

DEEPER STUDY

Listening to the Crucified Son

Matthew 17:1-9 & Matthew 16:13-28 & 2 Peter 1:16-21

1. Narrative Context: Why the Transfiguration Happens *Here*

One of the most important interpretive keys to the Transfiguration is its placement immediately after Peter's confession and Jesus' first passion prediction.

Matthew structures this section intentionally:

1. **Confession:** "You are the Christ" (16:16)
2. **Correction:** "Get behind me, Satan" (16:23)
3. **Call to Discipleship:** take up your cross (16:24)
4. **Confirmation:** Transfiguration (17:1-9)

This sequence suggests that the Transfiguration is not merely a revelation of Jesus' identity, it is a divine confirmation of *how* Jesus will be Messiah.

Scholars often note that Peter's misunderstanding in 16:22 provides the theological tension that the Transfiguration resolves. The glory shown on the mountain affirms Jesus' divine sonship while simultaneously validating the path toward suffering.

N.T. Wright frequently highlights that in the Gospels, "glory" and "cross" are not opposites but belong together within Israel's story of redemption. The Transfiguration becomes a moment where heavenly affirmation stabilizes the disciples before the descent toward Jerusalem.

2. "Listen to Him"

The Father's command in Matthew 17:5 uses the Greek verb:

ἀκούετε (akouete) — present active imperative, plural
Meaning: *keep listening, continue to heed, pay ongoing attention*

This is not a one-time instruction. The grammar suggests an ongoing posture of obedience and attentiveness.

Intertextually, this echoes:

- **Deuteronomy 18:15** “The LORD your God will raise up a prophet like me... you must listen to him.”

Matthew is deliberately presenting Jesus as the greater Moses. The presence of Moses on the mountain reinforces this connection.

So the command is not merely “hear his voice” — it is a covenantal call to recognize Jesus as the authoritative interpreter of God’s purposes.

3. Intertextual Mountain Imagery

Mountains in Scripture often serve as places where heaven and earth overlap:

- Sinai- Exodus 19-34
- Horeb- 1 Kings 19 (Elijah)
- Zion- Psalm theology
- Transfiguration- Matthew 17

The appearance of Moses and Elijah is not random:

Figure	Mountain Encounter	Thematic Connection
Moses	Sinai (Exodus 34)	Law, covenant, shining face
Elijah	Horeb (1 Kings 19)	Prophetic renewal, divine whisper
Jesus	“High mountain”	Fulfillment and climax

Matthew’s narrative suggests that Jesus stands as the culmination of Torah and Prophets. When the voice speaks, Moses and Elijah fade, leaving “only Jesus” (17:8). The imagery communicates that revelation now centers fully on Him.

See Addendum C to this Deep Dive for an even DEEPER dive into Mountain Imagery

4. Peter’s Tents: Tabernacle Imagery

Peter’s suggestion to build three shelters (σκηνός / skēnas) may reflect the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot), a celebration of God dwelling among Israel.

Possible meanings scholars discuss:

- Desire to prolong divine presence
- Attempt to institutionalize the moment

- Misunderstanding of eschatological fulfillment

Matthew portrays Peter as sincere but misaligned. He wants glory without movement. The divine interruption signals that discipleship is not about preserving sacred experiences but following Jesus' unfolding mission.

Mountaintop revelation is meant to propel obedience, not create spiritual retreat.

5. Glory and Fear: Theophany Patterns

The disciples' reaction, falling facedown in fear (17:6), mirrors Old Testament theophanies:

- Daniel 10:9
- Ezekiel 1:28
- Exodus 34

Yet Jesus' response is strikingly gentle:

"Rise, and do not fear."

This reflects a recurring Gospel pattern: divine revelation evokes awe, but Jesus mediates that revelation with touch and reassurance. The Transfiguration thus reveals both transcendence and intimacy.

6. The Cross in Immediate Context

Matthew's timeline matters:

"After six days..." (17:1)

This echoes Exodus 24:16, where God's glory covers Sinai for six days before revelation. Matthew subtly frames Jesus as entering a new Sinai moment but the content of revelation now centers on the suffering Messiah.

Michael Gorman's participationist theology helps illuminate this moment: the disciples are being drawn into a narrative where divine glory is revealed through cruciform obedience. The Transfiguration anticipates resurrection light while pointing toward the cross as its pathway.

7. 2 Peter 1

The inclusion of 2 Peter 1:16-21 adds a later interpretive lens.

Peter emphasizes two key ideas:

A. Eyewitness Testimony

“We were eyewitnesses of his majesty.”

Peter uses the Transfiguration to defend the reliability of apostolic proclamation against accusations of myth-making.

B. Scripture as a Lamp

“We have the prophetic word more fully confirmed...”

The Transfiguration does not replace Scripture; it reinforces its authority. Early Christian communities interpreted experiences through the lens of Scripture rather than allowing experiences to redefine doctrine.

The phrase “lamp shining in a dark place” suggests that the memory of glory sustains faith during suffering.

8. Christological Significance

Three titles converge in Matthew 17:5:

- **Son**- echoes Psalm 2 and baptism narrative
- **Beloved**- covenant language
- **Well pleased**- Isaiah 42 (Servant Song)

This fusion of royal Messiah (Psalm 2) and suffering Servant (Isaiah 42) signals that Jesus’ kingship is inseparable from sacrificial mission.

The Transfiguration therefore reveals:

- Jesus as divine Son
- Jesus as prophetic fulfillment
- Jesus as the cruciform Messiah

9. Discipleship Implications: Cruciformity

Theologically, the Transfiguration is not only about Christology but ecclesiology.

The disciples witness glory but must follow Jesus back into the valley.

Michael Gorman describes cruciformity as participation in Christ’s self-giving life. In narrative terms:

- Peter wants permanence.
- Jesus leads them downward.
- Discipleship becomes movement toward sacrificial love.

10. Questions for Deeper Reflection

- How does the narrative flow from Matthew 16 reshape how we interpret Matthew 17?
- Why might Matthew deliberately echo Sinai imagery in this story?
- In what ways does the Transfiguration challenge triumphal views of glory?
- How does Peter's later reflection in 2 Peter reshape our understanding of spiritual experiences?

ADDENDUM A

From the Mountain to Patmos: The Transfiguration and Revelation 1

One of the most striking intertextual connections to the Transfiguration appears in **Revelation 1**, where John encounters the glorified Christ.

While the Gospel writers describe Jesus' face shining like the sun during the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:2), John later writes:

“His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.” (Revelation 1:16)

Scholars have long noted that both passages present Jesus in language associated with divine glory but each moment serves a different purpose within the biblical narrative.

1. Shared Imagery

Transfiguration (Matthew 17)	Revelation 1
Face shining like the sun	Face shining like the sun
White garments	White hair/garments imagery
Disciples fall in fear	John falls “as though dead”
Jesus touches them: “Do not be afraid”	Jesus touches John: “Do not be afraid”

These parallels suggest that Revelation is not introducing a *new* Jesus but unveiling the same reality glimpsed briefly on the mountain.

2. Glory Revealed Before Suffering vs. After Victory

- **Matthew 17** glory appears *before* the cross, strengthening the disciples for the road ahead.
- **Revelation 1** glory appears *after* resurrection and ascension, strengthening the Church for endurance.

Both moments function pastorally:

Revelation does not replace the crucified Christ with a warrior king; it reveals that the crucified Lamb is the exalted Lord.

This aligns closely with the theological trajectory emphasized by scholars like Michael Gorman, who describe Revelation's imagery as deeply cruciform: victory through faithful witness, not domination.

3. "Listen to Him" and Revelation's Call to Hear

In Matthew, the Father commands:

"Listen to Him."

In Revelation, Jesus repeatedly says:

"Whoever has ears, let them hear..."

The command to listen becomes an ongoing posture for the Church. The Transfiguration models the disciples learning to listen; Revelation shows the Church learning to listen under pressure.

4. Pastoral Reflection

Connecting Transfiguration to Revelation reshapes how we imagine glory:

- Glory is not escape from suffering.
- Glory is the unveiling of Jesus' true identity within suffering.
- The same Jesus who shines on the mountain walks among lampstands in Revelation.

For deeper reflection:

- How does seeing the Transfigured Jesus help us interpret Revelation's imagery?
- What changes when we recognize that the radiant Christ of Revelation is the crucified Messiah?

ADDENDUM B

Transfiguration and the Gospel of John: A Bridge to *From Death to Life*

The next series I (Billy) will be preaching is called “From Death to Life” and will explore the themes of life and death in the Gospel of John through the season of Lent.

Although John’s Gospel does not include a traditional Transfiguration account, many scholars argue that John presents Jesus’ **entire ministry** as a kind of unfolding transfiguration.

John’s language of “glory” becomes the key connection.

1. Glory in the Synoptics vs. Glory in John

In Matthew:

- Glory is briefly unveiled on a mountain.

In John:

- Glory is revealed progressively through signs, teaching, and ultimately the cross.

John 1:14 states:

“We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son...”

This echoes the heavenly declaration at the Transfiguration, but John frames glory as something visible throughout Jesus’ mission.

2. The Cross as the True Moment of Glory

One of John’s most radical theological moves is redefining glory around the crucifixion:

- John 12:23 “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”
- John 13:31 Glory begins at the moment of betrayal.

Where Matthew gives a flash of radiant light, John shows that the ultimate transfiguration happens through self-giving love.

Scholars have long observed that John’s Gospel treats the cross not as the absence of glory but as its deepest expression.

This fits beautifully with a cruciform emphasis:

The voice says, “Listen to Him,” and in John we discover that what we are listening to is a Messiah who reveals divine glory through sacrificial love.

3. Light and Darkness Themes

The Transfiguration:

- radiant light on the mountain.

John:

- “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1:5)

In the upcoming Sermon series, *From Death to Life*, we explore this contrast: life emerging where death seems strongest. The Transfiguration can be understood as a preview of that Johannine theme:

- A glimpse of resurrection light before the descent into suffering.

4. Discipleship in John, Listening as Following

In John 10, Jesus says:

“My sheep hear my voice.”

Listening becomes relational, not merely instructional.

The command from the cloud, “Listen to Him”, finds its lived-out expression in John’s vision of discipleship:

- abiding
- loving
- laying down one’s life

This creates a powerful bridge into Lent:

The Church moves from the mountain of revelation into the journey of transformation, from seeing glory to living it.

5. Reflection Questions for the John Connection

- How does John redefine glory compared to Matthew’s Transfiguration scene?
- Why might John emphasize the cross itself as the moment of divine revelation?
- In what ways does listening to Jesus lead us from death into life?

ADDENDUM C

From Sinai to the New Creation Mountain

The Mountain Theme from Exodus → Transfiguration → Revelation 21

One of the most consistent symbolic threads running through Scripture is the imagery of **the mountain**: a place where heaven and earth overlap, where God reveals Himself, and where His people are transformed before being sent back into the world.

The Transfiguration sits at the center of this biblical pattern. To fully appreciate its depth, it helps to trace the mountain motif across three major moments in the biblical story:

1. Sinai: covenant revelation
2. The Transfiguration: Christological fulfillment
3. New Creation: cosmic restoration

1. Sinai: Glory Revealed in Covenant (Exodus 19-34)

When Matthew tells us Jesus leads the disciples up a “high mountain,” the Gospel intentionally echoes Sinai.

At Sinai:

- God descends in cloud and glory.
- Moses enters the divine presence.
- After six days, revelation comes (Exodus 24:16).
- Moses’ face shines after encountering God (Exodus 34).

The parallels with Matthew 17 are striking:

Sinai	Transfiguration
Cloud covers the mountain	Bright cloud overshadows them
Divine voice speaks	Father’s voice speaks

Moses' face shines

Jesus' face shines like the sun

Fear and awe

Disciples fall in fear

Yet there is a crucial difference:

At Sinai, Moses reflects God's glory.

At the Transfiguration, **Jesus radiates it from within.**

Matthew's narrative suggests that Jesus is not merely a new Moses, He is the source of the glory Moses once reflected.

This shift reframes the covenant itself. The Law and the Prophets now point forward to the Son, and the divine command becomes:

"Listen to Him."

2. The Transfiguration: The Mountain That Sends Us Down

Unlike Sinai, where Israel remains at the mountain, the Transfiguration is brief and transitional.

Peter's instinct to build shelters mirrors humanity's long-standing desire to **stay where God feels near**. But Jesus leads the disciples back down into the valley.

This movement is theologically significant:

- Revelation does not replace mission.
- Glory does not cancel suffering.
- Encounter leads to participation.

Michael Gorman's work on participationist spirituality helps illuminate this moment. The disciples are not spectators of glory; they are being formed into people whose lives will mirror the crucified and risen Christ.

The mountain becomes a place of orientation, not escape.

3. The Pattern of Mountains in Scripture

Throughout Scripture, mountains often serve as **threshold spaces**: places where divine revelation reshapes human vocation.

Consider the pattern:

- Abraham on Moriah (Genesis 22) trust in God's provision
- Sinai (Exodus) covenant formation
- Carmel (1 Kings 18) prophetic confrontation
- Horeb (1 Kings 19) quiet renewal
- Transfiguration (Matthew 17) Christ revealed
- Golgotha (Gospels) glory through sacrifice

Each mountain encounter moves the story forward rather than suspending it.

The Transfiguration fits within this trajectory as a moment where the disciples begin to understand that divine glory will be revealed through the cross, not apart from it.

4. The Final Mountain: New Creation in Revelation 21

The mountain theme reaches its climax in Revelation.

John writes:

“He carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain...” (Revelation 21:10)

From this vantage point, John sees the New Jerusalem descending from heaven, not humanity climbing upward, but God bringing renewal downward.

This vision completes the trajectory begun at Sinai and reframed at the Transfiguration:

- Sinai- God descends to give covenant.
- Transfiguration- God reveals the Son as the fulfillment of covenant.
- Revelation 21- God dwells permanently with His people in renewed creation.

Unlike earlier mountain encounters, Revelation's vision is not temporary. There is no descent because the whole world becomes the dwelling place of God.

Scholars frequently note that Revelation transforms the mountain motif into a vision of cosmic communion:

The goal of the biblical story is not endless mountaintop experiences, but a world where God's presence fills everything.

5. Cruciform Glory Across the Mountains

Tracing the mountain theme reveals a consistent theological pattern:

- God reveals glory.
- Humans misunderstand it.

- God redirects them toward faithful obedience.

At Sinai, Israel fears the glory.

At the Transfiguration, Peter tries to preserve it.

At Golgotha, the world rejects it.

At New Creation, glory finally reshapes all things.

Glory is not opposed to the cross, it is revealed through it.

The shining face of Jesus on the mountain anticipates the risen Christ, but it does not bypass the suffering Messiah.

6. Living Between Mountains

For believers today, the Transfiguration reminds us that we live between two mountains:

- the mountain where Jesus' glory is revealed
- the mountain of New Creation still to come

We experience moments of clarity, worship, and encounter... but we are called to carry that vision into ordinary, sometimes difficult faithfulness.

The command "Listen to Him" becomes the guiding thread between these mountains.

Listening means:

- trusting the path Jesus sets before us
- embracing cross-shaped love
- walking forward with hope rooted in resurrection glory

7. Questions for Deeper Reflection

- How does the Sinai imagery deepen our understanding of the Transfiguration?
- Why does Scripture repeatedly portray revelation on mountains but mission in the valley?
- What does Revelation 21 suggest about the ultimate purpose of divine glory?
- How might recognizing this mountain pattern reshape how we interpret our own spiritual "highs" and "lows"?