

Life with Jesus and Mountaintop Experiences **2 Kings 2.1-12; Psalm 50.1-6; 2 Cor 4.3-6; Mark 9.2-9**

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Why do we so often feel that life is just one string of troubles? My own work seems to be focused on solving problems all the time. Why can life not be more up, why so much down? If only we had more mountain-top experiences!

1 GLORIOUS EVENT: What Happened

Jesus took his closest followers with Him on a mountain retreat, and there they had a very special experience – an event that lasted only a short time, but it was so intense and special to them that they have left us a description of what happened there.

We have read the story from the Gospel of St Mark; Mark got this story of the transfiguration on the mountain straight from the horse's mouth, that is, from Peter. Church traditions say that Mark was the interpreter for Peter at the time when Peter was in Rome. That is when Mark noted down the stories Peter told his audiences.

So what Mark writes about this event is nothing less than the transcript of the account of the prime eyewitness.

St Luke in his Gospel relates *why* Jesus went up the mountain with his three disciples – it was because He wanted to pray. Jesus wanted to speak with his Father because of the very difficult journey ahead of Him. The valley of the shadow of death lay ahead.

And when Jesus began to speak with his Father, extraordinary things happened. Here we see the Son of God briefly in his actual glory – the glory He had with his Father before He came to earth and the glory He would have again when he returned to his Father.

How awe-inspiring, to see Jesus transfigured in shining light. And beside this, Moses and Elijah appeared for a summit meeting with Jesus. Moses and Elijah are known for their *own* mountaintop experiences.

Moses was with God on Mount Sinai, and there he received the law of God, in the midst of lightning and thunder and brightness and clouds. For Israel, Moses represented the law; he was also the lead man for Israel's exodus out of Egypt into the Promised Land, the founding father of the nation of Israel.

And Elijah was Israel's greatest prophet. He is famous for what he did on the top of Mount Carmel, where he defeated the prophets of the Middle Eastern god Baal, when God sent fire and lightning from heaven.

Peter and his mates were scared to death – and Peter was, it seems, rather clueless about what he actually saw. He saw, but he did not get it.

‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah’. Mark tells us: He did not know what to say, they were so afraid.

Three dwellings – the original Greek speaks of tents, tabernacles. Many theologians think that this event of the transfiguration on the mountain actually took place during the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, when every Jewish family would build a hut in his backyard or on his roof, and eat and celebrate and sleep in that hut for a whole week - to remember the exodus from Egypt.

They would remember God’s provision in the desert, in that valley of death, and how God led them into the Promised Land. As the feast coincided with the end of the fruit harvest, it was a joyful feast. It was also a time to remind one another, while sitting in their huts, that even though today may be miserable, one day God will re-create this world to be a paradise.

So Peter’s immediate response was: Lord, let us build three of those huts. Maybe he was convinced that this moment on the mountain, this moment of glory with Moses, Elijah and Jesus, was actually the inauguration of that expected perfect kingdom of God. He hoped to prolong the mountaintop experience, forever.

2. UNDERSTANDING: only through the Spirit

Even though Peter knew his Bible well - he did not really understand yet how to interpret the events and promises of the Old Testament. Because all things written in the Hebrew Scriptures must be read in the light of who Jesus Christ is, and what he came to do. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to this.

To begin with, the idea to maintain the *status quo* with Moses, Elijah and Jesus was a mistake, as it was in direct opposition to God’s plans for Jesus. Moses and Elijah had come to assist Jesus, to prepare him for the valley ahead of him. And they were to disappear into the background.

Moses and Elijah confirmed to Jesus: ‘This valley of death ahead of you, to be killed in Jerusalem, this is the real exodus, an exodus much greater than that of Moses.’ Jesus leads all who believe in him out of darkness into eternal life with God.

If you read the Old Testament with this in mind, you will see Jesus in his suffering and in his glory everywhere, prefigured and prophesied.

Peter saw Moses, and Elijah, and Jesus, and wanted to keep *all three* together there forever. With that statement he assumed that the three men were actually each other’s equals. But Jesus is not just one in a sequence of great men.

The law and the prophets were just a shadow of the reality of God, who is only found in Jesus. The Old Testament witnesses to the New Testament.

Only when we see the glory of God in Jesus Christ, and then look back at the Old Testament, can we also see God's glory, Jesus Christ, in that Old Testament of Moses and Elijah. Then the Old Testament also contains the Gospel.

The Old Testament is the Word of God. But the living Word of God, Jesus Christ, is the heart, the Spirit of all that is written. So any explanation of the Word of God with no sight of Jesus Christ misses the heart of what God says to us.

While Peter was still speaking, a cloud appeared and a voice from the cloud said: 'This is My Son, whom I have chosen. Listen to him!' God interrupted Peter: 'Can you please keep your mouth shut, Peter, can you please listen? Jesus is not like Moses or any other prophet, He is my Son. He is of a totally different nature. So keep your mouth shut, and listen. Listen to Him!'

The cloud of the presence of God, the Spirit of God, covered all of them, because they were in the presence of Jesus Christ. He is the true Tabernacle, the Temple where God is to be found, and we also become his Temples - by attaching ourselves by faith to Him, the true Temple.

So there is no longer a need for physical tents, for tabernacles made of fabric. Peter's idea was mistaken. We can meet God in Jesus Christ alone. He is the tabernacle, the tent, the temple of God, and as we find God, in Jesus, through faith, he also lives in us.

When the apostles heard the voice of God from the cloud, they fell face down on the ground, terrified. After a while as they slowly, carefully looked up, they no longer saw Moses and Elijah; they saw no one, except Jesus. That is how the Father in heaven wanted it: Jesus as the only focus of our spiritual attention.

3. TO DO: our Life

And all this is what Peter with his suggestion wanted to avoid. He wanted a rather limited Kingdom now. No pain, no suffering, but immediate blessings. 'Lord, this is a good place. Let us stay here. Let us not go any further to Jerusalem...'

Maybe Peter had been scared by the words Jesus spoke a week before, that he was going to Jerusalem to die, and that his disciples would also have to take up their cross and follow him. Jesus predicted that servants of God will also suffer, like he did. Yes, he died for us. But that does not mean that after his death, there is no suffering for us.

No wonder Peter preferred to avoid this. And what a great idea, life as one long mountaintop experience. The mountain of transfiguration is always more enjoyable than the valleys of life... It is always more pleasant to experience mountaintops than to face daily life and its problems.

But the glory of the transfiguration on this mountain must be seen in conjunction with the glory of Jesus on the mountain of Golgotha. The route to the eternal kingdom of God cannot bypass that mountain of pain and death. That was true for Jesus... and I think it is true for us until His Kingdom has finally come.

Our mountaintops may energize us, and they are vivid reminders, milestones, that point us to the better things that are to come. But in the meantime, life can often be dark and grim, and the summit-experiences few and short. A painful example of this is the life of Mother Theresa. After her death, some of her correspondence was revealed in the book *Come be my light*.

This woman, who was so much the face of true service to God, had struggled for decades with the absence of any mountaintop experience. That absence seems to have started almost precisely at the time she began tending the poor and dying in Calcutta, and — except for a five-week break in 1959 — never abated.

Although perpetually cheery in public, Mother Teresa actually lived in a state of deep and abiding spiritual pain. In many letters she speaks of the ‘dryness’, ‘darkness’, ‘loneliness’ and ‘torture’ she was undergoing. She compares the experience to hell and at one point says it has driven her to doubt the existence of heaven and even of God.

James Martin, wrote about Mother Theresa in his book *My Life with the Saints*,

I've never read a saint's life where the saint has such an intense spiritual darkness. No one knew she was that tormented.

Mother Teresa is a very extreme case; most Christians regularly experience the presence of God in a joyful manner, in nature, with friends, at Eucharist, in prayer. However, life in the valley is the norm – the daily life of service, of problems, of sadness for the loss of friends and family. The daily life of heartache and headache.

CONCLUSION

So if we desire to experience more spiritual mountaintops in our life, if we hope to see something of the glory of God even in the midst of our daily life, if that is what we desire, it does not help us at all to focus on experiences, or on accompanying feelings.

We have to focus on Jesus Christ, in whom we meet with God, our comforter. We meet Jesus Christ in his Word - from page one to the end, each page is filled with him.

This Wednesday we celebrate Ash Wednesday; this is the beginning of our period of Lent, focusing on the last days in the life of Jesus, his route to the cross for our sins. Please come to church at 7pm.

Let us use this period to read the Gospels again. I will give you a booklet with daily readings, starting on Ash Wednesday. When you read, ask God to meet with you through the life of Jesus Christ and through the presence of His Spirit in your life.

The booklet also contains seven specific prayers for evening time. Let us pray those prayers.

During Lent, hundreds of millions of Christians worldwide adopt some personal form of fasting to consider what Christ has done for us. Some people do not eat meat. Or they do not drink coffee. I know some who minimize their usage of TV and internet to spend time with God. The prayers and bible readings in the booklet we give to you may help with this.

Why not decide upon a form of fasting that suits you? We would also like to set aside each Wednesday for fasting together with our Egyptian and Sudanese congregations, taking only bread and water.

May our focus this Lent be to experience the glory of God that became visible in the Lord Jesus Christ. Our focus should be on the Lord himself and on Him alone, and on serving Him, even in the valleys of this life.

By staying close to Him, even suffering with him to a certain extent, like the disciples did, we may expect God to bless us every now and then with mountaintop experiences that will help us in our walk through life.

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit Amen