

*See God's Glory*

**Luke 9:28-36**

John Breon

This section of Luke's Gospel marks a turning point in Jesus' ministry. It concludes Jesus' popular ministry in Galilee and introduces Jesus' turning toward Jerusalem to face rejection and death.

Immediately after Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus impresses on his disciples that the Messiah must suffer. He is more than they had imagined any Messiah would be. Later, Jesus reveals that after his suffering and through his suffering, the Messiah will enter into his glory.

In today's passage, three disciples see the glory of Jesus. This event, called the Transfiguration, gives the three disciples a glimpse of the future as well as a vision of Jesus as he really is. They see the glory of God in Jesus shining forth. They also see the glory Jesus will have in the future, in his resurrection and at his return.

This account of Jesus' transfiguration has some close connections with the stories in Exodus of Moses meeting God on the mountain. In chapters 24, 33, and 34 of Exodus, Moses goes up a mountain where he sees some of the glory of God. He enters a cloud that represents God's presence. He hears the voice of God. When Moses returns from his time in God's presence, listening to God, his face shines.

Michael Card wrote about Moses' experience:

He ate the bread of heaven  
Drank water from the rock  
And the grumbling children followed  
Like a misbegotten flock  
He climbed up on a mountain  
They couldn't even touch  
Who'd have known that one encounter  
Could have ever meant so much

And up upon that high place  
In a cleft of solid stone  
His face was set on fire  
As the God of Glory shone  
He alone had seen it  
And had lived to tell the tale  
But because they feared the fire  
He had to hide behind a veil

A face that shone with the radiance of the Father  
Though it had known and endured dark desert days  
A face that shone with the glory of Another  
So the prophet would discover  
As the glory was fading away

At this turning point in Jesus' ministry, he takes Peter, John, and James and goes up onto a mountain *to pray*. Luke repeatedly reminds us of Jesus' prayer life. He frequently went off like this. And a mountain seems to be a significant place for Jesus to pray. Perhaps he is intending again to pray all night.

As he prays, something happens. This is another of Luke's favorite phrases. When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit came upon him *as he was praying*. In Acts, the Holy Spirit comes upon the church while they are "all joined together constantly in prayer" (1:14). Later, "the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly" *after they prayed* (4:31).

As Jesus prays, his faces changes appearance and his clothes become bright as lightning. It's probably at night when this happens, so the effect is even more dramatic. The glory of God incarnate in Jesus is shining unveiled. His glory that will shine in his resurrection and when he returns at the close of history is already bursting forth in the present moment.

In addition to this display, two men appear in glory. The two men are Moses and Elijah, and they are talking with Jesus. The veil between the

earthly and heavenly dimensions opens for a moment. Jesus on earth converses with Moses and Elijah in heaven.

What they discuss is Jesus' "exodus." Jesus' way out is the way of suffering, death, resurrection, and exaltation. He will soon fulfill this exodus at Jerusalem. The connection between Jesus' "exodus" and Israel's exodus from bondage in Egypt tells us that Jesus also brings liberation from bondage. He has been forgiving people's sins, releasing people from sin. He has been healing people and freeing them from the bondage of sickness. He has released people from demonic possession and oppression. Through his death and resurrection, he will make the way out of bondage to sin and death and the way into the new life of freedom and peace and joy and love that God intends for people.

The appearance of Moses and Elijah not only encourages Jesus. As the major figures in the OT, they represent the Law and the Prophets that point to Jesus and find their fulfillment in him. By bringing his departure to fulfillment, Jesus would also fulfill the Law and its intention to reveal God's gracious care for his people and its provision of guidelines for living as God's people. Jesus would fulfill the hopes and visions of the prophets for the coming of God's kingdom of justice and peace. The covenant relationship with God that Moses led the people in and that the prophets kept calling the people to return to, is finally and fully realized in Jesus.

While Jesus is talking with Moses and Elijah, Peter and the two other disciples are falling asleep. How typical of Jesus' disciples and how like us so often: Not alert, not attentive to what God is doing and showing us.

What do we miss when we are asleep? When our minds or spirits are dozing? God, wake us up, open our eyes to see you! When the disciples were fully awake, they saw Jesus' glory.

I like Fred Craddock's story about visiting with a surgeon at an airport. The surgeon had done a study on the effects of conversation between doctors and nurses on a patient who is under anesthesia. He found that if the doctors and nurses were negative and gripey and grumpy, then the patient in post-op was depressed and pessimistic. If the doctors and nurses were upbeat, happy, merry, and cheerful, then the patient in post-op was euphoric and optimistic and proceeded to recover quickly. It was time for

Fred to catch his plane and he thanked the surgeon for the conversation. He asked, "Why, are you a doctor?" Fred said, "No, I'm a preacher. But if it'll work in surgery, it'll work in the sanctuary." He says he's not bothered by someone sleeping during his sermon, because several days later they may get a little Christian twitch and not even know what caused it (*Craddock Stories* 29).

God can get through to us, even when we're sleeping. But, how much better to be awake to God's glory in Jesus.

Then the disciples see that the two men with Jesus are leaving. Peter has an idea—why not put up some shelters (tents/tabernacles): one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah? Luke comments that Peter didn't know what he was saying. Maybe Peter wants to camp in this experience. Or he wants to honor Jesus alongside other great figures in Israel's history.

Whatever Peter is trying to say, he is interrupted. A cloud appears and envelops them—the cloud of God's presence. The disciples are afraid as they enter the cloud. The awesome majesty and holiness of God is cause for frail humans to fear.

A voice comes from the cloud—like the voice at Jesus' baptism. This time the disciples also hear the heavenly voice: "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him!" Again, the Prophets and the Law come together to testify to Jesus. "This is my Son, my Chosen" comes from Isaiah (and possibly also the Psalms), where God speaks of his Servant. "Listen to him" comes from Deuteronomy where Moses urges the people to heed the prophet God will send.

At the beginning of this section of Luke, in verse 9 of this chapter, Herod asks about Jesus, "Who then, is this I hear such things about?" Luke wants us to consider that question throughout this section. A little later Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do the crowds say I am?" Then he makes it more personal, "Who do you say that I am?" Now, on the mountain, the heavenly voice provides the dramatic answer to Herod's question. Who is this? He is the Son of God.

Peter was wrong if he saw Jesus as just another in the line of Moses and Elijah. Jesus is not simply another figure in Israel's religious history. Moses and Elijah fade from the scene, leaving Jesus alone. The new era of

God's kingdom that Jesus brings surpasses the era of Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets. We are to hear Jesus, not over and against Moses and the prophets, but as the proper interpreter and fulfillment of what the Scriptures proclaim. Jesus is God's Son, God's Chosen, the One to listen to.

We still need to see Jesus for who he is and not try to fit him into our image. Before too long, the major news magazines and some of the cable networks will trot out their articles and stories on Jesus. They tend to do that around Christmas or Easter. Some of what they say is good—it gives up to date information about archeology and other studies. We don't have anything to fear from historical and archeological study. But some of what those media outlets say about Jesus starts from a position of skepticism and they try to disprove the biblical and historical witness to Jesus as fully God and fully human. Too often, people try to explain Jesus in terms that omit or deny God's activity in the world and in the life of Jesus.

We need a fresh vision of Jesus as he is. Because we do not define him; he defines us. Will Willimon tells about a woman who complained to him about the youth group her 17-year old daughter attended. The daughter had said something like, "The Trinity is an outmoded concept. We don't need to think of God in such a complicated way anymore." The youth leader had replied, "Well, that's wrong. That's not the way Christians look at it." The girl's mother was deeply offended that this youth pastor dared to tell her daughter she was wrong! Willimon said to the mother, "Your daughter is extremely bright. She's gotten a huge scholarship to the college of her choice. But she's ignorant and uninformed when it comes to basic Christian doctrine. As Christians, we're not here to say, 'I agree or disagree with that.' We're here to be instructed, to be enculturated into a very different way of looking at things" (*Leadership*, Winter/94, 30).

Jesus, God's Son, God's Chosen One is the one to listen to, the one we follow. In the rest of Michael Card's song, he talks about Jesus:

He was the Bread from Heaven  
He would be the smitten Rock  
He had twelve confused disciples  
They were his bewildered flock

When he climbed upon the mountain  
He took Peter, James and John  
In the face of pending glory  
They soon began to yawn

As he prayed while they were sleeping  
He was transfigured into Light  
His face a flash of lightning  
His clothes so burning bright  
So Moses finally saw the face  
Before he'd hidden from  
Then came a voice from heaven  
"This is my beloved Son"

The face that shone is the Glory of the Father  
And he had known from the start that it was so  
The face that shone had let the light shine out of darkness  
And we're changed into His likeness  
As we gaze upon the Son

But you and me we tend to flee from shining faces  
We see the glow and then we know that we're undone  
They shine His light into our emptiest of spaces  
With their bright and shining faces  
Reflect the radiance of the Son

("A Face that Shone," *The Beginning*, 1989/*The Ancient Faith*,  
1993)

The disciples still weren't sure about what they'd seen. They didn't really wake up spiritually until after Jesus' resurrection.

John would later write in his Gospel, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Peter's memory of this event is preserved in 2 Peter 1:17-18: "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.' We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain."

Through the testimony of those who saw and heard Jesus, we can see his glory and hear his words. By the present working of the Holy Spirit, we can wake up and see Jesus' glory revealed to us. The Holy Spirit transforms (transfigures) us as we behold and reflect the glory of God we see in Christ. We then return glory to God by giving him praise and honor.

And we're called to carry that glory into places of suffering and need. Right after this experience on the mountain, Jesus and the three disciples go back down the mountain (verses 37-43). They are confronted by a crowd including a man whose son is possessed by an evil spirit. The other disciples had been unable to cast it out. But Jesus rebukes the evil spirit, heals the boy and gives him back to his father. "And they were all amazed at the greatness of God."

The One who is Lord on the mountain remains Lord in the valley. The glory and power revealed in Transfiguration are available to meet needs, to save, heal and deliver people everywhere.