

The Glory of God Revealed

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on January 26, 2020.

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.” And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” And the disciples asked him, “Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” He answered, “Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist (Matthew 17:1–13).¹

Jesus tells his disciples that “he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things...and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Matt. 16:21) words hard for them to understand. Having confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, a gracious revelation given to them by God, did not negate their presumptions of the Christ, the Messiah of Israel. Perhaps ignoring the prophecies of the suffering servant to come, they envisioned arriving in Jerusalem not for a trial and crucifixion but for a coronation of the rightful King of Israel.

His faithful followers likely anticipated appointed positions of honor in the kingdom. Instead, they were called to self-sacrifice: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24). Crosses were for criminals not kings, for public shame and death not honor. We can imagine the death of a dream for Jesus’ disciples, their visions of grandeur crucified. What they thought was to come was dramatically different than what Jesus was describing. Would they not witness King Jesus in all of his regal glory?

Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (Matt. 16:28). And, in fact, six days later the “some” is revealed as three: Peter, James, and John. Following Jesus, they are led upon a mountain, overshadowed by a cloud, and witness the glory of their Lord.

This should sound familiar. In Exodus 24, we read that God calls Moses upon the mountain, and the cloud that led Israel in the exodus from Egypt descends upon him on the mountain. It says, “The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days” (Ex. 24:16).

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

We learn that God speaks to Moses “face to face” seeing the very “form of the LORD” (Num. 12:8 NIV) and beholding his glory.

Similarly, Peter, James, and John upon the mountain, amidst the cloud, witness the Lord face to face beholding his glory. And it is what they witness that I want us to consider more closely. In that moment the three disciples witness the glory of God revealed as testified in Scripture, as confirmed by the Father, as revealed in the Son, and proclaimed through the Spirit.

Testified in Scripture

As Jesus is transfigured before their eyes, suddenly they are not alone. Moses and Elijah are there talking with Jesus. How the disciples know it is Moses and Elijah or which one is which, we don't know. What we do know is that it *is* Moses and Elijah. But why? Why these two Old Testament men of God? There are plenty of Old Testament figures that we may think could appear in this moment. Where is Adam, the first? Or Noah, the righteous? Or Abraham, the faithful? But Moses and Elijah serve as types. Physically present and speaking, they represent the Word of God.

Moses was given God's Law upon the mountain, and even his name represents Israel's history, laws, and ways. Likewise, Elijah received the Word of God upon the mountain and served as one of the great prophets of Israel, miraculously departing this world and prophesied return. Together, they represent the Law and the Prophets, the totality of Old Testament Scripture. And, what is the testimony of Scripture, the Law and the Prophets?

In the fifth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus confronts the Jews who sought to kill him. Like a skilled prosecuting attorney in a courtroom, Jesus begins to categorically list their offenses. First, they did not listen to the testimony of John the Baptist, he whom God sent in the spirit of Elijah. Second, they were given the writings of Moses, but in them they refused their testimony. Third, despite God's provision in the testimony of both, they refused to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. And so Jesus condemns them: “You search the Scriptures...and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39).

Upon the mountain, Peter, James, and John saw the visible testimony of this truth: The Law and the Prophets testify that Jesus is, as Peter confessed, “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Moses and Elijah represent, as Calvin writes, “that Christ alone is the end of the Law and the Prophets.” However, Moses and Elijah do not merely stand there but converse with their Lord. While Matthew does not mention their topic of conversation, Luke does, explaining that they “spoke of [Jesus'] departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke. 9:31). Consider the magnitude of this conversation: Moses and Elijah appear gloriously upon this mountain speaking with Jesus, and what are they talking about? The redemptive work of Christ upon the cross! Is this not the pinnacle of human conversation?

Indeed, Jesus would proceed to Jerusalem, be falsely accused, illegally tried, crucified upon a cross, his departure complete. By the power of the Holy Spirit, on the third day he arose from the dead. And, in his resurrected body he would appear to many, including a few sorrowful saints, for example, walking down the road to Emmaus. In their presence but not yet revealed, how

would our Lord encourage them? Luke records, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

Upon the mountain, into the solemnity of the moment, Peter has to say something, doesn't he? “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah,” to which Luke's account adds, “not knowing what he said” (Luke 9:33). Often considered comedic relief, in reality Peter's intention is probably more practical: Tell me what I need to do, what I need to build, to honor such important guests. As if his works or efforts could contribute to the glorious moment, Peter wants to do something. Just as we may neither add nor take away from the testimony of Scripture, so Peter in that moment must only watch and listen, as the glory of God revealed is confirmed by the Father.

Confirmed by the Father

The voice from heaven is introduced by “a bright cloud” overshadowing them, reminiscent of the glory cloud enveloping Moses on Mount Sinai. And from that cloud the disciples hear: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” If these words sound familiar, it is because they are identical to the words spoken from heaven at Jesus' baptism, with the addition of “listen to him.” In this case, the divine confirmation is not given to the great prophet, John the Baptist, but to Peter, James, and John. Nor is it the commencement of an earthly ministry but a confirmation of his eternal glory.

What they hear from heaven confirms their confession. He is indeed the Son of the living God. As the eternally begotten, he is the everlasting recipient of the Father's pleasure, as revealed in his perfect obedience and as enjoyed within the divine unity of God.

As Peter's earlier attempted obstruction of Jesus' mission revealed, there was confusion about reconciling Jesus' identity with his words. Now the disciples hear the command directly from their heavenly Father: “listen to him.” God the Father speaks to his children through his Son, as the writer of Hebrews explains:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power (Heb. 1:1-3a).

Therefore, as confirmed by God the Father, the glory of God is revealed in the Son.

Revealed in the Son

Upon the mountain, it says that Jesus was “transfigured before them.” The word translated “transfigured” is the Greek word *metamorphoomai*, from which we get our word “metamorphosis.” In this context, it describes an immediate transformation: Jesus changes before their eyes. They see it in his face, which shines “like the sun,” describing a glorious radiance.

And his clothes are visibly transformed too, from earth tones to “white as light.”

Jesus previously told his disciples that he was “going to come with angels in the glory of his Father” (Matt. 16:27), and in this moment Peter, James, and John get a glimpse of that glory. Of this moment, Peter would later explain, “...we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’” (2 Peter 1:16b -17). What they beheld was the majesty, honor, and glory of God the Son.

While culturally we place an emphasis on Christ’s birth with the Christmas holiday, we must remember that his earthly conception was not his beginning but the commencement of his incarnation.

As John testifies in his Gospel, “And the Word *became* flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). In his incarnation, he took upon himself “the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:7). He would live, die, resurrect, ascend to heaven, and be glorified in the presence of his Father with the glory he had “before the world existed” (John 17:5).

Upon the mountain the glory of God was revealed in the Son before Peter, James, and John, but one day we too will behold his face shining like the sun in full strength (Rev. 1:16). Until that day, the Holy Spirit continues to proclaim the glory of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Proclaimed through the Spirit

Having heard the Father’s confirmation of his Son, the disciples “fell on their faces and were terrified,” a fitting response to the Majestic Glory (1 Pet. 1:16-17). Yet, in his mercy Jesus touches them saying, “Rise, and have no fear,” words of command and comfort from the Lord. They are alone: no Moses, no Elijah, no tents for each, and no voice from heaven. They are once again alone with the Lord.

We can imagine the wonder and awe that captivated the disciples’ memories. They were likely emboldened to tell the world. But Jesus tells them, not yet, not until after his resurrection, again prohibiting anything that would detract from his work upon the cross.

But the disciples had witnessed Moses and Elijah! Did not Malachi prophesy that Elijah would prepare the way for the Christ? Were not the scribes discrediting Jesus because Elijah had not yet come? Did not Peter, James, and John serve as three witnesses, validating what they had seen? Why not tell the world: We saw Moses and Elijah has come!

But like the scribes, the disciples too had missed Elijah, who indeed had already come by the Spirit in the Prophet John the Baptist. John, through the Holy Spirit, proclaimed the glory of God revealed in the Son, and yet the world “did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased.” So also, our Lord suffered at their hands, and yet it was “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23) that our Lord was crucified. For our salvation and his glory, he arose from the dead and has ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the

The Glory of God Revealed

Father (Heb. 8:21), from where we await his coming “with his angels in the glory of his Father” (Matt. 16:27).

Moses beheld the glory of God on the mountain, as did Peter, James, and John. We too will behold his glory in his second coming, but what about today? In his first epistle, John writes,

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete (1 John 1:1-4).

Indeed, even today, we rejoice in the glory of God revealed in Christ: That which John and the apostles saw and heard they proclaim to us, and for our joy.

By his Spirit and through his Word, we behold the glory of God. He is gloriously revealed to us through his written Word, shown to us by the illumination of his Spirit, and given to us that we too may worship him in his majesty, honor, and glory. And so, we do. Amen.