

THE GLORY THAT FOLLOWS

by Ray C. Stedman

Today we come to one of the most dramatic events in Scripture -- ranking perhaps only after the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord -- the transfiguration of Jesus. This event follows his announcement of the cross, and of the way of discipleship -- both what it would cost those who are to be his disciples, and what the blessings would be as well. It is evident from Mark's text that Jesus knew the transfiguration was coming. He announced it at least six full days before it happened. He had led the disciples, all twelve of them, to the foot of Mount Hermon in order that they might prepare for this event.

I believe that the transfiguration took place on Mount Hermon, that beautiful snow-covered mountain north of the Sea of Galilee which, at present, is the scene of much conflict between Palestinian and Israeli armies.

The account begins in the closing verse of Chapter 8 and continues through the first thirteen verses in Chapter 9. This is another of the mental lapses that the man who divided the biblical text into chapters evidently suffered. Something interesting which strikes us right at the beginning is the fact that our Lord tells the reason for this event before it ever happened.

In the first verse of Chapter 9 we read,

And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power." {Mark 9:1 RSV}

Some liberal commentators have misunderstood this passage, have felt that Jesus was predicting the time of his second coming -- predicting that it would come within the lifetime of people who were alive at that moment. Many have been troubled by this interpretation, because obviously his second coming did not take place then. Some have even gone so far as to say that Jesus was mistaken as to the time of his second coming.

But if you link this statement with what immediately follows, it is clear what Jesus is saying. He is referring to the transfiguration, saying that some who were there at that moment would not taste death until they saw this manifestation of the kingdom of God, of his coming, and of the glory of his reign in power. This then provides a clue as to what the event meant. It is a preview that Jesus gives of the coming glory. He states that it will be a manifestation of his coming into his kingdom with power. On subsequent occasions, as he is teaching the disciples on the Mount of Olives and other places, he speaks of that coming with power: "You shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with all his mighty angels," {cf, Matt 24:30}. Notice that he has just referred to this at the close of Chapter 8:

For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. {Mark 8:38 RSV}

That is the event they are to preview. The fact that this is the case is made very clear to us by Peter himself. Our Lord chose Peter and James and John to be with him on the mountain top. Of the three, only Peter later refers explicitly to this event in his writings, but he does so, clearly and carefully, in Second Peter, Chapter 1, Verses 16-18:

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye witnesses 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," we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. {2 Pet 1:16-18 RSV}

Thus Peter confirms that our Lord is here giving a foreview of what it will be like when he comes again in glory, with all his holy angels.

Also -- and this is very important -- implied in Jesus' words is the fact that this event is what awaits the believer at death. Notice that he says, "There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power." The implication is that ordinarily it is by tasting death that the believer sees the kingdom of God come with power. Other passages confirm very clearly that when a believer dies, the event which meets his eyes, and into which he steps as he leaves time and enters eternity, is this coming of the Lord with his angels. This is why in the epistle of Jude it is recorded "that Enoch in the seventh generation from Adam prophesied, saying, 'Behold! He cometh with ten thousands of his holy ones,'" {cf, Jude 1:14}. This is the event that awaits the believer at death.

A dear friend of ours went to be with the Lord just this Friday. I have no doubt that the event which greeted her, as she slipped out of time into eternity, was that she too saw the Lord coming with ten thousands of his holy ones and, through death, tasted of the kingdom of God come with power.

But here our Lord says that some who were then present would see this before death. It is clear, then, that the reason the transfiguration happened was to encourage the disciples. He had just announced the way of the cross, and his coming death in Jerusalem. So he gives them this incident to strengthen their faith, to encourage them that it was not going to end in darkness and disaster, but that it would end in triumph and victory and glory. And it is intended to encourage us when, in our life, we too must take up our cross. We can be assured it is not going to end in disaster; it is going to end in glory.

Now let us look at the event itself, beginning at Verse 2:

After six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves; and he was transfigured before them, and his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." For he did not know what to say, for they were exceedingly afraid. And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." And suddenly looking around they no longer saw any one with them but Jesus only. {Mark 9:2-8 RSV}

A remarkable event! There are four dramatic occurrences in this account that immediately rivet our attention:

First, there is the glorious change in the person of the Lord himself. Suddenly, as they were with Jesus there on that mountain, his countenance altered, Matthew tells us. His face began to shine, his garments became white, and his whole being radiated glory. It is interesting to read how some of the critical commentators 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 supernaturally changed. Well, that is all very well in accounting for his change, but it does not explain Moses and Elijah, nor the other events that happened. It is clear from this account (and from Matthew's and Luke's, also) -- Mark is careful to point out -- that this is a supernatural change. No fuller on earth could produce this. This even exceeds the claims of the soap and detergent ads of our day. There is no whiteness like this whiteness, and the writers are very careful to make that plain.

Well, what happened to Jesus? We can only understand this when we see that what he did was to slip back into eternity, in a sense, back into his pre-human glory, which he refers to later in his great prayer recorded in John 17. He prayed, "Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made," {John 17:5 RSV}. This is the glory which now is suddenly revealed to these three disciples. It is evident therefore that our Lord did not have to die. That is one of the meanings of the transfiguration. It makes clear that he had no reason to pass through death. He could step back across the boundary of time into eternity without passing through death. We must die; he did not need to. He could step back into glory at any time, and here he did so.

I am sure this is what John is referring to in his Gospel when, though he does not give us an account of the transfiguration, he does say, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, ... we have beheld his glory," {John 1:14 RSV}. Though he does not tell us where, it was undoubtedly this moment on the mountain that he remembered.

The second thing that grips us is the account of the heavenly visitors, Moses and Elijah, who appeared and were talking with Jesus. Is it not interesting that the disciples seem to have no difficulty at all in recognizing instantly who these men were? Jesus did not say, "Now, Peter, James, and John, I'd like to have you meet Moses and Elijah." No, they knew instantly who they were. There will be no need for introductions in glory; we will know immediately who people are. So this account gives us something of a preview of what heaven will be like.

Now, why Moses and Elijah? Many have puzzled over that. Why not one of the other prophets -- Isaiah, or Jeremiah, or David -- or some of the other great leaders of the Old Testament -- Abraham, perhaps, or Noah? But it was particularly Moses and Elijah who appeared with Jesus on the mountain. I think the commentators are right when, in general, they say this is because these two were preeminently the representatives of the Law and the Prophets, those two great divisions of the Old Testament which pointed forward to the coming of Messiah -- Moses, the great law-giver; Elijah, the first, and in some ways the greatest, of the prophets.

It is also interesting to note that these two men represent the two ways by which men have entered heaven. Moses entered through the normal, natural process of death. No man was present when Moses died, but God buried him, the Old Testament says. And yet here Moses is -- his body lying in some unmarked grave on a mountain top beyond the Jordan River -- but he himself, in a resurrected body, present on the mountain with Jesus. Elijah, on the other hand, was one of two men caught up to heaven without death. We have the dramatic story in the Old Testament of Elijah's ascension into glory, caught up in a fiery chariot, without passing through the normal process of death.

We have a prediction of this same phenomenon in the New Testament. Believers today normally enter into glory through death, as Moses did. But Paul tells us that the generation of Christians who are living on the day of the Lord's return shall not taste of death. In First Corinthians 15:51, he says, "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet." And in First Thessalonians 4:16-17: "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord." So there are two ways by which believers can enter into glory, and these are represented here by Moses and Elijah.

I am always intrigued by the fact that Moses is here, because it means that he finally made it into the Promised Land! In the wilderness, because he got angry and disobeyed the Lord, God told him that he would not be permitted to lead the children of Israel into the Promised Land. He could see the land, but he could not enter. But that prohibition was only in time. Now, in eternity, he was permitted to enter the land. And here he is on the mountain top. I can just see him looking all around, looking over that land, saying, "So there it is! I've been wanting to come here for ages, and I've finally made it!"

Luke tells us that they spoke of the exodus of Jesus, of his departure from Jerusalem. They discussed together how he would leave the earth by means of a cross and a resurrection. I am sure these three disciples were so perturbed by the splendor and the glory and the strangeness of this scene that they did not recall all that they heard. That is too bad, for what a conversation this must have been! How I wish we could have been present and heard them discussing these things. Moses perhaps discussed how Jesus was the fulfillment of all those sacrifices which the Law demanded -- all the lambs and calves and bulls and goats which were killed as a picture of the suffering One who would come. Elijah, as one of the prophets, perhaps spoke of the longings of men, the hungering after a leader, a conqueror, a Savior; and of the predictions of the prophets that One was coming who would bear our transgressions, enter into our heartaches, and free us from ourselves. Such must have been their discussion.

The third element of great interest in this account is the proposal which Peter makes. After hearing these men discussing these strange events together, Peter, in his usual manner, interrupts: "Master, it is good for us to be here. This is tremendous! Let's make three booths and live here. Let's settle down here and make this our world headquarters. We'll make one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He evidently has in mind that they would transform that mountain into the headquarters for the world-wide reformation movement that was going to start. They would operate right from that mountain, as the center of all activity.

Well, that shows how foolish he was, and how little he understood what Jesus had been trying to tell him. In fact, Mark, who undoubtedly got this account from Peter's own lips, indicates that the motive which led Peter to speak was that of fear. He said, "They were exceedingly afraid." Someone has said that there are only two kinds of speakers: those who have something to say; and those who have to say something! Peter was someone who just had to say something. He blurted out whatever came to his mind, without stopping to think whether it made sense or not. So he makes this proposal that they make this their headquarters for a great campaign to take over the world.

But he scarcely had gotten the words out when he was interrupted, and the fourth dramatic event occurred. Suddenly they were overshadowed with a cloud. Matthew tells us it was a bright cloud, a very bright, shining cloud. It is my conviction that it was the identical cloud mentioned in the Old Testament, which hovered over the tabernacle during the day -- the glory of God, called the Shekinah. They heard a voice speaking out of the cloud, saying, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." There is no doubt that this is a correction of Peter's brash statement. The Father himself is saying, "Peter, do not put Jesus on a par with Moses and Elijah. You listen to him. He is the one of whom Moses and Elijah spoke. He is the one who fulfilled all the predictions of the prophets and the sacrifices of the Law. Listen to him; this is my beloved Son."

There are three occasions in the New Testament when the voice of God spoke directly from heaven concerning the work of Jesus. One was at his baptism, when he began his ministry. There the words were addressed to Jesus himself: "Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." It is evident that the voice came to launch the ministry of Jesus. Here we have the words addressed to the disciples, to correct a mistake they were making. The third account occurs in John's gospel, Chapter 12, just before the cross in Jerusalem. Jesus spoke of having completed the work which the Father had given him to do, and said in prayer to the Father, "Glorify thy name." And a voice spoke from glory and said, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again," referring to the cross immediately to follow. There the voice came to complete the testimony of the life and ministry of Jesus. So three times we have the voice of the Father from heaven: to launch his ministry; to correct a mistaken idea about him; and to complete the testimony that Jesus gave by his life and ministry.

Mark ends this account by telling us that, as the voice spoke, suddenly the scene faded. They were returned to the normal situation. As he puts it so beautifully, "...they no longer saw any one with them but Jesus only." Jesus himself remained after the glory had faded.

In the next section we have the discussion that ensued as they were coming down the mountainside:

And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of man should have risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what the rising from the dead meant. And they asked him, "Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" And he said to them, "Elijah does come first to restore all things; and how is it written of the Son of man, that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him." {Mark 9:9-13 RSV}

There are two features of importance in this account.

First, the verbal quarantine which Jesus laid on these disciples. Once again he forbade them to tell anyone what they had seen -- even the other disciples, evidently. Of course, our immediate question is, Why does he do this? Why does he show them his transfiguration but then tell them not to say anything? If you look closely, you can see two reasons:

One, of course, was because their information was incomplete. They needed the resurrection in order to understand all that was happening. Without that resurrection, the whole process would be incomplete. They apparently had ignored all he had said about the resurrection, and so now he tells them not to say a thing until after it occurs. Without that, their message would be meaningless, a hopeless jumble which would only mislead men and set them on the wrong track.

And, second, it is very clear that their understanding was incomplete. Their information was incomplete, and their understanding was incomplete. They kept the matter to themselves, but questioned "what the rising from the dead meant." They did not understand that. Probably, like Martha in the eleventh chapter of John, they linked this with the great resurrection yet to come, when all the dead should rise, and of which the Old Testament spoke. They could not make the connection, did not see it as referring to the resurrection of Jesus.

If we understand this, then we will understand why they asked the question about Elijah, which follows immediately: "Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" If you put all that back into context, you can see that they felt what they had just seen on the mountain -- Elijah and Moses speaking with Jesus -- was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi that Elijah must come. But their problem was, he had come in the wrong order. He had not come first, before Messiah appeared, and they could not understand that. They said, "Why then do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" The emphasis is on the word "first." They are confused, they do not know how to tie the resurrection into this, and they do not know how to explain that Elijah did not come first and restore all things before Messiah appeared.

So Jesus' answer to them is very instructive. We must observe it very carefully, because he does something rather unusual here. He said to them, "Elijah does come first to restore all things; and how is it written of the Son of man [referring to himself, not Elijah], that he [Jesus] should suffer many things and be treated with contempt?" If you notice, he has carefully changed the subject from Elijah to himself. Then he says, "But I tell you that Elijah has come and [notice the tense] they do to him [not they "did" to him, as it is translated] whatever they please, as it is written of him." Who is he referring to there? The Son of man, not Elijah. That agrees with what he has just quoted -- that he would suffer many things and be treated with contempt. It is not written anywhere of Elijah that he would suffer many things and be treated with contempt. That is a reference to Messiah. So Jesus is saying, "Elijah will come; but as to Messiah, they are doing to him whatever they please, as it is written of him." He changes the focus of their question from Elijah to himself.

What does all this mean? Well, he is really saying that the issue is not Elijah's coming first, at all. What will happen first will be the suffering and death of Messiah. This is what they ought to focus on. This is what he is trying to drive home to them, what he seeks to impart to them again and again through this whole process of teaching them before the cross. He emphasizes it here again: "The cross must come first."

Now, it is true that, in Matthew's account, he refers to John the Baptist as having fulfilled, in some secondary way, this promise concerning Elijah. And you remember that at the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist, an angel appeared to his father, said that his wife would have a son, that his name should be called John, and said of him that he would go before the Lord to prepare his way, and that he would do so in the spirit and power of Elijah. Our Lord indicates that in some way John was a fulfillment of that prediction about Elijah. But he was not Elijah; he came in the spirit and power of Elijah. He was not the reincarnation of Elijah, but was engaged in the same type of ministry Elijah had.

But our Lord also makes clear here that, before Messiah appears in glory, in his second coming, Elijah will indeed come first. "Elijah does come first," he says. But the important thing now for the disciples is the shame and suffering of the cross, which Jesus himself would experience.

The account closes with the story of an event which took place at the foot of the mountain: the curing of the demon-filled boy. It links with the transfiguration, as we will see in a moment. Mark begins by recounting the impotence of the disciples:

And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd about them, and scribes arguing with them. And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed, and ran up to him and greeted him. And he asked them, "What are you discussing

with him?" And one of the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a dumb spirit; and wherever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able." And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me." Mark 9:14-19 RSV}

We need to be a bit understanding with these disciples. They were faithless, as Jesus said, but they had a difficult problem facing them here. It is clear that this boy they were confronted with was a very difficult case to handle. Even Jesus acknowledged it later. It was not a simple case of epilepsy, as it might appear on the surface. It is true that the symptoms recorded here are the classic symptoms of epilepsy. But the Bible records instances of epilepsy, as well as of demon possession, and distinguishes between them. Here it is clear that the problem was being caused not by epilepsy but by demon power. Today we know that many things can happen in the brain to cause such convulsive fits. A brain tumor, or certain chemical imbalances can cause them. Certainly it is not at all incredible that demon power could cause a seizure of this type. So this is not epilepsy, though it appears so in its outward form. It is really caused by a very powerful demon, one of what Paul calls "principalities and powers, wicked spirits in high places," {cf, Eph 6:12} a being of incredible craft and power evidently extremely difficult to dislodge, as we shall see. This is perhaps one reason why Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has this been going on?" This was his clue that it was a very difficult case to handle. Furthermore, while Jesus was away, these disciples were surrounded by unbelieving scribes who were opposing them in everything they did, arguing with them over everything. It was a very difficult situation, and they were unable to cast out the demon.

Why did they fail? I think it is clear that our Lord put his finger on the basic reason: Their lack of faith. But notice something very important. They did not fail because they did not expect anything to happen -- because they did. We almost always think of faith as some kind of expectation that something is going to happen. If we can just believe something is going to happen, it will happen. But these disciples did believe something was going to happen. They were surprised when it did not happen. They expected the boy to be delivered. They had seen people delivered before from demons when they said the word, and did so in Jesus' name. But this time it did not happen. So faith is not merely a sense of expecting something to happen. That ought to be clear from this account. What is it, then? Jesus said their problem was that they were faithless. Yet they did have a kind of faith -- they expected that something would happen. What did he mean?

Well, if you think it through, you can see what had happened. They had faith, but it had changed from faith in God to faith in the process they were following. They thought that if you said the right words, and followed the right ritual, that the demon would have to leave. Without their even realizing it, they had transferred their faith from confidence in a God who can act, to a formula that can bring it about. This is what we often do. We get to thinking that it is the words we say, or the way we say them, or what is happening in our lives, which is the real reason things happen, rather than the God who acts. Jesus reproved them for this, said their faith must be in God himself, if it is to be a fresh and vital faith.

The power of that kind of faith is exemplified by our Lord himself:

And they brought the boy to him; and when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. And Jesus asked his father, "How long has he had this?" And he said, "From childhood. And it has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us." And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible to him who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You dumb and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again." And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse; so that most of them said, "He is dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. {Mark 9:20-27 RSV}

Notice the father's honest unbelief. He said, "If there is anything you can do -- if there is -- please help us." That is simply an honest statement of where he is. Jesus gently challenges him, "If you can! No, that's never

the problem. Not 'if you can'; the problem is 'if you will believe'. If you will believe not only in a God who can, but a God who will, it can be done. Nothing is impossible if you'll believe. The problem is in you, not in me." Immediately the man did a beautiful thing. He said these words which have been the encouragement of many since: "I do believe; help my unbelief!" Out of the honesty of his weakness, he cast himself on the Lord. "Yes, Lord, I do believe; but I feel my unbelief and I don't know how to handle it. You make me believe." That kind of faith is small, but it is like a grain of mustard seed -- it is able to move mountains. The moment he said those words, the moment he cast himself in his weakness back on the Lord, that was all God wanted. Our Lord spoke the words, and his son was delivered. You can see the severity of the case. It was with reluctance, even at the command of Jesus, that this spirit came out of the boy. It cried out, convulsed him, then left him as dead. But Jesus picked him up by the hand and restored him.

In the last verses we get the secret of that power:

And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." {Mark 9:28-29 RSV}

He does not mean prayer uttered at the moment, because Jesus himself did not pray when he cast out this demon. He is not talking about a certain kind of prayer that you say at the moment you want to relieve somebody of a demon. No, what he means is a life style of prayer. "This kind cannot be driven out except by a heart which is kept fresh and alive and in touch with God by a life of prayer." That is where Jesus' power came from. He was always in touch with the Father. He was always drawing upon his Father's power. He always walked in reliance upon God. He referred every event of his existence to the God who indwelt him, and he prayed consistently and constantly to the Father, in expectation of his working. This is what he is talking about -- maintaining a fresh and vigorous relationship with God, and trusting in him. This is a life of prayer.

In closing, I want to go back to the beginning for just a moment. Remember that Jesus said, "There will be some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power." What had these disciples just seen? They had seen the kingdom of God come with power into the life of a father and his boy. And what made it come? Well, as Jesus points out, it was the presence within of a living God, and a reliance maintained by a constant communication with him. This is what permits the kingdom of God to come with power, right now, in the midst of our daily affairs. When we understand that, we can say with Paul, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" {Rom 8:31b KJV}.

Prayer:

What tremendous themes have occupied our thoughts these last few moments, our Father -- glimpses into eternity, views of the glories of heaven, insights into the terrible world of demons and the injury they cause humanity, recognition of the power of faith understanding about the saints of old and their relationship to us. What tremendous themes we have been examining in conjunction with this incident! Lord may it all find its focus in these simple words of Jesus. "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer," and "All things are possible to him who believes." This is the life of prayer -- lifting up the heart to God, and a sense of the immediate presence of a risen Lord in the midst of our humdrum and routine activities, all day long. This is the secret of power. Teach us this anew, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: The Glory that Follows
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: The Ruler who Serves
Scripture: Mark 8:38 - 9:29
Message No: 2
Catalog No: 3316

Date: February 23, 1975

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