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## On a Mountaintop

Quiet beginnings! They can catch us by surprise. One place you sometimes see it is at a high school reunion. Those who were quiet and unassuming in their younger years often go on to become the most solid and influential citizens in the community, whereas those who were most popular then often seem to have burned out on life by the time they get to their 10, 20, or 30<sup>th</sup> class reunion because the life that was so easy for them in their teenage years didn't adequately prepare them for the hard realities of life to come.

***One example from my high school years was a very quiet and serious guy named Ray. We had gym class together in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and were in the same home room all 3 years. But what few of us knew in high school, because he never talked about it, is that Ray was a member of Tacoma Boys Club's amateur boxing team, won the national amateur welterweight championship in 1971, the national golden gloves title in 1972, tried out for the U.S. Olympic team and became America's only gold medal boxer at the 1972 Olympics in Munich. Sugar Ray Seales then went on to box professionally for several years. He fought Marvelous Marvin Hagler three times, but finally had to retire due to a detached retina in his eye. At that point he went on to work with autistic students in Tacoma for a number of years, which says something about the man's heart. All the while we his fellow classmates at Stadium High School had no clue about any of this until we saw him boxing on television.***

And my point is this: Greatness goes undetected because it's almost always developed in secret. That's true of athletics. It's true of academics. And it's also true in music, art, literature as well as the hard work of learning to be a servant of Jesus Christ. Consequently, it shouldn't surprise us to learn that our Savior also had a quiet beginning—born in the little town of Bethlehem, raised in another obscure village called Nazareth by a very normal couple named Mary and Joseph who trained him in the art of woodworking, a trade he worked at for almost 20 years, providing for his mother and half brothers and sisters when Joseph his foster father died. What's more, He looked like every other human being. When His disciples first saw Him, they didn't say, "Isn't that God walking and talking over there?" But on the inside, where no one else can see, He was different from every other human being who has ever lived! He was and is the Almighty, Eternal Son of God born of a virgin and clothed in human flesh. They already had evidence of that, of course. They saw Him cast out demons, heal lepers, walk on water, raise the dead, and feed 5,000 people with 5 fish and two dinner rolls. So they knew there was something different about Him. But it wasn't until the event before us today that they fully understood who Jesus is, because here the curtain is pulled back and we, along with Peter, James, and John are given a glimpse behind the scenes to witness Jesus in His eternal power and majesty.

By the way, if you were with us last week, you remember our study ended on a problem passage that I didn't take time to explain—Luke 9:27, where Jesus made this promise to His disciples. After talking to them about His Second Coming, He added this: "But I tell you truly, there are some standing here will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God." One simple phrase that's been a stumbling block to countless critics of the Bible! "Aha!" they say, "another mistake in the Bible! Every one of the disciples standing here died 2,000 years ago and the Kingdom of God still hasn't come! So Jesus can't be God because Jesus was wrong." But what they fail to take into account is the context, and the context is always the first consideration when trying to understand the Bible. So notice what happens just 8 days after He makes this promise in verse 27—the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ in which His disciples see Him for the first time in His kingdom majesty and

authority. Moses and Elijah also appear with Him, and the experience is so glorious that His disciples never want to come back. And maybe we won't either! Our passage is Luke 9:28, if you brought your Bible with you this morning and you'd like to turn there now. Last week we focused on the step of discipleship called conversion and baptism in which you make an informed decision to follow Jesus and then publically confess your faith in Him by being baptized. And again, if you'd like to celebrate the resurrection of Christ this Easter by being baptized as His disciple, please let us know that by marking it on your registration card and leaving it on the seat next to you, and we'll contact you before the week is over. This week's study by contrast moves us on to the third stage of discipleship called growth because what we're about to witness together is the glory, the fear, and the authority of Christ and if we do that well, we won't ever be the same again.

## 1. The Glory of Christ

Verse 28 begins like this, "About 8 days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray." Here again we have an example of one of the most monumental events in the life of Christ coming in response to prayer, which tells us what we need to do if want to enjoy a mountaintop experience with Jesus. It adds, "As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning." Matthew's account says, "His face shone like the sun." Mark adds, "His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them." This is the eternal power and glory of Jesus Christ that we're witnessing here. It's what Jesus referred to in his high priestly prayer when he said, "Now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began." You see, what the disciples witnessed in those 3 short years He was with them was majesty cloaked in humility, so they never saw Him as He really is. But now, in order to confirm that He really is who they think He is (You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!), Jesus now takes 3 of them with Him to the top of Mount Hermon because the Bible says that every fact must be confirmed by 2 or 3 eyewitnesses, and here He reveals Himself to them in His eternal majesty and authority, and it terrifies them because what they see isn't a bright light shining on Him like a spotlight; it's the glory of God radiating out of Him, the same Shekinah glory that appeared as a pillar of fire leading God's people in the wilderness and later filling both the Tabernacle and Temple with His glory. And suddenly, as they're praying two men appear with Him in glorious splendor, and right away they know who they are. They're Moses and Elijah! How could they tell? Were they wearing name tags? I don't think so. I think they either heard Jesus mention their names or God revealed it to them. And that ought to tell us something. You and I aren't going to have any trouble whatsoever recognizing our loved ones in heaven. They'll look way better than they ever have before, but it'll still be the same mother, father, sister, and brother you loved here on earth but without any of the imperfections!

But you say: Why was it Moses and Elijah He chose to meet with on the mountaintop? Because these were the two greatest prophets in the Old Testament who would have had instant credibility with Peter, James, and John! What's more, Moses and Elijah would've been a comfort to Jesus as He prepared for His death. You'll notice that's what they were talking about here: His departure which He was about to bring to fulfillment in Jerusalem. They would have sympathized with what He was facing because the Bible says they also suffered for their faith, choosing to share the oppression of God's people rather than enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin, thinking it was better to suffer for the sake of Christ than to own the treasures of the world. This was far and away the most awe-inspiring event in the life of our Savior and it changed these men forever! I say that because 30 years later what was Peter still talking about when he wrote his 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the churches? He wrote: "We did not follow cleverly devised tales when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For 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." Beholding the face of Jesus in His eternal power and majesty is what changed these men forever so much so that they were willing to suffer and die for Him.

So did they have an advantage over us since they saw the glory of Jesus with their own eyes, and we haven't? We love Him and believe in Him but is it possible to be radically changed and love Him as much as these men without having been there to see His glory for ourselves? The Bible says it is, and I believe the Bible. 2 Corinthians 3:17 explains: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." Do you hear what He's saying here? He's saying that you and I can have the very same experience as Peter and James and John because even though we can't see him with our eyes, the same glorious Spirit who shone forth from Him on the mountaintop is now living in us who believe and is ready to change us into His very likeness if we're willing to spend the time it takes worshiping in His presence and reflecting on His glory.

***Nathaniel Hawthorne told the story of a country that was ruled by a great and benevolent monarch who was so well loved by his people that when he died, they refused to have another king until they could find someone as wise and kind as their late monarch. To keep his memory alive, they had his profile carved into the side of a mountain overlooking the realm, and then they set out to find a new king but with no success, until one day the king's men stopped for food and water at a cottage near the foot of the mountain, and there to their delight, they found a kind and handsome young man whose face was the exact replica of the monarch on the cliff. Day in and day out this lad had plowed his field and cut his firewood gazing up at that great image, and day by day, shaped by the thoughts that filled his mind, he was changed little by little into the very likeness of the king.***

***That's just a fairytale but the story before us is not. The Bible promises that the more time we spend in His presence, the more we'll be like Him culminating in our complete transformation one day. For "now we are children of God," John writes, "and what we will be has not yet been made known but we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him just as he is. And everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure," because we want to be confident and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming, and that leads me to the second theme in our passage this morning, and that's—***

## **2. The Fear of Christ**

Luke continues in verse 32: "Peter and his companions were very sleepy but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, 'Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters (or tabernacles)—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' (He did not know what he was saying.) While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud." I'm not sure how many of you are new to the Bible this morning, but one of the things that's helpful to understand is that there are 4 accounts of Jesus' life in the New Testament, each one written by a different disciple—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—the first 3 of which contain this story, but they don't tell it the same way. Each one reports it from his own unique perspective. For example, Mark says it was the glory of Christ that frightened the disciples, Luke says it was the cloud that enveloped them, and Matthew claims it was the voice from heaven that left them shaking in their sandals. So what should we conclude from all of this?

They were afraid! Triply afraid if I can put it like that! And that's good! It was good for them to be afraid because just as important as our awe at the glory of God is a humble and holy fear of God. So let's take a moment to ask the question: What does the Bible mean by the fear of God? Some people like to substitute the word reverence or respect, and certainly it includes those things. But do you know what I think the Bible means when it says "the fear of God? Fear! It means fear—not the fear of unbelief that sends you running away from God, but the holy fear that keeps you from doing things that are stupid and self-destructive. For example, let's say you and I decide to take a trip to the Grand Canyon and when we get there, I'm so overwhelmed by the sight that I make my way to the very edge to get a better look. So

let me ask you. What do you think would keep me from jumping off? Is it my respect for its grandeur? No. It's my fear of dying! I know it'll kill me and though I want \*o go to heaven when I die, I don't want to go today! Men, that's why I don't surf the net for porn either! "What! You don't like women!" No, I actually like them a lot! "O, I know what you're going to say. Get an accountability partner to keep you honest. It's true! I have that but that isn't what keeps me honest. What keeps me honest is my fear of God! One day the Bible says we're all going to stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ, and each one of us will be rewarded for what we've done in our bodies, whether good or bad. And frankly, I don't want to be humiliated when I stand before you, God, and all the saints and angels in heaven. That's something I think about every day.

***That's also why I didn't curse and take the Lord's name in vain as a boy. I knew Exodus 20: 7 because we'd memorized it in Sunday school! "Thou shall not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain." So I was careful what I said because I was afraid if I took the Lord's name in vain, He'd remember it and hold it against me when we all stand before Him in judgment. But then I started to hang around with a new group of friends who weren't very careful about the things they said and because I wanted them to like me, I soon began to talk the same way myself. "Now wait a minute!" you say. That isn't the gospel. The gospel isn't about fear, it's all about grace." And I'd like to agree with you, but I can't, because I believe that rightly understood fear is grace and an essential part of both love and the gospel.***

***For example, going back to my illustration of the Grand Canyon for a moment, let's say I know nothing about the law of gravity, that if you drop some-thing from a great height, it breaks. So I begin to dance along the edge oblivious to the danger. But you, being the gracious person you are, reach out to me and warn me, "Get back from the edge before you get killed!" But I still don't understand. So you get the pumpkin you keep in the trunk of your car for emergencies like this and you throw it over the side, and together we watch it explode into pieces. And finally I get it. It's dangerous to get too close to the edge and slowly I make my way back to safety. Let me ask you. What made me back away from the abyss? Fear! But that's also grace, that you were willing to reach out to me and drag me to safety.***

And the same is true of the gospel! Jesus is the most gracious person in the universe, but He also talked more about judgment than anyone else in the Bible. Why? To save us from destruction! Fear saves the unbeliever from eternity in hell, and it also saves the believer from those self-destructive habits that steal our joy in this life and rob us of our rewards in heaven! "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; but the one who sows to please the Spirit, will from the Spirit reap everlasting life." This event was intended to instill holy fear in the disciples and thereby protect them from sin. But once fear had done its work, Jesus relieved their fear. Matthew's account says: "A voice from the cloud said, 'This is my Son whom I love. With him I am well pleased. Listen to him!' When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. 'Get up,' he said. 'Don't be afraid.'" That's the gospel, friends! 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved. How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed." We've seen the glory and felt the fear of Christ, and one more point I want us to look at together, and that's—

### **3. The Authority of Christ**

Do you have any nervous habits, something you do to ease the tension when your stress gets too high? Some people bite their fingernails, tap their feet, clear their throats, giggle, snack on comfort foods like chocolate chip cookies, shop for shoes, or talk too much as a way of controlling the conversation or changing the subject when things get too close to home. That was Peter! Peter had something to say about almost everything! The trouble was he didn't have a mental filter to tell him when and how to say it. So he just blurted it out. On one occasion, Jesus tells His disciples that He's going to die for our sins. So what does Peter do? He corrects him saying, "No,

Lord! This must never happen to you!” Next Jesus warns them that they’re all going to forsake him. And Peter boasts, “Not me, Lord! Even if I have to die with you, Lord, I’ll never deny you,” and then he promptly proceeds to do the very thing he said he wouldn’t. He denies the Lord not once, but 3 times in one night! And we see that same tendency here! “Open mouth, insert foot.” Peter, with all due respect (because he is an apostle of Jesus Christ), respond by babbling like an idiot. I’ve caught myself doing that a few times, haven’t you? He says (verse 33): “Master, it’s good for us to be here. Let us put up 3 shelters: one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” He did not know what he was saying. And I know his suggestion was well intended, first, because it was humble. He asked permission to build 3 shelters, not 6. And it seemed like a timely thing to do because this was the season when all Israel moved out of their homes and celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles by living in little shelters to commemorate the 40 years their ancestors lived in tents in the desert. But the real reason he said what he did is because he wanted to stay on the mountaintop! And who could blame him! But the hard reality is Jesus hasn’t called us to live on the mountaintop. He still has work for us to do!

Look again at verse 35. While Peter is interrupting Jesus and Moses and Elijah, God interrupts him. It says, “A voice came out of the cloud saying, ‘This is My Son whom I have chosen. Listen to Him!’” Only 3 times in the life of Christ did God the Father speak to Him out of heaven, and each time it’s significant. The first time was at His baptism. The other time was just a few days before His death. And this is the third time, and notice what He says! “This is My Son whom I have chosen. Listen to Him!” The word “listen” is the word *akouw* meaning to hear and obey. God has called us above all things to obey His Son, and one of the ways we do that is by serving those He puts in our path. I say that because next week in our study the disciples will come down from the mountain and what are they going to find waiting for them in the valley? A father whose son is possessed by a demon who’s trying to kill him! He brings him to the 9 disciples who’ve remained in the valley hoping they can cure him. But they can’t. Think about that for a moment. Here in a matter of minutes, the 3 disciples go from the greatest spiritual high they’ve ever experienced to a vicious battle with the devil and who wants that? Who wants to face the harsh realities of everyday life in the valley when you can commune with Christ on the mountaintop? But what we fail to understand, and this is the good part, is that every valley contains within it the path to a new mountaintop because once your faith has been tested and Christ has come through for you, as He’ll do in next week’s study, it sends your faith and joy soaring again, raising you up to another mountaintop!

So let me ask you. What are you going to do this afternoon and evening and tomorrow morning to get a better vision of Christ? Will you turn off the TV and spend some time reading your Bible, listening to Christian music, and enjoying His presence in prayer? I guarantee you. If you draw near to Him, He’ll draw near to you. And is there an area of life where you want to be more obedient—giving to His kingdom, encouraging someone who’s discouraged, helping someone in need, ministering in His church? What a Savior we have and what a joy it is to serve Him! You know I’ve been serving the Lord for over 35 years now and I’m enjoying it more today than ever before! I hope you are too. If not, why not bow your head with me now and ask Him to renew your vision and joy?