

About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. ²⁹ As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. ³⁰ Two men, Moses and Elijah, ³¹ appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. 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. ³³ 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—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” (He did not know what he was saying.)

³⁴ While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ A voice came from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.” ³⁶ When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves, and told no one at that time what they had seen. Luke 9:28-36

His Departure was Coming

In our family, we love to travel. When we go on vacation, we want to go somewhere, even though we know it’s going to mean tedious miles on the highway or dealing with airports. The destination usually is worth the hassle. But we don’t enjoy the preparation. In fact, I think our stress level triples in the week before we leave on a big trip. You’re not on vacation yet, so you have to go to work, but you also need to get all this stuff done to get out of the house. It’s kind of ironic, because we’re excited about making the trip, but getting ready almost makes us change our minds. In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus was getting ready to go. He was about to travel to Jerusalem for the last time, but that was just a stage to his real departure. **That departure was coming.**

I.

How do you think he felt about it? Let’s be clear, his departure was the cross. Jesus was far in the north, in Galilee and he wasn’t going to die the next day, or anything like that. In fact, it probably took several weeks at least for him to get to Jerusalem. But once he came down from the mountain, he would begin that final trip to Jerusalem, which was kind of like going to the airport. Every step of the way, his destination would be the cross and his final departure from this life. On the way, he would begin to speak to his disciples plainly and urgently about what was going to happen when they got to Jerusalem and provoke all kinds of anxiety on their part. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he himself would wrestle with all the human fears that come with facing a death like that. It was going to be much more than just the cycle of life. It was going to be far worse than “his time.” For the Jews, dying on a cross was horribly shameful. God had taught them to think of crucifixion as meaning he had abandoned you to hell. Of course, there was going to be all the pain and mockery and unfairness. Worst of all, Jesus was really going to suffer hell itself on that cross. **His departure was coming. It was the only road to glory.**

That’s what the cross would lead to: glory. So before he turned to Jerusalem, for a brief moment, Jesus enjoyed the glory of heaven. We call this the transfiguration. That means the changing of his appearance. Luke tells us that **“the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.”** For thirty-three years, his true glory had been hidden behind the face of a baby and then a child and finally a man. His glory had been hidden behind the rough clothes of a poor, traveling preacher. But now that human face and those human rags took on the glory of the Son of God. Then Moses and Elijah appeared to him. Moses had died fifteen hundred years before this and his bones had to be dust by this time. Elijah had only lived eight hundred years before this, but his body was even harder to find. He had ascended directly to heaven in whirlwind. Now both these men stood on earth again. Peter, James and John had never seen them, or even a picture of them. Yet they knew them. Jesus was sharing the glory of the saints in heaven.

Luke tells us, **“They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.”** Now, God doesn’t tell us anything about this conversation. But the subject was clear. Jesus knew what was coming. In fact, Luke tells us that he was about to make that departure happen. It wasn’t something that was going to be done to him. It was something that he was going to make happen. Now, that seems a little funny to us, right? We all know that Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane and bound and dragged to

one hearing after another. We know that the Sanhedrin brought in false witnesses to make up charges against him. We know that they brought him to Pilate for execution and accused him, even while Pilate was thinking about letting him go. We know they pressured Pilate until he gave in and had Jesus crucified. We know that Roman soldiers nailed him to a cross and he died there.

But even so, all this was Jesus' own doing, even while all those sins were still the fault of the people who committed them. Jesus was born into this world for the sole purpose of dying on that cross outside Jerusalem. He came here to carry that shame and pain and mockery. The one time they did not want to kill him was during the Passover festival. But Jesus made it happen then. Even then, they did not succeed in taking his life. Jesus gave up his spirit on the cross. He died when he chose to die. Jesus did all this so that he could win true glory for himself. The glory of victory over sin and death and hell. The glory of crushing the devil and undoing all that he has done to us and to God's creation.

But there is an even greater glory that Jesus won at that cross: the glory of love. As the Son of God, he could've simply condemned us to hell. That's what we deserved. No one could have said differently. No lawyer in the universe could've gotten us acquitted in God's courtroom because we sin every single day. But in love, the Son of God left the glory of heaven behind and endured all the pain of this world, all the hardships we humans face, all the rejection and all the shame and pain of the cross. He suffered hell itself there because we deserve all that. Then he died so that we will live. So that we will never set one foot in hell. So that we will have a new heavens and a new earth, free from all sin and pain forever. There was only one road that would win that kind of glory for Christ: the road to the cross.

II.

But, of course, Jesus wouldn't have needed to win that glory if we hadn't gotten ourselves into such trouble. If we didn't sin, we would experience perfect love from God every day without a hint of judgment or anger, so we wouldn't need a Savior. But we do sin. We were all born sinners and sin stalks us every day of our lives, even for us believers who want to live a Christian life. We struggle to do that. We have weaknesses that we give in to over and over again. We all have those sins and failures that we would give anything to be free of. Left to ourselves, glory is the last thing we would ever have. But Jesus didn't leave us to ourselves. On the mount of transfiguration, **Jesus' departure was coming. It was the only way to bring us to glory.**

The only reason we know about the transfiguration is because Jesus wasn't alone on the mountain. He took Peter, James and John with him. He climbed that mountain to pray. The gospels tell us that Jesus often went off by himself to pray. Sometimes he took the disciples with him, especially these three. But most of the time, we don't know what he did or said at those private prayer sessions. I can only think of two times that the Bible describes what happened when he went off by himself to pray – this time, and the time in the Garden of Gethsemane when he sweat great drops of blood and an angel came and attended him. We know about both of these incidents because God provided witnesses to tell us what happened.

The climb was long. It was late. And it was probably not terribly interesting to watch Jesus pray, so these three men fell asleep. Then Jesus was transfigured and Moses and Elijah came. Luke says that when they were fully awake, they saw Jesus' glory and the two men standing there with him. Of course, that's what was supposed to happen. Jesus wanted them to see this. Why? First of all to assure them of what he had been teaching them for three years: he truly was the Son of God come in human flesh. He truly was the Savior of the world. In that moment, all that was revealed.

But he also showed them what he had in store for them: the glory of heaven. This time Jesus wasn't talking to an angel. He was talking with real human beings who had lived their lives here, who had struggled with sin and temptation and the pains and sorrows of life here. He was talking with men who had remained faithful and who now had their reward. Peter, James and John got a glimpse of heaven, a glimpse they needed before they followed Jesus on that long trip to Jerusalem and arrest and torture and death. They were going to be a part of those things, so they needed to see why Jesus was doing them and what he was going to win for them – and for us.

Peter's words show that. He said, "**Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.**" On one level, those words were unbelievably foolish. Jesus couldn't stay there and win eternal life for us. He had to die. And all the experience of their lives should have told them that God didn't send us to retreat up onto a mountain to find his glory. God sends us out into the world to live his love and share his world while we wait for his glory to come to us. Luke tells

Peter didn't know what he was saying. He was out of his mind with fear. When Peter was afraid, he talked. Quite often, he said things that didn't make him look good.

But at the same time, there is a sense in which Peter was right. He saw a glimpse of heaven and there is nothing better for us than heaven – except the new heavens and the new earth that will come when Jesus returns. Every believer longs for heaven. St. Paul himself said that he desired to depart and be with Christ which is better by far. If it would've been possible to stay there on the mountain in the glory of Christ with the saints of heaven, who wouldn't want that? Jesus was showing them why it's worth it to be a Christian, why we should all forsake this world and its lies and false promises and cling to Christ, why we come out ahead even though being a Christian means more suffering for us here than we would otherwise have. If we had been there, we would've wanted to stay too.

But they couldn't stay because this was just a glimpse. For them to actually stay in glory, Jesus had to go down the mountain and bring his departure to fulfillment in Jerusalem. It wasn't his fault that was true. It's ours. Every one of us is just as foolish as Peter was. How often don't we all talk about spiritual things with no more thought or insight than Peter had that night? How often don't we let the attitudes of our society color the way we think and feel about God? How many times don't we get tired of pastors insisting on things that we think are just so outdated that they should be thrown away? Certainly, if that's us pastors being spiritually foolish and clinging to our own ideas, those things should be thrown away. But in our day, when "organized religion" is a dirty word and our society thinks that God should be subjected to our human ideas of what's right and fair, far too often, the things we get tired of hearing about are things God says.

We were all born sinners, just like Peter was. Our sinful nature wages war against our faith. If it wins, we will spend eternity in hell, even while the world celebrates us here. But Jesus came to bring us to glory. He died and he paid for the foolishness that comes from our sinful hearts and for all the words we've spoken that denied his truth. He died and paid for our willingness to listen to anyone else but God. He died and paid for us all. Then he rose to give us that glory he showed Peter, James and John. He rose and we will live with him in heaven. Then Jesus came in the gospel to conquer the sin in our hearts and to free us from the influence of the sinful world around us. The power of God fights against the sin and temptation and foolishness of our own sinful hearts. To make sure we understand what all this means for us every day, God the Father said, **"This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him."** He will bring us to true glory.

Jesus made that trip to Jerusalem and now, he has departed. Now, we are preparing for our own departure. Every day we live here, we are preparing to live a new life in heaven. How do we feel about that? I hope we feel joy. I hope we look forward to being with that Savior who loved us this much. I hope that we eagerly anticipate the glory to come. And I hope and pray that we give glory to God here until that day arrives. Amen.