

Mountaintop experience

Mark 9.2-9

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Your life and my life, in many ways they resemble the world economy. It is one long sequence of ups and downs. And sadly, the mountaintops seem to never last long enough and the deep valleys are always lengthy.

The gospel story we have read describes an amazing mountaintop experience of the Lord Jesus Christ and three of his disciples, Peter, James and John. Imagine to be there!

1. Glorious event

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 of Peter at the time when Peter was in Rome. That is when Mark noted down the stories Peter told his audiences.

So Mark gives us the account of a prime eyewitness.

Jesus went up the mountain to pray. He wanted to speak with his Father because of the very difficult journey ahead of Him. The valley of the shadow of death lay ahead.

Then, 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.

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 also known for their own mountaintop experiences.

When Moses led the people of Israel through the desert, on their exodus, Moses received the law of God on Mount Sinai, in the midst of lightning and thunder and brightness and clouds.

By the way, note in that story in Exodus 24, how the glory of God appeared on Mount Sinai, like a devouring fire.

And Elijah, 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.

On Mount Carmel, God revealed himself by bright fire.

On the Mount of the Transfiguration Jesus is the one who is fully of glory; his clothes became dazzling white. Would would this mean?

Mark writes that the disciples were terrified. Peter had told him this; he was an honest man and did not embellish the event. The event was great, but the three disciples looked foolish. They were scared to death.

And Peter was, it seems, rather clueless about what he actually saw. He saw, but did not get it.

2. Three mistakes of Peter

'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 says: He did not know what to say, they were so afraid.

There are smart people who hide their lack of knowledge and wisdom by zipping their lips. That creates at least a semblance of wisdom. I am a slow learner in this respect, and I feel comforted – I am in the blessed company of St Peter. He should have kept his mouth, as fear and ignorance are not a great source for coming up with wise statements....

Three dwellings – the original Greek speaks of tents.

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.

And in those huts, they also reminded one another, that even though today we may feel miserable, one day God will re-create this world to be a paradise.

So Peter's immediate response was: Lord, let us create 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.

And Peter, I think, made three mistakes with his response.

Mistake one

In general terms, I think the idea to prolong mountain-top experiences with God is doomed to fail. As soon as you start to focus on the experience, it is like water in your hands – you lose it quickly.

Such an experience occurs mostly at unexpected moments and not because you look for it, but because God gives it in his goodness. They are rare moments that cannot be created, or prolonged, and that makes them actually so unique. They are gracious donations by God.

Mistake two

With his proposal, Peter, also went directly against God's plans with Jesus.

Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem and God gave Him this summit meeting with Moses and Elijah to prepare him for the valley ahead of him. Moses and Elijah spoke about his departure, says Luke. His departure, in Greek, is literally his exodus.

Moses and Elijah confirmed to Jesus: that valley of death ahead of you, to be killed in Jerusalem, that is the real exodus, much greater than the exodus of Moses.

It does not just bring people from country A to country B, but it leads the whole world from a situation of separation from God, to a life in eternity with the Creator.



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

The mountain of transfiguration is always more enjoyable than the valleys of life... It is always more pleasant to experience mountain-tops 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 energise 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 are 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, has struggled for decades with the absence of any mountaintop experience. That absence seems to have started at almost precisely 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 personal 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.

Mother Teresa is a very extreme case; most Christians regularly experience something of the presence of God in a joyful manner, in nature, with friends, at Eucharist, in prayer.

But life in the valley is the norm— the daily life of service, of problems, of sadness for the loss of family and friends.

Mistake three

Peter made a third mistake, I believe. He 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.

Moses and Elijah had come to serve Jesus Christ by confirm to Him how his exodus in Jerusalem would be. The whole of religious history of Israel culminated in Jesus.

Moses and his Law could not bring people to God; the Law is good, but it only teaches what behaviour is pleasing to God. And people tend to not follow those precepts well, so prophets are needed to call people back to obedience to God. But prophets cannot bring people to God himself.

Neither law nor prophets are able to solve our problems.



Jesus is not of the sort of religious leader who just gives us rules for living, or a prophet who calls people back to those rules. Jesus is much greater than Moses or than any prophet.

So by putting Jesus on the level of Moses and Elijah was a grave mistake of Peter, and a mistake that is even today repeated by millions who recognise Jesus as just one of the prophets.

3. God has the last word

What happens next is almost comical – Luke says that 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!’

So while Peter spoke God interrupted him:

‘Can you please keep your mouth shut, Peter, can you please listen? Jesus is not like Moses or any prophet, He is my Son. He is of a totally different nature. So keep your mouth shut, and listen. Listen to Him!’

When Peter, James and John heard that voice of God from the cloud, they fell face-down on the ground, even more terrified. And when after a while 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. Because He is God of God, Light from light, true God from true God.

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.

The Gospel makes it so clear. If we want to experience the glory of God, we have to face 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 life.

And by staying close to Jesus Christ, even suffering with him to a certain extent, like the disciples did, we may expect that God will bless us every now and then also with mountaintop experiences that help us, energise us, encourage us in our daily walk through life’s valleys.

+ Amen