

A Mountain Top Experience

Mark 9:1-13

Rev. Brian Bill

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What one incident or event comes to your mind when you think of the life of Jesus? Turn to the person next to you and share what it is...

There was one miracle foremost in the Apostle Peter's memory, so much so that he wrote about it more than 30 years after it happened. According to 2 Peter 1:16-18, a glimpse of God's glory had so gripped him that he couldn't stop talking about it: ***"For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,' we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain."***

This eyewitness encounter showcased the power, majesty, honor and glory of Jesus Christ. And notice that this was not just Peter's perspective because he uses the emphatic phrase, ***"we ourselves,"*** referring to his buddies James and John who were also there.

I love how Mark lays out the flow of events in his gospel. The big idea last weekend was this: *Salvation is free, but discipleship will cost you your life* from Mark 8:34: ***"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."*** We're called to line up our *desires*, to *deny* ourselves, to *die* to sin, and to *devote* ourselves to follow Him. We learned that we're as close to Christ as we want to be.

This is certainly one of the most challenging statements Jesus ever made. After driving this truth deeply into our souls, our passage today showcases *who* Jesus is and that there's a better world waiting for Christ-followers. Here's the sermon summary: *A glimpse of glory will keep us going.*

As I prayed about how to preach through this passage, I decided to approach the sermon differently. Instead of concluding with a number of action steps, my aim is simply to have our view of God grow grander. Specifically, I'm praying that we

will catch a glimpse of the glory of Jesus Christ and that this will motivate us to gather, grow, give and go like never before.

I like this quote from A.W. Tozer's book *The Knowledge of the Holy*: "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us...the cause of many of our modern spiritual woes is the loss in today's church of a lofty concept of God." He argues persuasively that the cure lies in our rediscovery of God's majesty. By the end of our time today, I'm hoping that our minds will be blown [demonstrate] by the bigness, the majesty, the greatness, the goodness and the glory of Jesus Christ.

A generation ago J.B. Phillips wrote a book called, *Your God Is Too Small*. This captures the struggle many of us have because our God is much smaller than the God of the Bible. I long for each of us to grow in our grasp of how great God really is because it's so easy to fall into an inadequate view of the Almighty.

Our aim then is to adore Jesus Christ and worship Him for who He is. *A glimpse of His glory will keep us going.*

Prayer

As we move through this passage, we'll begin by noting the *setting*. We'll then see the *splendor* of Jesus, which is followed by a strange *solution* from Peter. We'll then consider the *supremacy* of Jesus, which is followed by some *struggles* the disciples had.

1. The setting. Jesus is still in the area known as Caesarea Philippi when we read these words in Mark 9:2: "***And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John...***" It's interesting that Mark mentions the passing of six days. I wonder if Jesus is deliberately drawing a connection to Exodus 24:15-16 when Moses went up on a mountain and the glory of God covered it for six days before he was called "***out of the midst of the cloud.***" These six days served as a time of preparation for revelation from God.

It was not uncommon for Jesus to take Peter, James and John aside for some extra training – He was modeling the importance of intentional mentoring for these future church leaders. As you may recall, they had the privilege of being in the room when Jarius' daughter was raised from the dead (Mark 5:37) and this inner

circle was invited to be with Jesus when He poured His heart out in prayer on the Mount of Olives (Matthew 26:37).

This encounter was for their benefit. In verse 2 we see the phrase, “***before them***” and in verse 4: “***appeared to them.***” In verse 7 God the Father tells them to “***listen to Him.***” This would strengthen their commitment to follow Christ and prepare them for suffering. Perhaps He also took them to serve as witnesses according to Deuteronomy 19:15: “***Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.***” Another possible reason these three were taken up the mountain was because Jesus desired their companionship.

Jesus “***led them up a high mountain by themselves.***” We’re not told what mountain this is. Tradition says it was Mount Tabor, but this mountain is too low and during that time there was a Roman fortress at the top. A more likely location is Mount Hermon, which is about 12 miles north of Caesarea Philippi and is the highest mountain in the whole region, rising some 9,000 feet above sea level. It’s noteworthy that Psalm 89:12 declares that both “***Tabor and Hermon joyously praise your name.***”

In the parallel account in Luke 9, we read in verse 28 that Jesus took the three up on the mountain to pray and in verse 32 we see that they do what some of us do when it comes to prayer [and preaching]: “***Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep...***”

The disciples are about to have a momentous mountain top experience...as soon as they wake up. *A glimpse of His glory will keep us going.*

We move now from the *setting* to the *splendor of Jesus*.

2. The Splendor of Jesus. The last phrase of verse 2 says, “***And he was transfigured before them.***” The word “***transfigured***” comes from the word “*metamorphosis*” and is used to describe the changes a caterpillar goes through to become a butterfly. It’s literally a change on the outside that comes from the inside.

We could say that Jesus changed forms. The glory of Jesus that had been concealed in the manger is now revealed on the mountain. His glory on the inside came gushing out on the outside. One commentator puts it like this: “*For a brief moment the veil of his humanity was lifted and Jesus’ body shined with brilliance.*”

Properly understood, the true transfiguration happened at the incarnation when God took human form. Here we see Jesus re-assuming his own true form.

The transfiguration of Jesus is seen in three ways.

- **Through His countenance.** Luke 9:29 says, *“the appearance of his face was altered.”* Matthew 17:2 adds, *“his face shone like the sun.”* When Moses met with God, Exodus 34:30 says that his *“face shone.”* Can you imagine what this all looked like on a dark night?
- **Through His clothing.** The splendor of Jesus also affects His clothing in verse 3: *“and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them.”* The word *“radiant”* means, *“to glitter, to shine like lightning.”* This same word is used to describe Christ in Hebrews 1:3: *“He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.”* Jesus explodes with glory as a roaring radiance pours forth from Him. His brilliance splashes out through his clothing as His humanity is lifted.

The word *“intensely”* means, *“very much, exceedingly.”* White garments were worn by priests and kings and represented purity. The common people out walking and working would never wear white because it soiled too easily. Those with white vehicles can attest to this, right?

White light was used to describe God himself in Psalm 104:1: *“O Lord my God, you are very great! You are clothed with splendor and majesty, covering yourself with light as with a garment.”* This white was so bright that no bleach could make this happen. In one of his benedictions, the Apostle Paul said this about Jesus in 1 Timothy 6:16: *“who dwells in unapproachable light.”* The Apostle John described Jesus this way in Revelation 1:14: *“The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow.”*

- **Through His companions.** As Peter, James and John are trying to process the change in His countenance and His clothing, two companions show up in verse 4: *“And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus.”* Moses represents the Law and Elijah was the preeminent prophet. That’s fitting because in Matthew 5:17 Jesus said that he came to *“fulfill the Law and the prophets.”* This shows the continuity

between the Old and New Testaments. Both Moses and Elijah met with God on mountains and caught a glimpse of His glory and now they are standing with the glorious Lord Jesus on another mountain.

Moses was buried but Deuteronomy 34:6 says that “*no one knows where*” and according to 2 Kings 2:11-12, Elijah was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. Some of us will be buried and others of us may be taken up to heaven in the rapture. I wonder what Moses must have felt since he had been forbidden to enter Canaan and now he’s standing on top of the mountain looking down on the Promised Land. He finally made it, 1400 years later!

We know from Luke 9:31 that Elijah and Moses were talking with Jesus about His “*departure*” or death. The word is actually “*exodus*.” They knew that Jesus was about to die as the final sacrificial substitute for the sins of the whole world. Can you imagine how thrilled they must have been about this? We know from 1 Peter 1:12 that angels “*long to look into*” how Jesus is going to redeem humans. In fact, the idea is that they are stretching out, peering into the mystery of redemption. Angels can’t be redeemed but they’re intrigued by what Jesus is going to do. And here, Moses and Elijah get to discuss all this with Jesus! What they had prophesied about when alive was about to be fulfilled!

A glimpse of His glory will keep us going.

3. The Solution by Peter. In the presence of the supremacy of Jesus seen through His countenance, his clothing and the companions, Peter doesn’t know what to say so he says something anyway in verse 5: “*And Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.’*” The phrase “*it is good*” would be like someone today saying, “*This is really cool.*” Peter either wanted to prolong this experience or maybe he was trying to package God’s glory.

Peter, true to his personality, was impulsive but let’s also give him some props. Maybe he had been reflecting on the Feast of Tabernacles from Leviticus 23:34 and therefore wanted to put some tents up. Incidentally, this feast pointed to the final deliverance for God’s people so perhaps this was Peter’s way of speeding it along. Or, at a deeper level, Peter knew that God’s glory could only be contained in a tent or tabernacle, so he wanted to make some portable worship units.

Verse 6 gives us some insight into Peter: ***“For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified.”*** This literally means, *“to be aghast by dread, to greatly frighten.”* Someone has said that there are people who have something to say and people who just have to say something! Peter was talkative in his terror, which is how some respond when they’re afraid.

4. The Supremacy of Jesus. While we don’t know for sure why Peter said what he said, we do know from verse 7 that God the Father wanted to impress upon the disciples the supremacy of His Son: ***“And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud [probably interrupting Peter], ‘This is my beloved Son; listen to Him.’”*** Sometimes God shuts us down so we slow down and become still before Him. When we’re all amped up, running in circles and nervously trying to figure everything out, listen to what God says in Psalm 46:10: ***“Be still, and know that I am God.”***

Notice the word ***“cloud”*** is used two times. This is no ordinary cumulus type cloud. We need to journey back to the Book of Exodus to get the backstory where the cloud represents God’s presence, power and protection as it both reveals and conceals His glory. Listen to Exodus 16:10: ***“And as soon as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud”*** and Exodus 40:34-35: ***“Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.”***

One commentator writes: *“Peter did not realize that the shekinah-glory, the manifestation of God’s presence, was already ‘living in a tent’ on earth, in the body of Jesus Christ.”* We pointed this out in our Christmas series called, “From Creation to Consummation” when we camped in John 1:14: ***“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...”*** The phrase, ***“dwelt among”*** literally means, *“tabernacled”* or *“tented”* among us. This brings us back to the tabernacle and the Temple in the Old Testament, where God’s glory dwelt.

We learned how God’s glory departed from the Temple in the Book of Ezekiel and how we catch a glimpse of the return of God’s glory when the angel announces in Luke 2:14: ***“Glory to God in the highest!”*** Jesus ascended into heaven in this glory cloud according to Acts 1:9: ***“And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”*** 1

Thessalonians 4:16-17 tells us that believers will be lifted up in this same cloud of glory at the Rapture. And now the cloud of God's glory "**overshadows**" or "**envelops**" them on the mountain where everything centers on the supremacy of the Son! The splendor of heaven is poured into a human body.

Peter was putting Jesus, Elijah and Moses on the same plane (as Islam does) when he wanted to put up three tents for them. The Father forcefully corrected this false teaching when He declared, "***This is my beloved Son; listen to Him.***" The Father said something similar when Jesus was baptized in Mark 1:11: "***And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.'***" At a later time, shortly before his death, Jesus looked up into heaven as recorded in John 12:28 and said, "***'Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven: 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.'***" The Father is affirming Jesus as the unique Son of God who will suffer, die and be raised from the dead.

There's another passage found in Deuteronomy 18:15 that Moses for sure knew, since He wrote it. Check out this prophecy that was clearly fulfilled by Christ and listen to the focus on listening: "***The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen.***"

The word "**beloved**" can be translated, "*most dear worthy.*" Instead of being in awe of Elijah and moved by Moses, the disciples are to listen to the Father's beloved Son. Note that the emphasis is on "**listening**" to Him. This has the idea of hearkening or obeying Him. And it's a present tense imperative, meaning that obedience is to be ongoing. As great as these two Old Testament guys are, Jesus is in another category all together. Moses and Elijah are spokesmen; Jesus is the Son!

Let me remind you that as cool as this encounter was, what's more important is listening to the voice of the Son. We don't have to go looking for visions or experiences because the voice of God's Son is contained in the Scriptures – that's one reason we've been going through the Gospel of Mark! The mountaintop is amazing but the message of Jesus in our valleys is even more incredible. It's OK to get emotional but it's even more important to be obedient.

As the disciples process the splendor and the supremacy of Jesus and try to comprehend the glory cloud and the presence of Moses and Elijah, all of a sudden they are left alone with Jesus in verse 8: "***And suddenly, looking around, they no***

*longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.” I love that phrase: “**But Jesus only.**”*

Moses and Elijah are gone and Jesus alone is left. He is the bridge between the testaments and the bridge between a holy God and sinful people. Only Jesus, and Jesus alone, can grant forgiveness and eternal life. Acts 4:12: “***And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.***” Here’s a statement we’ve quoted before but it bears repeating: *Jesus plus nothing equals everything!*

Nicholas Taylor writes: “*Most of the major world religions have one thing in common: they attempt to climb up to heaven to get to God through doing good things. Christianity, on the other hand, is the only religion in which God left heaven to come to us to do good things for us—in order to bring us up to himself.*”

Incidentally, if you were to go up Mount Tabor today, the traditional location for the Transfiguration, you would find three shrines or memorials – one to Moses, one to Elijah and one to Jesus. This misses the entire message, doesn’t it? They should instead put up a big sign that reads, “***But Jesus only!***”

Tim Keller writes, “*When Moses encountered God’s glory he reflected the glory of God as the moon reflects the sun. But Jesus produces the unsurpassable glory of God; it emanates from Him. Jesus did not point to the glory of God as Elijah, Moses and every other prophet had done; Jesus is the glory of God in human form.*”

God the Father is saying the only tabernacle you need, the only prophet you need, and the only king you will ever need...is His beloved Son! It’s not Joseph Smith or Brigham Young or Mohammed or Buddha or the Dalai Lama or Confucius or L. Ron Hubbard or Mary Baker Eddy or the Pope or anyone else.

When faced with the splendor of Jesus, Peter tries to come up with a man-made solution. When the disciples encounter the supremacy of Jesus, we see how they struggled with their response. *A glimpse of glory will keep us going.*

5. The struggles of the disciples. If we had experienced what the disciples did, we’d want to tell everyone. Let me quickly point out two things.

- **They're told to be quiet.** Look at verse 9: *“And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.”* Sometimes the Bible tells us to do something or not do something and it doesn't make sense to us. Incidentally, this is the final command of silence for the disciples and this is the only one that has a time limit – they can tell everyone after the Resurrection because that's when it will all make sense.
- **They had questions.** We see this in verse 10: *“So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean.”* To their credit, these guys put the Transfiguration in the vault. They obeyed, but that didn't stop their questions. Listen. It's OK to have questions. In fact, we'll learn next weekend that doubt does not disqualify us. Some of us are paralyzed by our questions, thinking we have to have them all answered to our satisfaction before we'll fully follow Christ. Here's a news flash. You don't have to have everything figured out before you put your faith in Christ and become a fully devoted follower.

In verses 11-13, the disciples ask some questions about Elijah and the answer Jesus gives them is that Elijah is still to come *and* Elijah has already come in the person of John the Baptist. I'm sure this is another mind-blowing [demonstrate] statement for them.

And so, here's what we've learned today: *A glimpse of glory will keep us going.*

Let's ponder something else that A.W. Tozer said, *“As God is exalted to the right place in our lives, a thousand problems are solved all at once.”*

Please Close Your Eyes

I want to end with something written by Jen Wilkins in her book *None Like Him*: *“When we lose sight of the majesty of God, we invariably fill the gap in our vision with the fable of the majesty of someone else. We revere a spouse or a leader. We worship our children or a friend. We even give reverence and awe to ourselves. And this is complete folly. Not only is it unwise to give our worship to someone other than God, it is the very definition of irrationality. And it's an exhausting business.”*

Prayer

Closing Song: “All for Your Glory”

Benediction

I close with this benediction found in 1 Timothy 6:12-16: ***“Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.”***