

## A Glimpse of the Glory

Mark 9:1-8

The late American cartoonist Rube Goldberg recounted a time he traveled to Europe on an ocean liner. He was assigned to a table with a Frenchman who spoke no English. Goldberg spoke no French.

Each night the Frenchman would be the last to arrive for dinner. He would come to the table, bow, and say, “Bon Appetit.”

Thinking the man was introducing himself, Goldberg would rise and reply, “Goldberg.” The two would shake hands and eat. This repeated itself for several nights, until Goldberg mentioned it to a friend. He thought it odd that the Frenchman introduced himself every night.

“No, no,” said his friend. “That’s not his name. That’s a French phrase for good appetite.”

Goldberg felt stupid and resolved to correct the situation. That night, he came to the table late so that the Frenchman was already seated. Goldberg bowed and said, “Bon Appetit.”

The Frenchman stood up and replied, “Goldberg.”

Jesus would talk. The disciples would listen, but often, they were still not on the same page. This was no more apparent than when Jesus would talk about the role His death must play in bringing God’s kingdom to pass. They heard Jesus well enough that His words distressed them. But, I get the sense that Peter in particular always felt in his heart that He could change Jesus’ mind.

Peter wanted to trust Jesus, but Jesus said things that flew in the face of all he had grown up anticipating about *Messiah*’s reign. One day, Jesus led him, along with James and John, up a mountain. There, three Apostles learned something that would greatly aide them in trusting that Jesus knew what He was doing. His plan for establishing God’s kingdom was different and higher than their plan, but Jesus was just still as glorious and as kingly as they needed Him to be.

### I. A Humble Condescension by a King (1-3)

#### A. The Struggling Faith of Jesus’ Men Needed a Boost verse 1

<sup>1</sup>And he said to them, “I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power.”

This verse, which was also the last verse of last week’s text, is a transition between what we studied last week and the strange event we call the *Transfiguration*. Jesus had invited His disciples to clearly state who they believed Him to be. Like today, most people admired Him, at least as a teacher or prophet. But, a high opinion of Jesus will never cause anyone to know the kingdom. Jesus bluntly asked: “But what about you?” ... “Who do you say I am?” Peter responded with certainty, “You are the Christ.” Peter, on behalf of the group, acknowledged that Jesus was Israel’s long-awaited *Messiah*.

As the story unfolds, however, it becomes obvious that Peter has no idea what Jesus’ status as *Messiah* would require. He knew what he thought it ought to mean, but when Jesus began to speak of His death, Peter became agitated. When he began to protest, Jesus said, “Get behind me, Satan!” Peter sounded just like Satan sounded back during those 40 days in the wilderness.

Jesus not only stuck to His guns about His death, He also suggested that anyone who wanted to be a disciple could expect similar treatment and that if any would-be disciple opted to bail out on Him, things would not go well for that disciple on the Day of Judgment. Bummer! None of this was what Peter wanted. He believed that Jesus was the Christ, but he was no longer sure that he wanted to believe it. Soon, Jesus would gently rebuke another man for a slight hesitancy in his faith. That man would respond with naked honesty, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). This was where Peter was in his faith. He did trust Jesus. He just could not be sure that he trusted Him enough to endure what amounted to a complete upheaval of his hopes and dreams.

Jesus saw that His disciples were distressed over this new vision of the kingdom and all this rhetoric of death, self-denial and bearing crosses. He knew how fragile their faith was so He announced that the power of the kingdom would be disclosed to some of them before they ever tasted the death of which He spoke. Jesus would grant three of them a glimpse of His glory.

### **B. The Remedy Was "Transfiguration" verse 2, 3**

<sup>2</sup>After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. <sup>3</sup>His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them ...

Peter, James and John formed an inner circle around Jesus. These three witnessed His power over death when He raised Jairus' daughter from the dead. They would witness His agony in Gethsemane. This day, they would witness His glory briefly unveiled. "There he was transfigured before them." *Metamorphoō*, from which we derive "metamorphosis," means that the outward appearance of Jesus changed as Peter, James and John looked on.

Luke records that Jesus' face changed. Matthew says it "shone like the sun." Mark draws attention only to His clothes, which became unearthly white. The original text says they were whiter than any "fuller" could bleach them. A fuller was a professional bleacher. He cleaned garments by placing them in containers filled with water and all sorts of bleaching agents. Then, he either stomped on them with his feet or beat them with rods. His shop was located outside the city because of the horrible odors of his various cleaning products. Still, he was the guy to go to if you wanted your whites sparking white. Yet, no fuller on earth and no combination of chemicals could render any garment as white as the whiteness of the garments of Jesus this day.

I call this event "the unmiracle" because, if a miracle is something out of the ordinary, then the *Incarnation* was the true miracle. Jesus in His very nature was God, but He garbed Himself in human flesh, veiling His glory. If anything, the *Transfiguration* marked a suspension of this veiling. The facade was rolled back, and the disciples beheld a glimpse of who He really was.

Jesus would transfigure back to the state by which the disciples knew Him. He would complete His mission and return to His Father with a promise to come back. Six decades later, one of these witnesses, John, saw Christ again in a vision of things to come when the ages shall draw to a close. Did it seem like *déjà vu* as gazed upon the now glorified Christ: "His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire" (Revelation 1:14).

And yet, as remarkable as the *Transfiguration* was, bear in mind that it occurred for the kindest and tenderest of reasons. Jesus' disciples needed reassurance that He was every bit as glorious as they expected Him to be, even if His path, or their own, would not be what they expected.

## II. A Historical Conversation with a King (4)

... <sup>4</sup>And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

### A. The Most Revered Men of Israel's Past Appeared with Jesus

Moses was the great Lawgiver. Elijah was the greatest of the ancient prophets. Their respective departures from this life were both highly unusual. Elijah was taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire as his successor, Elisha, looked on. Moses died at age 120, but the Lord buried him. It was almost as if God always had some sort of a "comeback" in mind for these two gentlemen.

For Jesus to have appeared in this extraordinary way with these two great figures of Israel's past was, at the very least, to declare that He was on a par with these historical giants. But, as we read on, we will quickly see that a mere equivalency with Moses and Elijah was not what this remarkable event was intended to convey to the three disciples who saw it.

### B. What Were They Discussing?

Mark mentions only that Moses and Elijah "were talking with Jesus." He goes into no further detail. We must turn to Luke's account of the story to discover what they were talking about:

... <sup>30</sup>Two men, Moses and Elijah, <sup>31</sup>appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. - Luke 9:30, 31

Both of Jesus' heavenly companions had experience with strange departures from the earth, but it was Jesus' departure that was the topic of this discussion. They were discussing precisely the same thing with which the disciples were struggling, which gives us some additional insight as to exactly what this event of *Transfiguration* was all about. It was to strengthen the disciples for the days ahead. Clearly, this should convince them the death of the Christ must be a part of some great and divine scheme.

Since the Bible plainly states that even angels long to look into how the sufferings of Jesus could bring about man's salvation (1 Peter 1:12), it is not far-fetched to speculate that even Moses and Elijah may have been captivated at speaking with Jesus. Both these men had endured the scorn of a people they were only trying to help. Now, they were hearing that God's *Messiah* must endure the same - and worse. His death and resurrection would give meaning to their own life missions. Everything Moses ever taught would be accomplished. Everything Elijah ever proclaimed would be fulfilled. Maybe, it's harsh to ridicule simple fishermen too much for having such a hard time following all of this. It was news to heaven's angels and perhaps to heaven's saints as well.

"The death of Christ was thus shown to be the ultimate end to which the Law and the prophets pointed. Even in that hour of his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, this was their theme; and thus the disciples were nerved to look with hope and faith to that which they had contemplated with dismay." - E. Bickersteth

The highest hopes of Jewish history were satisfied in the death of Jesus. Peter, James and John would be the heralds of that good news. They would never forget what they saw this day.

<sup>16</sup>We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. <sup>17</sup>For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." <sup>18</sup>We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. - 2 Peter 1:16-18

### **III. A Heavenly Confirmation of a King (5-8)**

#### **A. At First, Peter Missed the Point of All that He Had Seen verses 5, 6**

<sup>5</sup>Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." <sup>6</sup>(He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

Discussions abound as to exactly what Peter had in mind when he suggested building these three shelters or tents. This may have been an effort to linger on the mountain and not let the moment pass. It may have been the season for the Feast of Booths, when festivities included families building shelters and camping out to reenact the wilderness experience of their ancient ancestors. Perhaps, Peter wanted to celebrate on the mountain as a way of avoiding inevitable conflicts in Jerusalem. Perhaps, these were to be little shrines or memorials of some sort. Perhaps, Peter had in mind a retreat for everybody to get together and strategize what their next move ought to be.

It really does not matter what Peter had in mind. No one was going to pay any attention to him anyway. If Peter was, as most scholars believe, Mark's source for this information, he essentially confesses, "Hey, I was too scared anything too bright." So, why did he say anything at all? Popping-off was Peter's weakness. Not knowing what to say seldom stopped him from talking.

What is clear is that Peter was not detecting that Jesus was superior to even the greatest of the prophets and Israel's great Lawgiver. What is also clear is that he was still struggling with this idea that eventually, the little band needed to resume their journey toward Jerusalem so that Jesus could get on with the business of dying. No matter what Peter had in mind with these shelters, it had the same effect as covering his ears and saying, "La la la la la! I can't hear you."

#### **B. None of Them Could Miss the Point of What Happened Next verse 7**

<sup>7</sup>Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

Throughout Israel's history, supernatural clouds were identified with God's presence. The glory of the LORD would appear to the wandering Israelites in a cloud. A cloud would cover the top of Sinai when Moses ascended that mountain to converse with *JEHOVAH*. A cloud would descend on the Tabernacle when Moses was there. The cloud of God's presence filled the temple of Solomon when that structure was dedicated for service. Any Jew would understand a cloud like the one strangely enveloping them to be a sign of God's presence, and they would be terrified. Peter, James and John were drawn into this awesome and holy phenomenon, and the voice they heard spoke a message for their benefit: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

"This is my Son ..." This was a divine affirmation of the deity of Jesus. He is not a child of God in the sense that you and I and every created person are children of God. He is the firstborn of Creation, meaning that He is preeminent in all of creation. He is truly God, even though, for the love of the human race, He would not cling to His deity. He emptied Himself and veiled Himself in human flesh, taking the posture of a lowly servant of men and ultimately, dying for our sins. The voice was telling Peter, James and John. Don't let appearances fool you. He may work with His hands. He may preach meekness and gentleness rather than revolution, but, "This *IS* my Son."

"... whom I love ..." The Father loves the Son because He is altogether lovely. Every attribute of beauty and godly character resided in Jesus. But the reason Jesus gave as the basis for His Father's love was His perfect obedience to the divine plan of redemption: "... The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life - only to take it up again" (John 10:17).

"Listen to him!" Now we clearly see what this whole *Transfiguration* event was about. God graced three disciples with a tiny glimpse of the resplendent glory of the Christ so that they might be assured that He was God? Yes. That they might know that Jesus has the Father's love and approval? Certainly! But, it seems to me that the most practical purpose of the event was so that they might come down from the mountain and begin paying attention to Jesus as they had never paid attention before. The one thing Jesus had said over which they were chronically stumbling was that He must die. They were struggling with abandoning their old notions of *Messiah* and His kingdom. The voice of God commanded them to believe Jesus regarding the cross. If Elijah and Moses were okay with, Peter, James and John needed to be okay with it.

Of course, if Jesus is the Son of God, whom the Father loves, then, this command, "Listen to him!" must be heeded beyond the singular topic of the cross. He is the perfect Teacher and Master, so His teachings are the keys to joyful living. He is the perfect Friend and Savior, so His promises are the key to peace and sanity in a troubled world. He is Lord, so His commands are to be obeyed. Why call Jesus, "Lord," if you're not willing to do precisely as you are instructed?

But, keeping this in the context of the *Transfiguration*, believe Him about the cross. Don't presume that we can contribute to building God's kingdom if we are ashamed of the cross. And, don't presume that we can teach others to follow Christ if we feel we must soft-peddle the cost of discipleship. Debates will rage about the proper balance for a church wanting to "attract people" *versus* at what point it is time to confront them with the demands of Christ. But, this much is certain: As brutal as the path of the cross may seem to eyes unwilling to look to the glory and joy that lay beyond it, we can never be ashamed of it. The cross is the heart of His good news.

### **C. Jesus Alone! verse 8**

<sup>8</sup>Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

From Matthew we learn that the voice terrified the three disciples on the mountain that day. Perhaps, we should have assumed as much. They hid their faces to the ground and they did not look up until Jesus stepped over to them and touched them. Only then, did they look up and see Him standing their alone. Moses and Elijah had returned whence they came. The message was obvious. There was sufficiency and uniqueness to Jesus in this matter of salvation that set Him apart from Moses or Elijah, for He alone was the unique Son of God.

For us, how is the *Transfiguration* of Jesus on that ancient mountainside like life in the kingdom of God? What does it teach us in this age that equips us fro life in the kingdom of God today? It reminds us that Jesus was God veiled in flesh and that the next time any of us see Him, His glory will be unveiled. It reminds us that He is King, so His words are to be believed, trusted and obeyed. And, it reminds us that there is no other King, no other great prophet, no other great religious celebrity and no other Name by which salvation has come to a man.