

The Transfiguration of Jesus the Messiah

As you can see by the title, my subject today is the Transfiguration of Jesus found in Luke 9:28-36. Now, to understand this, or any other single event in the life of Jesus, we must first establish . . .

Its connection to the larger story of God

Jesus' robes and flesh take on a dazzling glow. He is seen talking with men from ancient times. Then a cloud envelopes him and the disciples and a voice from God declares that Jesus is the Son of God, the Chosen one. But what does this all mean?

Apart from being a momentary and encouraging glimpse into the glory realm of God, which no doubt the disciples desperately needed after just hearing Jesus' hard words about them having to "bear their own crosses," apart from the sheer wow factor of it, this *transfiguration* of Jesus on the mountaintop was crucial to their understanding of Jesus and his role in God's plan for *all creation*. There is a much larger story in which this extraordinary event is just one episode. The power of this vision is not that Peter, James and John caught a glimpse of what Jesus was *going* to be like *someday in the distant future*, but rather a revealing of the unseen glory Jesus *already had* there and then.

Now, the word "glory" is one of those tricky words perhaps most Christians today don't understand very well. When we think of "God's glory" we often picture some glowing light or the granting of great power and might to someone. In Jesus's world, they would speak of the glory of Caesar, ruler of the World, or the 'glory' of Rome. " But in the Hebrew Bible, "glory" means so much more than that. Glory was what Adam and Eve had in the Garden. We humans were created to bear God's *image* on earth and to do God's *will* on earth. And *this* is closer to the essence of what it means to *glorify God* than a shining light or being made very powerful. Therefore the glory of God can be among us, yet hidden as it was in Jesus until they were given a glimpse.

So the dramatic events of dazzling light and enveloping clouds we usually associated with "God's glory" in the Bible are in fact *symbols* that must not be confused with the *reality they stand for*. From The Book of Genesis on, the Bible tells an unfolding story of God's promise to restore his glory to creation. And at the end of this story, "his glory will fill the whole earth as the waters cover the sea" (____). And when that happens, we humans will once again perfectly reflect God's image on earth and faithfully care for God's earth as did Adam and Eve in the Garden.

But in the meantime, the Bible tells a story of banishment and enslavement, of exodus and return. It tells the story of God's people undergoing immense sufferings and struggles as they groan with the rest of creation which longs for the *glory* to be revealed once more *through* the children of God. (____)

But despite the present frustration in creation, this is still a story of *a promise*. The big story told in the Bible is about God's glory being restored *to* Israel and *through* Israel to the rest of the world.

As Christians, born of the Spirit with a personal knowledge of God, we are part of this unfolding, yet unfinished story whenever we pray, "Thy *will* be done on earth as it is in heaven. . .for Thine is the kingdom the power and the *glory*, forever and ever, Amen.

So its out of this understanding of the BIG STORY that we must understanding of the episode we find in . . .

Luke 9: 28-36

Jesus has contemplated this big story all his life. The mission of the Messiah was to lead Israel in taking God Glory to the world. From the day the Magi came with their gifts Jesus must have wondered at just how Israel was to become a light to the nations, and how *his* calling as Messiah was to be worked out. How often, and when and where Jesus gained access to the Scriptures we know very little. Books were rare, publically owned and publically read and studied. Jesus almost certainly never owned a single book himself, yet the *Scriptures* seem to have been the focus of his entire social and intellectual life. Though he is the Son of God, in his *humanity*, Jesus has grown up asking many questions about God's unfolding plan. Yet his contemplation of Torah and the Prophets has led him through all his years to an ever clearer understanding of who he is and where his life was now leading. He has just (v22) told his disciples he is about to go up to Jerusalem to die for the sins of humanity – a peculiar pronouncement for one claiming to be Messiah. How could he be sure this was the path to take? So before he reaches the point of no return, this vision comes on a mountaintop as a kind of divine, *pre-authorizing seal of approval* stamped on the fatal step he is about to take. God is saying to Jesus, yes, this is the way it must go.

The events of Jesus life that we find in the Gospels all have the single purpose of demonstrating that the life of Jesus the Messiah was the continuation of and indeed the fulfilment of, *God's covenant with Israel*. Through him the *glory of the LORD would fill the earth*. So it's not surprising at all as he comes to face his cross and his death and his resurrection to find in this timely mountaintop vision . . .

A Consultation with Moses

With our passage in Luke 9 in mind, please turn with me to Exodus 34:29-34. (Read)

I hope you can see here the strong connection between these two events: Moses on Mt Sinai and Jesus on the mount of Transfiguration. There's the dazzling shine Moses receives each time he goes up the mountain to receive the instructions from God. There's the way his brother Aaron and the others stood at a distance in terrified amazement. There's the way Moses needed to cover over his glowing face with a veil afterwards as he descends from the mountain to be among the people. There's the fact that Moses experience of the presence of God was uniquely intimate. . . All these themes are *repeated* by Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration.

But out of these similarities emerge some profound differences. When *Moses* was on Mount Sinai he received instructions for the building of an *earthly Tabernacle*, for a continuing system of sacrifice, laws of ethical and ritual purity for the people of Israel, all of which related to the divine *presence in the sanctuary*. But *now* with Jesus on the mountaintop, all these things that *Moses* saw are shown to be mere shadows of the unseen reality of God's presence in the flesh, in Jesus. For this story is, remember, about a *promise* – God's promise – a covenant. And Israel had tried and failed to keep that covenant. Had gone through the pains of exile and judgement. Israel, of the flesh, fell short of the glory of God. But God remains unchanged. God will keep his covenant of love, and he will seal it with his own blood.

What an amazing conversation Jesus must of had with Moses!
But what we also see is . . .

The Legacy of Prophets

Accompanying Moses on the mountain is the *Elijah* representing *all* Hebrew prophets, kind of a shop steward of all the prophets who through the centuries had *interpreted* the Torah of Moses to the people; prophets who stood against all the *false* glories of this world. From the time of Moses until Jesus, God's people had often succumbed to temptation of false gods and sought vainglory in golden temples and in armies and in kings and in wealth.

And it always fell on the shoulders of the prophets to remind them of *true* glory: God's plan to work through Israel to restore creation. God's plan for all humanity to reflect the image of God on earth, and do his will "on earth as it is in heaven." And always fell on the broad shoulders of prophets to warn God's people that to stray from this wonderful story, this covenant path, was to end up in *exile* – banished – not just from their land, but from the presence of their God – like Adam and Eve cast out from the garden, so Israel is exiled from the presence of the LORD. And it always fell to prophets to speak God's word of *hope* to the exiles: God loves you still, God will restore you, God will bring you back to himself. You can know once more his presence, and through you his glory will be revealed.

Now it's interesting to note that the prophet Elijah was taken up into heaven in a *chariot of fire* – a war chariot of which the *glory of the LORD* was seen to holding the reins. When Elijah had fulfilled his long and faithful prophetic calling on earth, standing up against all the "principalities and powers," the dark forces of spiritual wickedness embodied in people like Queen Jezebel, The LORD himself came and took Elijah into the realm of his *glory*. Elijah is rather unique.

But *in* this is another thematic connection with life and thought of another Israelite prophet. In Ezekiel's vision that same chariot of fire that came and took Elijah comes to Jerusalem, to the Temple and the "glory of the LORD" *leaves* the Temple, abandons his sanctuary and city – and travels all the way to be among the faithful remnant of the exiles by the rivers of Babylon. This is what Ezekiel saw.

So here the connection with the transfiguration of Jesus: God is now making a New Covenant with a new and true Israel. The divine presence has returned to the Temple in the person of Jesus. But the New Covenant God will make will not rest on the ever-failing human response to the Torah. No. The divine presence will be among all people through a relationship with Jesus. This very Jewish vision is literally initiating . . .

A New Exodus of the People of God

V31 says Moses and Elijah were speaking to Jesus about his *departure*, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." In Greek the word departure is literally *exodus*. For Jesus, as it once was for Elijah, the chariot is about to swing low. He is on his way to glory. The "exodus" of Jesus from the earth via the cross would launch a new exodus of the people of God. Through identification with Jesus in his death on the cross and resurrection on the third day, men and women would be brought with Jesus, as it were, through the Red Sea and into the land of Promise. Moses and Elijah were speaking to Jesus about this incredible journey he is about to make through the cross, leading his followers into a liberation from the power of sin. They spoke to Jesus about his *exodus*. God's covenant with Israel would be sealed with blood – not of the Passover lamb on the doorposts as in the Old Exodus, but by the Lamb of God on a Roman cross. And through this New Exodus the New Israel would finally get nations the proof of which would be in the resurrection of Jesus from the grave. The apostles would carry this Gospel to the ends of the earth, and the church would continue to bear witness until this very day. Jesus is

Lord. But tellingly, at this historic moment, the apostles are. . .

Fighting sleep

“Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with *sleep*; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.”

Maybe you’re fighting sleep right now. If so, *shake it off!* because there’s an exciting reality we are a part of. Here’s a bit of life application: There are times when the church seems to fall into a deep slumber nestled in the culture wherein it exists. This doziness can be so overpowering that we can almost miss the energizing renewal God wants to send to his church. It is my view that the church today is in such a time – fighting sleep.

Peter and his companions represent for us the church in the present post-modern culture. “The church must make its exodus from the host culture, not physically or geographically, but in the sense of not absorbing the surrounding culture’s values, vision, and mission.

There is a deadly drowsiness that will destroy us and drain us of our spiritual energy unless we keep our eyes open to *the old, old story*: we are created in the image of God to do his will on earth and despite the denials and ridicule and even suffering and shame we may endure, God will, through us *be glorified* and one day in our resurrection bodies we will see his glory fill the whole earth.

But in the culture we live in, “glory” is equated with “success.” Glory is big buildings, it big programmes, big money. “O, if only we could see this in the church,” we say, “it would be *“glorious”*”. In the worldview we are born into we confuse corporate success with spiritual growth. We see success in these terms as something as natural as rain and sunshine. But this is what we might call . . .

The problem with Tabernacles

v33 “Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said.”

Now if I dare to continue my application without any further ado, we might say that we in the church can react to God’s vision very much like Peter. We too get a glimpse of the glory, we mean well, our hearts are in the right place, we act in good faith . . . But like Peter, we have not challenged our cultural assumptions sufficiently enough from the word of God. As a result, we make a big deal about trivialities, and ignore the elephants in the room. We strain out the gnats and swallow the camels. All we know is its good to be here, now let’s build a tabernacle.

You see, Peter was seeing the new vision through his old Jewish glasses. In the past, whenever God’s glory was revealed, you built a Tabernacle to house the divine presence. When the cloud of glory appears, you need to *bottle it*. You institute a system of rules to regulate that place and protect its sacredness. But the problem with the building projects Peter was proposing was that they would be nothing more than a warmed-over version of what never worked in the past. As radical and frightening and dangerous as it would be, from now on, to follow the Torah of God would be to simply. . . .

Listen to Jesus

“While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen;

listen to him!" No tabernacles, please. Just listen to my Son.

Does this mean an abandonment of Scripture? No way! It means in fact exactly the opposite. How are we to fight this tendency we have in the church to just parrot-back everything our culture wants to put into our mouths? How are we to resist conforming to our culture's destructive values? The only way is to become a thinking, studying, reflecting people. We must *listen to Jesus*. Jesus, through his Spirit is our guide to the Scriptures. We come from a tradition of ordinary people who took the Bible and guided their faith and conduct by simply asking each other one simple question: "Where is it written?" They listened to Jesus.

In the church today we don't need a bunch of market strategists, pollsters and image-makeover artists. We need *thinkers*. We need people whose knowledge of the Scriptures and of what is going on around us in the world is deep enough to prevent the church's witness from being sucked down the drain of the "sound-bite" culture which has the attention span of a goldfish.

(For more on this see Jay Phelan's [The Covenant Church in the Post-Modern World](#).)
We need to listen to Jesus before we . . .

Return to a waiting world

36 "When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. . ."

They had seen the glory – the vision. But now all they could see was what everyone else could see: Jesus, the man, the Galilean rabbi, the one who would be handed over to be crucified on a Roman cross. All they could now see was "Jesus alone."

So perhaps it was a very wise silence that Luke says they kept in those days. They "told no one any of the things they had seen." For who would have believed them anyway? But later, when he had risen, when he had ascended to the right hand of the Father, when the Holy Spirit had come and empowered them . . .

Then they would speak.

Then they would keep silent no more.

Then there would be no more talk about building tabernacles to house God's glorious presence because the glory would be *within* them.

Then they would go, these bedraggled apostles into the Roman world, to pagan marketplaces and synagogues and riverbanks, wherever anyone would listen to them, and declare that the world has a new emperor, he is Jewish, he died on a cross but rose again.

Now could there be anything more absurd? How could *that* be true?

Yet within these humble and bedraggled men was the *glory* they had seen on that mountaintop in Jesus – the empowering presence of God.

And some would hear their message, sense that presence – the presence of a God who loves them who created them in his image to do his will. It would all make sense. And some would receive this Jesus Christ.

And he would change them.

Amen.