three disciples to share their experience because it could not be understood. It was just too incredible to grasp until after the resurrection. This charge to keep silent baffled the disciples because the Scribes had always taught that Elijah was to come and proclaim the Messiah (Ma1 4:5). They had just seen Elijah with Christ. When would Elijah begin announcing Jesus to be the Messiah? And if he were going to proclaim the message, why should they keep silent about Jesus' Messiahship? Should they not also proclaim Him as Messiah? Jesus told them that John the Baptist was the prophesied prophet like Elijah who was to come. The people killed him, and the Messiah too was to suffer at the hands of the people.

**Thought 1.** Jesus Christ is the Messiah, the Son of God. Belief in Him is absolutely essential.

**John 8:24** *"I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins."*

**John 4:25-26** *The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."*

**John 6:69** *"We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."* (see Jn. 11:25-27)

**Acts 9:22** *Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.* (see Acts 17:2-3)

**1 John 5:1** *Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. ■*