

February 8, 2009  
 II Peter 1:12-21 / Luke 9:28-36  
 Sacred Experiences, Sacred Places?

Today we come to one of the most significant events in the life of Jesus apart from His birth, crucifixion and resurrection — we come to His transfiguration!

It's an event I can remember from way back in my childhood — because I had a Bible with pictures in it — and one of those pictures was Raphael's famous painting of 'The Transfiguration,' where you see Jesus and Moses and Elijah floating in the air above a hill, where the three awestruck disciples are laying on the ground underneath them, and at the bottom of the hill (as we'll see in next week's text) are the other 9 disciples vainly trying to cast an evil spirit out of the epileptic boy who would scream, convulse on the ground, and foam at the mouth.

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Yet as many times as I would look at that picture, I could never really figure out what the transfiguration was all about — why it happened or what it signified — other than somehow tying Jesus together with those two O.T. figures. I even remember asking my Sunday School teacher what the transfiguration was all about, and she didn't know either!

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So, all these years later, let me tell you what I NOW BELIEVE the transfiguration was all about! And to save time, I'll simply tell you that I've sifted through all the various opinions for you, and will present to you the interpretation I feel best explains this text and the significance of this event!

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So, what's it all about? **FIRST** I believe it's about the return of something that had disappeared for many centuries — for nearly 600 years to be exact! Something that had departed from the scene nearly six centuries earlier (during the time of Ezekiel) and returns on this occasion in Jesus. That's what makes this event is so important!

You see, as a child I was right in one sense — this passage does tie Jesus together with those Old Testament figures. In fact, as with so many events in the N.T., this one can't be understood apart from some degree of familiarity with Old Testament history or events — events going as far back as the Exodus. Because it's in relation to the Exodus from Egypt, that God first reveals Himself and His glory or His unspeakably holy presence to Moses.

Initially it's in the burning bush — a bush that LOOKS like it's on fire, but isn't burned or consumed, because the light isn't caused by a fire, but by the Shekinah Glory of God! The visible,

tangible, irrefutable proof that God's glorious and holy presence was there, in a special way, in that particular place. That's why God tells Moses to take off his sandals and declares he is standing on holy ground.

**WHY?** Because the Shekinah glory of God — the radiant and even blinding light of God's glorious presence is manifesting itself right there in that place! It's holy ground because the holy God has chosen to make His holy presence known to Moses in that very spot (Exodus 3:1-15).

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But that was just the beginning! Because in Exodus 13:21, we also find that God manifested His glorious presence to all of Israel when *"He went before the people of Israel and guided them on their way (up out of Egypt) by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night."*

And don't picture it wrongly in your mind! The "cloud" was not like dense, gloomy, London or Pennsylvania "fog"! The cloud was like a glowing, radioactive cloud of iridescent light or a cloud of bright, luminous, particles of light that moved in a cloud-like fashion and would settle in one place, signifying that God's holy presence was there in a special and unique way.

And the pillar of fire at night so bright that it would illuminate the desert night for that huge company of Israelites, stretched back as they were for miles behind Moses, Aaron and Miriam! It must have been an awesome sight to see!

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We see it after they reach and set up camp below Mount Sinai, and the people would actually see God's glory (a cloud of light) descend upon the Tent of Meeting where Moses would go to meet with God.

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We see it shortly afterward, in conjunction with Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on the top of Mount Sinai, where Moses prays — *"Lord show me your glory"* — and God did, but not before He hid Moses in the cleft of a rock and sheltered Him with His divine hand, to keep the radiance of His glory from killing Moses! (And Moses was only allowed to see God's "backside" — the Bible's way of saying a small muted glimpse of God's glory and NOT a full, frontal, complete revelation of His glory!)

We see it on Moses face after he fasts and communes with God for 40 days on the mountaintop, unaware that when he comes down from mountaintop with the Ten Commandments, his face is glowing with the radiance of God's glory as a result of having spent all that time in God's immediate and holy presence!

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The same is true of the Tabernacle which God blesses on the day of its completion by filling it with the light of His glory! *“Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.”* (Ex. 40:34-35)

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And then last, we see it years later, when the people have settled in Jerusalem, and Solomon builds the Temple, and on the day of its dedication, as we read in II Chronicles 7:1-3:

*“When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. The priests could not enter the temple of the LORD because the glory of the LORD filled it.”*

Yet Solomon knew (like Moses before Him) that what they were allowed to see was NOT God in all His glory, but merely an infinitesimally small manifestation of His greater glory which would have been far too much for them to see in all its fullness and survive!

Solomon makes that clear when he lifts his arms to heaven and prays: *“Will you really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain You. How much less this temple I have built!”*

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You see, like all the Jews, Solomon was well aware that the entire universe in all its infinite expanses could never contain God, or a full revelation of His glory, never mind some measly little man-made temple in Jerusalem (large as it was)!

And thus he also knew that any manifestation of God's glory, regardless of how spectacular it was, was just a small sampling of God's greater glory that would have killed them, if they as finite, fallen sinners were to see it in all its infinite splendor!

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Thus we see that God was pleased to let the light of His glory dwell in the Holy of Holies in the Temple... until the time of Ezekiel. That's the SECOND thing we need to see. After the temple has been around for some 400 years, and Israel has gone through some spiritual ups and downs, something goes terribly wrong!

The people of Israel slip into a time of moral and spiritual decline so horrendous that it culminates with 70 elders from the house of Israel assembling in the Temple — each one in front of an idol of their own making — and then offering incense (or worship) to each one of their own personal idols in the place where God's infinite glory dwelt! (Ezekiel 8:7-16)

The text even tells us they *“painted the walls of the temple with all kinds of crawling things and detestable animals and all the idols of the house of Israel”* (Ez. 8:10).

And because of it, GOD'S GLORY LEAVES THE TEMPLE! Something Ezekiel describes in great detail two chapters later in chapter 10 verse 18 where he writes:

*“Then the glory of the Lord departed from over the threshold of the temple...”*

And after speaking of the angels, and the roar of their wings, and four whirling wheels that sparkled like chrysolite, and cherubim with four faces whose backs and hands and wings were completely filled with eyes all over, and moved in whatever direction their heads turned, we are told:

*“While I watched the cherubim spread their wings and rose from the ground, and as they went the wheels went with them. They stopped at the entrance to the east gate of the LORD’s house... Then the cherubim with the wheels beside them, spread their wings, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them. The glory of the LORD went up from within the city and stopped above the mountain east of it.”* (Ezek. 10:19 and 11:22-23)

The dazzling, radiant, iridescent light of God's Shekinah glory departs from the temple, hovers over it, moves eastward accompanied by these angels and whirling wheels until it stops above the Mount of Olives, and then it's gone! A glory not to be seen again for the next 600 years!

As R. Kent Hughes points out: *“For the next 600 years, though the temple was destroyed and rebuilt again, and though godly men and women came and went, the glory was not seen once.”*

That's what happens when God's people embrace idols. Ichabod — “the glory departs!” As God had warned his people in Isaiah 42:8: *“I am the LORD! That is my name! I will not give my glory to another, or share my praise with idols.”* Which means you can have your idols, or you can have the unspeakable blessing of God's glory dwelling in your midst, but you can't have both!

When you boldly, brazenly, defiantly bring idols into your life, or into the church, and God's glory departs, because YAHWEH, the great and glorious and thrice holy God will not share His glory or His praise with “idols.”

The people of Israel, in Ezekiel's day, chose their idols, and thus God's glory departed, and was not seen again until Jesus comes on the scene, and that glory returns! That's what the “transfiguration” is all about! The return of God's glory in Jesus after 600 years of never being seen at all!

Which brings us to today's text and our **THIRD** point. The glory which had departed from the temple returns! NOT to the earthly temple in Jerusalem, but to the true temple — the only "temple" which really matters even now — the temple of which Jesus said: ***"Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days."*** / ***"It has taken 46 years to build this temple,"*** the Jews replied, ***"and you are going to raise it in three days?"*** And lest anyone be confused, John tells us, ***"The temple He referred to was His body."***

So we have it — the climax of Jesus self-revelation of His Deity! Eight days earlier they had confessed Him to be "The Christ of God." And now He confirms that's exactly who He is, as the Shekinah glory of God wells up from within Him and radiates out from His face which is "transfigured" by the blinding brilliance of that glory.

Luke says "the appearance of His face changed" ("eteron" in the Greek – "it became different"). But both Matthew and Mark use a different word! They use the Greek word "metemorphothe" – the same Greek word from which we get the English word "metamorphosis" – to change one's basic form or substance, or to alter one's appearance extensively, as when a caterpillar changes to the butterfly.

His face radiates with a light so bright that Matthew can say "Jesus face shone like the sun." (17:2) ***"The appearance of His face,"*** says Luke, ***"and His clothes, became dazzlingly white"*** (and the NIV adds the descriptive phrase: "bright as a flash of lightning" which isn't in the Greek but tries to convey the idea Luke intended).

The light is blindingly white! / It's so bright it's impossible to look at it without hurting one's eyes! / So bright that a person would have to turn their head away from it. / Yet it's NOT that in the transfiguration Jesus became something He had not yet (up until this point) been! This is NOT, as some have wrongly taught, Jesus becoming or being made divine! This is Jesus revealing His true nature that He'd had all along!

R. Kent Hughes is right when he says: ***"For a brief moment the veil of [Jesus] humanity was lifted, and His true essence was allowed to shine through. The glory that was always in the depths of His being rose to the surface..."***

This is Jesus "metamorphosizing!" He is "transfigured!" The "glory" of His divine nature radiates out from inside, "extensively altering the appearance of His face so that it shines like the sun."

And not just His face! It radiates out from the rest of His body as well, with such dazzling brightness that even His clothes can't hide the light! It's like draping a cloth over a huge spotlight!

The wattage of the light it covers is so bright it shines right through it, so that they appear to be blindingly, dazzlingly, radiantly white as well!

Then Moses and Elijah appear also glowing in brilliant, radiant, "glorious splendor." And while the three are speaking "a cloud appears and envelops them, and they were afraid as they (that is, Peter, James and John) enter the cloud (of glowing light)," from which God speaks and declares Jesus to be His Son. His Chosen One whom they are to listen to.

And **JOHN**, having witnessed this sight, writes years later in John 1:14-15: *"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen His GLORY (I believe referring to this particular event) the GLORY of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."*

The **APOSTLE PAUL** who surely heard of this event from them, alludes to it (I believe) in II Corinthians 4:5-6 where he writes: *"We do not preach ourselves, but Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus sake. For God, who said 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made His light shine in our hearts to give us the KNOWLEDGE OF THE GLORY OF GOD IN THE FACE OF JESUS CHRIST."*

What was the PRIMARY THING that stuck out the most to the three witnesses? Jesus face. / His face was transfigured! / His face shone like the sun. / His face became blindingly, dazzlingly white — as bright as a flash of lightning!

And it's not just John and Paul. Some 30-35 years later, when **PETER** is writing his final letter to the church, just before his death, he reflects back on that glorious event, and uses THAT experience (still as fresh in his mind as if it had happened yesterday) as the basis for the assuring his listeners that what He said about Jesus "power" and "His coming" was true!

I Peter 1:16-18: *"We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus (referring, of course, to His first coming), but we were eye-witnesses 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, who 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."*

It's as if Peter is saying: *"I know Jesus is the Christ, because I was there when the Shekinah glory of God burst forth from His face and transfigured His entire being! I'm not making this up, I was there! I saw it happen! God's glory shone forth from inside Him and altered*

*His entire being so that He shone like the sun. His face was as bright as a flash of lightning! Only the Messiah or the Christ or God the Son could do that!"*

We can **REFLECT** God's glory, like a mirror reflects the light from another source, but Jesus is the **SOURCE**! We're like the moon, He's the sun! He's the living, walking repository of God's divine glory! He's the temple the Old Testament temple foreshadowed, in which the glory of God dwells!

You see, one does not easily forget such intense and awesome sights or experiences! They are burned into the memory banks and become faith-energizing reminders we rely on in the future! Memories of the events that altered the course of our lives! Things we can look back to years down the road when life becomes more routine and mundane and normal, and we begin to question what we once believed so firmly.

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That's my **THIRD** point. Some thirty plus years later, when Peter is an old man, he still recalls with vivid clarity the things he saw and experienced that day. Jesus invited these three to witness something that would change their lives forever. Something they would look back upon and speak about and rely upon as one of the things which convinced them Jesus was the Christ! That He was God's One and Only Son. That He had come and had come in power!

**WHY?** Because they had *"seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father full of grace and truth."*

"Jesus," they would say, "is the Christ." / "But we don't believe you," people would say. And Peter would apparently reply (as he essentially does in this passage) by saying: "It doesn't matter if you believe us — we know what we saw! We know what happened to us! We saw the cloud and the Majestic Glory and heard the voice speak out of it!"

Their experience was like an anchor for their soul — a sacred gift that rejuvenated their faith, and gave them confidence and assurance when they went through trying times and the glow of that mountain-top experience was replaced by the more natural, mundane or routine things of life in this world.

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You see, I don't know how many of you seated here today have had experiences with God — intense, life-changing experiences with God. Things that cannot be explained in any other way except that they came from God.

Experiences that you have occasionally looked back on, and purposely reflected upon years down the road, when you were struggling, and things weren't going too well, and you wondered if the choices you made were right, and were tempted to deviate from the path of life you began to tread – a path you chose at least in part because of those experiences!

I find that many people have had them. You may be thinking of such an experience right now. In your childhood. In your teen years. As a young adult. Experiences God gave you as a way of changing the direction of your life then, keeping you on course now, and being there for you in the future (just as this one was for Peter in his old age, giving him confidence and assurance in regard to the truth that some people were now questioning).

That's the beautiful thing about this passage — Jesus invites these men to witness an event that will change the direction of their lives in the present, and act as an anchor for their soul in the years to come.

And not just them. He has done so with many others down through history. **John Newton** (who wrote the song "Amazing Grace") had a dream which he knew to be from God, and it was one of the things that led him to give up slave-trading and led to His conversion. **John Wesley** felt his "heart strangely warmed" as a man read the preface to Luther's commentary on Galatians.

**Blaise Pascal**, the famous French physicist likewise had an experience with God that was so special to him that he wrote it down on a piece of paper and sowed it into the lining of his coat, where it was discovered when he died in 1662. He even dated the experience. It had happened 8 years earlier on *"Monday, November 23, 1654, from 10:30 in the evening until half past 12."*

He was sitting in his room, when the room filled with light for nearly two hours, and he would write of that experience:

*"God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of philosophers and savants. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling, Joy, Peace. God of Jesus Christ. My God and your God. 'Your God shall be my God.' Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except God. He is to be found only by the ways taught in the Gospel... Joy, joy, joy—tears of joy....' This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.' Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. I have fallen away; I have fled from Him, denied Him, crucified Him. May I not fall from Him forever. We keep hold of Him only by the ways taught in the Gospel. Renunciation, total and sweet."*

**Thomas Aquinas**, who wrote one of the most extensive theologies ever published, the "Summa Theologica," which is still read and studied today as one of the greatest theological works in

history, had an experience with God in his latter years that was so profound that after he had it he felt that everything he had written was as nothing!

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And I could go on and on and on! But that's not the point! It's not the experience that you have, it's that regardless of the experience, God blesses us with it that we might look back upon it as a signpost that pointed us in the right direction then, and continues to point us in the right direction when we are tempted to deviate from it years down the road!

Such experiences remain there, imbedded in our psyche, so that when we question, and doubt, and run into opposition, and wrestle with temptation, and later begin to wonder why we chose the road we're now on, we can pause, turn around, look back at that event and remember what it taught us — as a way of reminding us why we went in the direction we did, and why we need to continue in that direction.

There have been many times when I've questioned what I'm doing in the pastorate! At one point in 1992 I almost threw in the towel and called it quits. And one of the things that prevented me from doing so was reflecting upon that time, when I was sitting around that campfire at the closing ceremony of a VBS in my hometown of Norfolk, and as a child of 11 or 12 years old, clearly sensed God call me to be a pastor—an experience which initially shocked me, but has since been an anchor to my soul when I've contemplated deviating from that call.

For you it may have been your conversion, when that light went on in your mind, and you knew that you knew that you knew.

Or that evangelistic crusade, when the evangelist preached the Gospel, and the Holy Spirit warmed your heart, and you knew deep down in your soul that Christ had died for you, that God loved you and He was calling you to embrace Christ by faith.

And years down the road, when things turned sour, and life went in a way you never expected, and you were wondering if it was all true, you think back to that experience, and it reminds you (like Peter) that you didn't invent it, you experienced it! You recall it and it helps refocus you. It beats back those doubts and rejuvenates your faith and helps you regain a right perspective of things all over again!

That's what such experiences are meant to do! Sustain us! Gird us up! Be a signpost along our way that we can always look back on when we struggle. A God-moment imbedded in the psyche that's like a rock or anchor for the soul! A light that shone brightly then, illuminating our way, and continues to shine in our dark times!

I have OFTEN (like John and Peter and Paul) when I'm going through times of spiritual dryness, reflected back on experiences I've had with God and received the strength that they are intended to impart. I encourage you to as well.

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You see, Peter makes a common mistake. He wants to mark the spot and make the place sacred by building three shrines! But that's not the purpose of such experiences! It's not where they happen that we need to remember, it's what we learned from them!

I don't really care if they know the exact spot where the burning bush was, or the exact spot where Jesus was crucified. It's not important to know which tomb was the one his body was laid in and rose from the dead in! Those things don't matter! That's the stuff of hucksters and moneychangers and tourist traps.

What matters is what happened in those places. That Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead is what's important, not the spot of ground on which it happened!

Peter wanted to build three booths to mark the spot. *"He didn't understand,"* the text tells us! It was *"good for them to be there,"* but not to cordon off the area and build a shrine! It was to savor the event! And we would be wise to do the same!

People are into building shrines and making pieces of ground sacred. God is into truth, and events and the experiences that shape our lives.