

“Christ Alone”

Matthew 17:1-9

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

“And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only (Matt. 17:8).” After spending some time talking with Moses and Elijah at the top of the mountain of Transfiguration, the Father spoke, the prophets disappeared, and Christ was left alone. Why? To fulfill God’s gracious promise to His people. A promise is something that we think we understand, but often misconstrue and misuse in our sinful nature. According to the world’s standard, it is a word that is flaunted about with no real care for the true meaning. It’s disposable and easily backtracked with a simple cross of the fingers. It happens all the time, doesn’t it? Kids promise not to sneak any more candy, but you always find those empty candy wrappers hidden under their bed. Friends or family members promise to keep the secret you told them, but somehow that secret “magically” makes its way in the ears of everyone in your contact list. This flippant worldview lacks the necessary seriousness that is supposed to come with the word’s meaning. A promise is meant to be a certainty, an absolute guarantee.

So, when you see Christ alone at the top of the mountain, the Lord shows you what a promise truly means, because He has not only made it, He has fulfilled it. He has shown this many times over by fulfilling all the promises He has made through the Law and the Prophets. In Exodus 3:16-17, He says to Moses:

Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, “The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, ‘I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to...a land flowing with milk and honey.’”

He then fulfills that promise made to His people through His prophet, and He delivered His people out of the hands of the evil Pharaoh, leading them to the promised land of Canaan. The Lord promises deliverance for all of His people, including all gathered together here, but through the Law, He also promises to punish sin.

The Lord said to Noah in Genesis 6:13, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth.” That was not a mere threat, but a guarantee—a certainty that His vengeance and wrath would be brought upon those who have abandoned Him and given themselves up to unholy desires. He also fulfilled that promise and destroyed the earth with a great

flood brought about by His wrath in the form of 40 days and 40 nights of water coming from the heavens and up from the fountains of the earth. God keeps His word. When He makes a promise, He keeps it. That is why we teach about the proper fear of God. The proper fear of God is a trust that God will keep His promises. All of them.

As we just read from a couple of instances, there are many times in the Old Testament where God upholds His promises of punishment for the sins of His people and the sins of the whole world. But those are not the only promises that He fulfills. In the example of faithful Noah and His family, God executes His justice upon the evil people of the antediluvian world. Just as it says in Psalm 99:4, “The King in His might loves justice.” But in His fulfillment of that promise, another shines through. Noah and His family were spared the wrath of God. He told Noah to build an ark, a very specifically defined ark, so that Noah and his family would be safe from the waters, along with a pair of each animal. Noah obeyed God’s command. He had faith that God would fulfill His promise, and he and his family were saved. And after all of that, a third promise was made to him by God with a rainbow stretched across the sky, and a guarantee from the Lord that He would never again destroy the earth with water.

God does as He wills, but He also keeps Noah, Moses, and His people “in the loop” about what’s happening every step of the way. He makes a promise, and then He fulfills it, but He never leaves them in the dark. In similar ways, He keeps His disciples and you “in the loop.” God’s gracious revelation of His will and purpose is given to us by His Holy Word. Peter, James, and John had the words of Holy Scripture and they were witness to their fulfillment, and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they recorded it for your edification. The Apostle Peter writes in our Epistle lesson:

...we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:18-21).

As they bore witness to the transfigured Christ and the great prophets of old, they saw the promise of Holy Scripture brought to fruition in the person of their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. They witnessed it, and so you too have witnessed it by their testimony.

Moses and Elijah were present at this glorious event on the holy mountain to acknowledge the fulfillment of the Law, the Law which was given directly to Moses by

God Himself on another mountain, Mt. Sinai. Moses was the keeper of God's Law, but He didn't *keep* it any better than you or I do. Elijah was often considered to be the greatest prophet of the Old Testament. He was taken up into heaven by chariots of fire sent by the Lord, and left such a lasting mark on the people that everyone thought that Jesus might actually be Elijah reborn, as the Gospel records in Mark 6:15. The Jews practically worshiped Moses and Elijah as perfect keepers of the Law.

The significance of their presence is simple. It is to fulfill God's promise to send the Savior of all mankind. These two men were present with Christ to show the need of all men to be saved by something other than their own works. Even the great prophets couldn't keep the Law perfectly, and they still need Jesus, just like you and me. No matter how good of a person you think you are or how virtuous you may be, you still need Jesus! You are all still poor, miserable sinners, who fail the Lord time and time again by not keeping His Law. But just as Christ appeared in the fullness of His glory at the Transfiguration, He presents Himself in glory for your redemption on the bloody cross of salvation. There He takes all of that imperfection upon Himself and pays the price for your sins that you would be declared justified for His sake alone.

Peter says, "We were eyewitnesses of His majesty (1 Pet. 1:16)." The Apostles saw His glory. Not the glory of Elijah and Moses, not their own glory, but the glory of the only begotten Son of God. The One of whom the Father declared, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him (Matt. 17:5)." Just like them, Moses and Elijah were there to behold the glory of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as He sets out on His journey to redeem the world on the cross. As the fulfillment of God's greatest promise, even they are bid to listen to Him alone. And after all of this, the disciples "saw no one but Jesus only."

That, my friends, is the true message delivered at the Transfiguration. The ultimate promise is CHRIST ALONE. He wasn't abandoned at the top of the mountain when Elijah and Moses departed. He was found alone because everything the disciples saw and experienced, and everything that the prophets foretold was because of Him alone. He is the promised Savior that God proclaims when Moses records in Genesis 3:15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; He shall crush your head, and you shall bruise His heel." Jesus is now revealing Himself as God's ultimate promise fulfilled, and that fulfillment will take place at the conclusion of His humiliation, through His death on the cross.

The promised Savior has come to take all your wretchedness and sin upon Himself so that He might redeem you from eternal damnation, death, and hell. He has done that

for you, because you cannot hope to save yourselves. That's what James 2:10 says, "For whoever keeps the whole Law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it." And you will always fail in at least one point. Christ alone is capable of perfect keeping of the Law, and He has done that for you, and imputed His perfect righteousness to you. Your trust and your faith lies in the redemption that He has won for you despite your poor, miserable state, because there is a greater, glorified state that awaits you. In his 2nd letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul says:

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Eternal, everlasting life in the currently unseen glory of God is your hope. The seen things of this world change and decay, but Christ's glory is eternal, and He has promised that you will have that inheritance of glory as an adopted son.

One day, just like Peter, James, and John, and all of the saints that have gone before, you too will see the fullness of Christ's glory—incomprehensible light and power shining forth in heaven. The Transfigured Christ is a foretaste of that glory which you will see in heaven when He finally calls you home. Paul tells us in Romans 5:2, "Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God." You live your lives daily according to God's divine grace and mercy, knowing that the hope of His glory is still to come. The Almighty and Eternal God will show us His face, and the glory that shines like the sun will be like nothing you can possibly imagine.

You have that promise, given to you and fulfilled by Christ alone through His substitutionary atonement on the cross. He blessed you with faith in that promise in the waters of your baptism, and you receive the gifts of that promise in the Lord's Supper when you eat and drink His true body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. The final verse of Psalm 99, which I referenced earlier, is this, "Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at His holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy!" Jesus was on His holy mountain with the disciples, where they prayed and worshiped the Lord God Almighty in all of His glory. We exalt the Lord and His holy name by gathering with the communion of saints in worship at His holy mountain: HIS church, where we gather to receive the promised gift of forgiveness through Word and Sacraments. What a glorious promise that we have seen fulfilled in Christ! It is a glorious gift from God that we might live in

this world, knowing that the true promise of everlasting life in Christ awaits us in heaven, forever in the glory of the Lord as it shines forth through eternity. Amen.