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A Pitstop in Glory

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

I enjoy the mountains. There is something magical about taking in the view from the top of a peak. Years ago I had a job at a summer camp driving high school kids up and down a mountain. Twice a day I would take off from 8,000 feet and drive up the side of a precipitous peak to 12,000 feet. The view was spectacular and I never got tired of it. We could see for miles and miles the many peaks of the Collegiate Range in the Rocky Mountains.

What is it about mountains that makes us willing to put our lives at risk to get to the top? I wonder if it's a longing for the glory of heaven. I guess it might just be the expansive view or the thin air or the exhilaration of making it to the top, but there is something about being up there that makes us feel closer to God? Think about it. God created the nation Israel for himself and brought them out from Egypt to worship him on a mountain. That mountain was enveloped in a cloud, and in that place Moses was able to speak with God. Centuries later, after combating Baal worship on Mt. Carmel, Elijah fled for his life and met God on that same mountain. There he was re-commissioned with a fresh vision from the voice of God. David lifted his eyes to the hills, and saw in them a symbol of the presence of God. That was where he set in place plans to build the temple on a mount in Jerusalem.

As we've been studying the movements of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, we might expect that he would also make that same journey up the mountain with his disciples. Well, the time has finally arrived. As we come to Luke 9:28, the disciples of Jesus are feeling bewildered. Just prior to this, Jesus gave them the startling news that he was going to Jerusalem where he would suffer many things and be rejected by the religious leaders and killed. To make matters worse, he said that following him would require a radical shift in the way they lived their lives. It would mean denying themselves the right to run their own lives. If they wanted to save their lives they would have to give them up for his sake. Those were hard words to swallow.

What do these troubled disciples need to stay on the path of discipleship? What do we need when the cost of following Jesus seems to outweigh the benefits? We need to make a trip up the mountain. In a sense, we need to make a pit stop in glory. We need to allow God to pull back the curtain of our soul so we can see his glory. We need to know there is light at the end of the tunnel.

In Luke 9:28-36 Jesus leads three of his disciples up a mountain where they see something of his coming glory. It was something they never forgot. Years later, John opened his gospel with these words, "**We saw his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth**" (Jn.1:14). He was likely talking about what happened in this story. It was the peek into the coming splendor of his glory that bolstered the disciples and will bolster us in tough times.

PREDICTION OF GLORY

Remember Jesus had predicted this in v. 27. "**But I say to you truthfully, there are some of those standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.**" Some have been confused by this verse because they thought that Jesus was speaking of his Second Coming. Obviously, his Second Coming didn't take place within the lifetime of any of those disciples so some say that Jesus was mistaken here. But Jesus is not talking of his Second Coming. It's clear that Luke links this prediction with what is about to happen in what we call the transfiguration. Jesus is saying that some of them there would not die until they saw a manifestation of the kingdom of God in its glorious power. The very next thing that happens fulfills that prediction.

PREVIEW OF GLORY

A. The setting: Luke begins by setting the scene. "**Some eight days after these sayings, He took along Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray**" (v. 28). Luke gives the approximate time this took place – eight days after the prediction was made. We're reminded that when Moses went up on Mt. Sinai he took three men with him and there was also a preparation time of about a week. Jesus takes with him three men: Peter, James and John. These three were often singled out from the rest. This has nothing to do with these men being better than the rest or Jesus loving them more. Jewish testimony required two or three witnesses be present to substantiate an event. He brought them up the mountain to witness his coming glory. Many scholars believe this was beautiful Mt. Hermon – not the one in the Santa Cruz mountains, but the real one in northern Palestine which rises 10,000 feet above the Jordan Valley. This would have been one heck of a climb, but what better place could there be to reveal your glory! Notice it says that Jesus went up to the mountain to

pray. Throughout this gospel we've seen that Jesus was a man of prayer and here he continues that practice.

B. The transfiguration: Look what happens while he was praying.

“And while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and His clothing became white and gleaming. And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah, who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (vv. 29–31).

Imagine this! Some of you enjoyed a spectacular fireworks display this past Monday night but, believe me, this was far more glorious! The glorified body and face of Jesus illuminated his clothing so that it became as bright as a flash of lightning. It's interesting to read how some of the liberal scholars treat this incident. One says that Jesus was praying on the mountain top when suddenly the sun broke through the clouds and shone upon him, and in that brilliant sunlight he appeared to the disciples to be transfigured. That may sound possible, but it doesn't explain Moses and Elijah, nor the other events that happened. It's clear that this is a supernatural change.

What happened to Jesus? For a brief moment, the veil of his humanity was removed, and the true essence of who he was shone through. This was not a reflected glory; this was an intrinsic glory. It's almost as if Jesus crossed the line between time and eternity; he entered back into his pre human glory. In John 17:5 he prayed, **“Father glorify me with the glory I had with you before the world was created.”** Well, here, for a moment's time, he slips back into that glory; the same glory that he would resume when he was exalted to the right hand of the Father. Much later, John had a vision of the glorified Jesus while exiled on the island of Patmos. He says that he saw **“one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His breast with a golden girdle. And His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire; and His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been caused to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. And in His right hand He held seven stars; and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength”** (Rev.1:13-16).

C. The heavenly visitors: Luke also says Jesus had some heavenly visitors – Elijah and Moses. It's interesting that they somehow knew who these men were. Did they recognize them? I doubt they wore name tags! Did Jesus introduce them? “Peter,

James and John, I'd like you to meet a couple of old friends of mine – Elijah and Moses.” We don't know how but somehow they knew who it was. A more important question is why them in the first place? Why Elijah and Moses rather than Abraham and Isaiah? Perhaps it's because both of these men had mountaintop experiences with God of their own – Moses on Mt. Sinai and Elijah on Mt. Horeb. Or perhaps it was because each of them represented something that was fulfilled in the coming of Christ. Moses was the great lawgiver; Jesus fulfilled the law. Elijah was the great prophet who would restore all things and prepare the way for the Messiah. Or perhaps it was because both of these men had strange departures from this world. Elijah was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11), and Moses died but he was buried by the Lord and no one knows where (Deut 34:6).

Luke is the only writer who tells us what they were talking about. They were speaking of his departure, meaning they were discussing his coming death. This was a mountaintop experience, but one in which the subject was death. It seems that the cross was the central thought of heaven. The word he uses for “departure” is significant. It's the word “exodus.” Jesus was about to accomplish his exodus at Jerusalem. God had used Moses in the exodus to deliver his people from bondage in Egypt. Now he will use Jesus to deliver his people from bondage to sin. And so the mount of transfiguration looks towards the mount of sacrifice. It lights up Calvary and lays a wreath of glory upon the cross.

What an amazing sight! Luminous, dazzling Jesus is talking to Moses who had been dead over 1,400 years and Elijah who had been dead for about 900 years. And they're talking about his death for our sins. What is interesting is that during at least part of this the three disciples were sound asleep. They're always sleeping when they should be awake and awake when they should be sleeping!

D. The reaction: But somehow in the midst of this they woke up. Imagine waking up to that! If there was ever a time for silence, this was it. But even the transfiguration couldn't silence Peter. There are two kinds of speakers in this world: those who have something to say and those who have to say something! Look what happens next.

“Now Peter and his companions had been overcome with sleep; but when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him. And as these were leaving Him, Peter said to Jesus, ‘Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles: one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah’ – not realizing what he was saying” (vv. 32–33).

Isn't Peter great? Have you ever been in one of those situations where the only appropriate response is silence, but someone who can't stand the awkwardness of silence speaks up and says something incredibly stupid?

That's the Peter syndrome!

Peter says to Jesus that's it's good that he and his buddies are there because they can really be of some help. They can build three tents, one for each big shot. Peter believes that this is a good time and place for Jesus to set up his campaign headquarters. He assumes that Jesus is going to usher in the kingdom right here. He wants to contain this moment. He may even write a book about it. He'll call it, "Ten Easy Steps To Glory" or "Mountaintop Faith" or "Memoirs of a Sunburned Saint." Peter probably felt that finally Jesus was coming around. "Enough of this cross business, we're staying up here to rule the world. We've got the place. We've got the personnel. Let's do it, Jesus!"

Many of us are like Peter. We want to stay up on the mountaintop with Jesus. We have an experience where we see something of his glory or his goodness, and we think, "This is it! This is what we've been looking for. I need to find a way to stay here." We fail to realize that most of the journey is not lived on the mountaintop but in the valley.

D. The testimony: I can just see the look Jesus gave Peter. "Is this guy ever going to get it?" But Jesus didn't say a word. Instead, he lets his Father do the talking. Look what happens next.

"While he was saying this, a cloud formed and began to overshadow them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, 'This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!' And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent, and reported to no one in those days any of the things which they had seen" (vv. 34–36).

Remember that the cloud is the sign of God's presence; his shekinah glory. The pillar of cloud led Israel through the wilderness by day. It was the cloud which enveloped Moses on Mt. Sinai and the cloud which covered the Tent of Meeting where Moses met with God. It had been hundreds of years since anyone saw that glorious cloud! Now, it envelops the six of them.

And then, out of the cloud, thunders a voice, "This is my Son, My Chosen One, listen to him!" One of the mistakes Peter had made is that he had placed Jesus on par with Elijah and Moses. That's why he suggested a tent for each one. He felt they had the dream team all set up here. God the Father steps in and says, "Forget about Moses and Elijah. This is my beloved Son. He is the one you should listen to." It's surprising that with all this emphasis in the story on what they SAW, God doesn't say, "Look at him!" but instead, "Listen to him!" Visions come and go, but God's Word abides. All of a sudden, the others are gone and all they see is Jesus. He is the One they need to listen to.

Now that experience had to be incredibly encouraging for Peter, James and John. It was like having

a sample of food from a fine restaurant that made them just die to eat there. But, before they could enjoy the fine dining of heaven they had to go back down the mountain and face the real world of McDonalds and Burger King. Brian Morgan writes, "The painful thing about being creatures of this earth is that every time we go up the mountain we have to come down, and the experience that once filled us with glory now leaves us with a gaping ache that makes us long for more."

We know from Mark's gospel that they kept silent about it because Jesus told them to. Can you imagine how difficult that would have been, especially for Peter? But Jesus does this because their understanding is still incomplete. If they had spread the word about this event, people would want to coronate him right away. But Jesus insisted that the cross must come before the crown.

POSTLUDE ON GLORY

There is a part of me that thinks this whole thing was a rather cruel experiment. He unzips his humanity and reveals his glory, but then he jerks them back to the grimy realities of the cross. Why does he do this? He does this for one reason: because it's only in the light of his coming glory that following Jesus makes any sense. He wants to encourage them to face suffering joyfully and hopefully, knowing that the glory in which they just made a brief pit stop will soon be their permanent home.

Paul had the same experience. He wrote that at one point in his life he was caught up into the third heavens (2 Cor 12:2), and what he heard and saw was unspeakable glory. That vision of heaven was given not to puff him up but to encourage him in the face of suffering. In my own life, when heaven has appeared most real to me, I found it was preparing me to endure suffering. If we've tasted the future we can endure anything. If we know that all suffering has a limit and a destination, we can get through it.

This is what we need to know when the path that Jesus leads us down becomes difficult. Later, Peter would write about this same event to encourage believers struggling with being persecuted for their faith, saying, **"We weren't...just wishing on a star when we laid the facts out before you regarding the powerful return of our Master, Jesus Christ. We were there for the preview. We saw it with our own eyes: Jesus resplendent with light from God the Father as the voice of the Majestic Glory spoke... We were there on the holy mountain with him. We heard the voice out of heaven with our very own ears. We couldn't be more sure of what we saw and heard--God's glory; God's voice. The prophetic word was confirmed to us. You will do well to keep focusing on it"** (2 Pt. 1:17-19 The Message).

What do we need when the road where Jesus

leads seems long and hard? What do we need when the world groans and we wonder how long things can go before they break? Peter says we need to focus on what's at the end of the journey for those who love him and follow him. That's why we get this pit stop in glory land. It reminds us that though suffering is a part of the journey, it's not the end of the journey. At the end of the journey is glory. Knowing that's at the end, we can endure the present with joy. We can make the hard choices to let Jesus rule our lives even when it seems like we're missing out.

We have to learn to leave room in our lives for the Lord to break through our hard shell and reveal his glory to us. That, by the way, is part of what worship is all about. There are times when we drag ourselves to church and go through the motions like we're sitting through a mandatory timeshare presentation. But if we come expectant and seeking and open, the Lord can break through and reveal his glory to us. He can do that here in church; he can do it in your own personal time with the Lord; he can do it as you go to the mountains or the ocean this summer and take time to let the reflected glory of creation remind you of the intrinsic glory of our Lord.

Some of us are not on the mountain but in the valley. We need to be encouraged to follow even when the journey is perilous. What are the hard choices you have to make in order to follow him? Maybe you have to let go of a relationship that you know isn't what he wants for you. Maybe you have to stay in a marriage that seems dead. Maybe you have to be willing to be labeled as one of those weird Christians by people you long to be approved by. Maybe you have to stop trying to control the outcome of every part of your life and just trust in Jesus. Maybe you have to continue to obey him even though he seems distant and cold. Or maybe you're just overwhelmed with a sense of how perilous the world is these days. Murdered and missing children. Bombings in London. A war that seems to just drag on in Iraq. AIDS continues to decimate the population of Africa. It's a dark day in which we live. What do we need in times like these? We need to know that it's not all going to end in darkness and disaster; it's going to end in triumph and glory. Suffering may be necessary, but it's also just temporary. It's not the last word. Our eyes should be more fixed on the coming glory than the present trouble.

In July 1994, Brian Kelly from Detroit suffered complications from surgery on his intestines. Knowing he was soon to die, Kelly told his family what he wanted done with his remains. Human ashes have been sprinkled from airplanes and spread over oceans from ships, but Kelly had something more glorious in mind. His request was unusual, but his family granted it. His boss at Independence Professional Fireworks rolled up Kelly's ashes in a twelve inch round fireworks shell. On Friday, August 12, they shot it into the sky. It trailed two silvery comet tails as it ascended into the night sky and then exploded into red and green stars. If you want to go out in a glorious display, that's pretty spectacular!

But that's nothing compared to the glory that God intends for those who follow Christ. Our reflected glory will far surpass that four second arc of light and color. Scripture says, there will be an awesome blare of the trumpet of God and the majestic voice of the archangel and we will ascend to meet Jesus in the clouds, whose brightness is like the lightning shining from east to west. Jesus himself said, **"Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the Kingdom of their Father"** (Mt. 13:43). In the valley, if we keep that glorious hope before us, we can endure anything.