

A Vision of Christ

Mark 9:1-13 *And He said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power." 2 Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up on a high mountain apart by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. 3 His clothes became shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth can whiten them. 4 And Elijah appeared to them with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. 5 Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" -- 6 because he did not know what to say, for they were greatly afraid. 7 And a cloud came and overshadowed them; and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!" 8 Suddenly, when they had looked around, they saw no one anymore, but only Jesus with themselves. 9 Now as they came down from the mountain, He commanded them that they should tell no one the things they had seen, till the Son of Man had risen from the dead. 10 So they kept this word to themselves, questioning what the rising from the dead meant. 11 And they asked Him, saying, "Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" 12 Then He answered and told them, "Indeed, Elijah is coming first and restores all things. And how is it written concerning the Son of Man, that He must suffer many things and be treated with contempt? 13 "But I say to you that Elijah has also come, and they did to him whatever they wished, as it is written of him."*

As preachers, we are sometimes criticised for not making our sermons more relevant, or more practical. One of the most striking stories about what is relevant or not relevant is told by John Piper. He tells the story that many years ago, during the prayer week in January that their church holds, he decided to preach on the holiness of God from Isaiah 6. Piper decided to do nothing more than unfold a vision of God's holy glory seen in that passage. He deliberately left out any words of application (which is normally essential) but on this occasion, Piper wanted to see if simply a portrayal of the glory of God would meet the needs of the people.

What Piper didn't know was that just before that Sunday that he preached from Isaiah 6, one of the young families in the church had discovered that their child was being sexually abused by a close relative. Of course, they were traumatised and devastated. The family which was going through that crisis sat through that message. Hundreds of teachers on preaching and on church growth, on counselling and ministry methodology, would have scolded John Piper. They would have said something like, "How insensitive to preach on something as pie-in-the-sky as the glory of God when you have hurting, devastated people in your congregation. Come down out of your ivory tower pulpit and get practical. Meet the needs of the people in front of you."

But then this happened: Piper learned about the tragedy affecting the family a few weeks later. And one Sunday, after a service, the husband took him aside, and said, "John, these have been the hardest months of our lives. Do you know what has gotten me through? The vision of the greatness of God's holiness that you gave me the first week of January. It has been the rock we could stand on."

For that family, seeing the beauty of God, seeing the glory of Christ was not pie-in-the-sky. It was not far-off dusty theology. It was an oasis in a desert to them. When their world seemed to be pulled out from under them, and their worst nightmares came true, they didn't want a five-step program, or ten steps to feel happier. In the darkest seasons, they wanted nothing less than to see who their God is.

Practical steps are good and well, and we teach them often enough in this church. But there is coming a time in your life, if you have not already faced it, or are not perhaps right now facing it, when nothing else will console you, strengthen you and enable you, than to see the strength and beauty and glory of the God you say is your Father, Saviour and Comforter. Contrary to what some will tell you, in the end nothing is more relevant, and nothing is more practical to your life, than to

see the greatness of the glory of God.

Our Lord knows that. In the case of twelve men who had given up everything to follow Him, they had just heard devastating news. They had just heard that all their hopes for glory here on earth, for overthrowing Roman rule, for seeing Solomon's glory re-established from Jerusalem were not going to materialise because, according to Jesus, He was not going to Jerusalem to reign, but to suffer and die. Their Beloved leader, their Lord and Messiah, was going to be murdered. And further, all those who were with Him, had to embrace a life of renouncing self-rule, and counting their lives dead, and giving up their lives entirely to Christ, even if it meant suffering, shame, and ridicule. I picture the twelve looking into each others' eyes, and then down, confused, shaken. I see some of them sitting down, as we often do when we have heard news that is tragic.

Jesus lets it sink in. But he knows that during those valleys, our deepest consolation is to see again who He is. That Sunday in January, He knew that that family needed to see His glory. He knew that His disciples needed to see His glory. So He makes a promise, seen in 9:1.

And He said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power."

Yes, I've told you about death and suffering, says Jesus, but I promise you that I will also let you see the kingdom of God with power. You are staring at the valley of shame, and suffering and death, but I will give you a glimpse of the mountaintop of glory, and of pleasure, and of life.

What did Jesus mean that some of these disciples would not die till they had seen the kingdom of God present with power? Quite a few interpretations have been thrown around. Some have said it refers to the resurrection. Others say it refers to His ascension. Some have said it refers to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Other say it refers to the day of Pentecost. Others say it refers to the spread of Christianity through the book of Acts. But the only scene which really fits with the context was the transfiguration of Christ that immediately followed. Six days later, Jesus took just the inner three, Peter, James and John, and gave them a foretaste of Christ's glory, a foretaste of Christ coming in His kingdom with power. Peter, James, and John, who would become leaders in the church and would face torture and suffering, were given a taste of glory. And I suggest that taste remained in their mouths for the rest of their lives, and was a rock to stand on during suffering.

To study this account is all at once to be left outside, like the other 9 disciples. We cannot know exactly what they saw. At the same time, it is to be invited to catch a glimpse of it, because it has now been recorded for us. We can see two aspects of this vision, The The Supremacy of Christ, and the Centrality of Christ.

I. The Supremacy of Christ

Since they were in Caesarea Philippi, the mount was more than likely Mount Hermon, a snow-capped mountain that reaches 2800 metres up. It would have taken several hours to climb, and after the physical exertion of the climb, combined with the thin mountain air, the disciples would have been drowsy. Jesus had them praying, and like in the later Garden of Gethsemane incident, they were falling asleep, according to Luke's Gospel. But then, what woke them up frightened them.

; and He was transfigured before them. 3 His clothes became shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth can whiten them.

Jesus was transfigured before them. The Greek word here is *metamorphothei*, which means to be

changed, not simply in outward appearance, but in inner form. What was going on here? Remember, Jesus had promised that some of them would see the kingdom of God in power. What these three disciples were now seeing was Jesus, as He would be after His death and resurrection. They were seeing Jesus as He would be when ruling and reigning on the Earth. They were seeing what John saw in Revelation 1. They were seeing the God-Man in His glory.

In His first coming, God the Son voluntarily chose to veil much of His glory. Once He had added a true human nature to Himself, that human nature could be no less and no more human than ours. But the glory of being the God-Man would make Him an infinitely glorious and infinitely beautiful man, the kind of man that we would worship if we saw Him. But for the purposes of the atonement, Jesus chose to allow His pre-resurrection body to be very humble, ordinary, nondescript. Now, to fill these men with hope, to console their despairing hearts, the Lord pulls back the veil of humiliation, even if for a few seconds or minutes.

Like a thick dark curtain, when it is pulled back allows the brilliance of the sun to shine in, so, when Jesus' first Incarnation body is transfigured into His eternal, post-resurrection body, the brilliance of the vision dazzles them.

Mark tells us that His clothes became dazzlingly white. Throughout Scripture, white robes represent holiness, and purity – worn by angels, and resurrected saints. But notice, the whiteness of Christ's garments was unearthly in their brilliance. Nothing down here could account for it. Not only so, but they were shining. They had their own brilliance and light. Jesus was not simply reflecting someone else's holiness. This was His own. Back in Daniel 7:19 we read of the Ancient of Days whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of His head was like pure wool.

Matthew and Luke tell us that not only His clothes, but His face became different, and shone. Again, in John's vision of Christ, he saw one whose

“ head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire;.. and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength.”

Peter, James and John, saw the Christ we will see in glory. They saw what we will see in the New Jerusalem. Do not expect to see the humiliated Jesus, who was so ordinary looking that Judas had to identify Him for His captors with a kiss. No, that humiliation ended with the ascension. He has returned to His Father and our Father, and is exalted above all.

But was that all they saw? Did they simply see bright lights? We have all seen bright lights, and these do not fill us with awe, with reverence, with admiration. I want you to read what one of the eyewitnesses of this scene wrote down:

John 1:14 *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*

John saw the glory of Christ, and he describes it as full of grace and truth. Now let me ask you, are grace and truth outward or inward virtues? They are inward virtues. But John says, we saw His glory, and it was the glory of grace and truth. What can this mean?

It must mean that as Peter, James and John saw the outward brightness of His face and clothes, it revealed to them those inner beauties. The outward display, as spectacular as it was, pointed them to the glories of Jesus Christ, the bright, excellent and sweet Person of Jesus.

Have you ever spent time, unhurried time, thinking on who Christ is, and what makes Him glorious? Do you spend time in the Psalms, in the Gospels, just gazing? Do you take up a hymn-book, or a collection of hymns, and look for jewels that really allow the light of Christ to sparkle. I found one about a week ago, one that we don't sing, and isn't well known. It pictures Jesus Christ ruling and reigning in heaven. It helps us to imagine the scene, and taste the beauty.

O! the delights, the heav'nly joys,
The glories of the place,
Where Jesus sheds the brightest beams
Of his o'erflowing grace!

Sweet majesty and awful love
Sit smiling on his brow;
And all the glorious ranks above
At humble distance bow.

Princes to his imperial name
Bend their bright sceptres down;
Dominions, thrones, and powers rejoice
To see him wear the crown.

Archangels sound his lofty praise
Through every heav'nly street,
And lay their highest honors down
Submissive at his feet.

Those soft, those blessed feet of his,
That once rude iron tore,
High on a throne of light they stand,
And all the saints adore.

His head, the dear majestic head
That cruel thorns did wound,
See what immortal glories shine,
And circle it around!

This is the man, th' exalted man,
Whom we unseen adore;
But when our eyes behold his face,
Our hearts shall love him more.

What did this sight do for them? For these three, whose hearts had been broken at the thought of Jesus dying, the sight was overwhelming. It left Peter babbling. Certainly it drove out those worries about defeat and sacrifice and loss. One sight of this glory, and no cross seemed too heavy; no shame too low; no price too great to pay; no sacrifice too great; no suffering too much. A sight of the glory of God consoled these men. They saw their Lord was full of grace and truth.

This is why Jesus' prayer in John 17 was

^{NKJ} **John 17:24** *"Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world."*

When you have heard that devastating news, when the routine of life has worn you down to where you feel numb, when all your dreams and hopes seem to be slowly fading and disappearing from view, this is the Christ you can fix your eyes on. For He is not only your Lord, He is your inheritance. He is your portion.

There was a second side to this sight of Christ's glory. Not only did it show His beauty and excellence, it also showed His supremacy.

II. The Centrality of Christ.

4 And Elijah appeared to them with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus.

Jesus appears with Moses and Elijah. Now how did they know it was Moses and Elijah. Probably the same way we will know it is them. Some kind of spiritual recognition, some kind of perception and intuition that God grants. Why these two? The Bible doesn't tell us, but there are several good reasons: First, Moses and Elijah represent the way the Jews spoke of the Old Testament – the law and the prophets. Moses represented the Law, and Elijah the prophets. And since this is a sight of the kingdom of God in its glory, here all of the Old Testament – law and prophets, point to and culminate in whom? Messiah Jesus. They speak of Christ, prophesy of Christ.

In fact, on the way down from this scene, having now seen Elijah, they ask Jesus why the book of Malachi says that Elijah must first come before the end of all things. After all, if that's true, Elijah hasn't come back, so how can Jesus be the Messiah. Jesus tells them that this is true, Elijah does come before the final Day of the Lord. However, John the Baptist came in the spirit and power of Elijah, and Israel rejected Him. What then will they do to the one that John was preparing the way for? The Son of Man must suffer. John was the Elijah of the first coming of Messiah, there will doubtless be an Elijah before the Second Coming. Nevertheless, Moses and Elijah speak of all of Scripture testifying to Christ.

Second, Moses and Elijah represent two kinds of believers. Moses died and was buried; Elijah was translated straight to Heaven. Since this a sight of the kingdom in all its glory, both kinds of saints will be there – the kind that died and are raised, and the kind who will be alive at the Second Coming of Jesus and immediately translated, raised into glorified bodies. What do all these saints look to? Who do they celebrate? The King, Jesus.

Third, Moses and Elijah represent Old Testament saints. What happened to all those who died before the coming of Jesus? Here is the answer: they return with Him. What are they speaking to Him about? Luke tells us they spoke to Him about His coming death on the cross. Old Testament saints looking to and rejoicing in the Person of Christ and work of Christ.

All the Scriptures point to Jesus, all the saints will look to and worship Jesus. He is at the centre. And now Peter, still being Peter, opens his mouth and says the first thing that comes to mind.

5 Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" -- 6 because he did not know what to say, for they were greatly afraid

This was the time of year close to the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, where the Israelites dwell in booths. So, maybe this was on Peter's mind. At any rate, he wanted to prolong this mountaintop experience, and without thinking, he had equated Jesus with Moses and Elijah, making them into equals.

And at that point, a cloud overshadows them, a cloud reminiscent of the glory cloud that came upon the Tabernacle and Temple. And from the cloud comes the same words that came at the baptism of Jesus – This is my Beloved Son. And then a command added to it: Hear Him! Listen to Him!

A voice of the Father Himself proclaims – this is my chosen, beloved Son that I delight in. Stop talking, Peter, stop equating Him with Moses and Elijah, put Him at the centre of your thoughts and listen to Him. Hear Him! Let Him be your Lord and teacher. Years later, Peter would actually write this in one of his epistles:

2 Peter 1:16-21 ¹⁶ For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. ¹⁷ For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." ¹⁸ And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. ¹⁹ And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; ²⁰ knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, ²¹ for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

Peter goes seamlessly from the event of the Transfiguration, to the word of Scripture. For Him, the outward sign, confirmed the inward Word, the truth of God's Word that revealed Christ. It was a more sure Word. And what does He tell us to do in verse 19? To heed, to listen, to pay attention.

There was only one event of the Transfiguration, and only three men saw it. But one of those three tells us there is a more sure word to see and know the glory of Christ, to gain the consoling vision of His glory – the word of Scripture. Here is where the eye of faith will be stimulated – faith comes by hearing and hearing of the Word of God. The eyes of the heart are ears – we hear and read of the revelation of God and understand, and we see inwardly the beauties of Christ. You keep Christ central when you give His Word the central place in your life.

Paul tells us what will happen when we do that.

2 Corinthians 3:18 ¹⁸ But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

When we see the glory of God in the Word of God, we are transformed. Guess what Greek word the word 'transformed' translates. It's the same word for Christ's transfiguration. The glory of Jesus was shown on that mount, and as we keep beholding Him, we are changed, by one degree of glory to another. We are metamorphised inwardly.

1 John 3:2 ² Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.

I don't know all the pain, heartache, despair, or confusion that might be in hearts today. But I do know what happens when new hearts take the time to hear Christ until they see Christ. They are satisfied. They are strengthened. They are consoled.

So the word of the Father to these men is really the same to us: "This is my Beloved Son – listen to Him". And, like that family that was devastated by sexual abuse found out, that may be the most practical thing you need.