

On the Way: Top of the Mountain

Mark 9:2-29

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I was fifteen and showing up at Ness Lake as an LIT for my first time. Mom dropped me off and I quickly shoed her away, but half of me wished she could stay. I was a deathly shy, short, incredibly skinny and insecure kid with long hair and an astounding lack of fashion sense. And I was walking into totally unfamiliar turf.

I remember approaching the side door to the basement of the dining hall. It was about 4:30 in the afternoon. I was alone. But the door opened and the director welcomed me in and mentioned that I would be getting dressed up by a Cabin leader for dinner.

And across my mind flickered fear and apprehension. But before I could process that Peppy le Pew approached from the hall.

And he was huge – like at least 6 feet tall and 200 pounds – I was about half that so he seemed huge. And mature – I think he was in second year Bible school. And popular with the ladies ergo the name Pepe le Pew.

On all accounts a guy like him should never have had any time for me, and yet, without warning he yelled out: “You’re my LIT.” And in a second I was embraced and accepted as one of the team. And that moment started one of the best summers of my life.

So have you ever had a mountaintop experience? Either spiritually or emotionally or relationally? Has life ever been so good that the only conceivable way forward was down?

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If you’ve been with us over the last few weeks you know that we have been looking at the life of Jesus through the earliest and rawest account of Him that exists – that’s Mark. There simply is no information on Jesus that is more closely connected to the source than this Gospel. And we are in chapter 9 today so go ahead and grab your Bible.

And in chapters 8, 9 and 10 Jesus leaves His home town area and deliberately journeys to the cross. He’s on His way there on purpose. And He tells this to His disciples.

And this was a mind job for them, like “why Jesus? You’re supposed to be the Messiah. You’re supposed to save us from evil and injustice. How does letting evil and injustice kill You accomplish anything good for us?”

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Well that would be enough, but the mind job goes on. You see Jesus isn’t going to the cross by Himself. Last week He said “Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me.”

Jesus wants us on our own crosses, and dying to ourselves. Now doesn't that sound awesome? I'll take two of those please. But here's where we come to the mystery of Jesus' good news. You see Jesus doesn't call us to follow Him because He loves it when we're miserable. Jesus knows that it is only by following Him, on the way He is going, that we can live the abundant life He calls us to. His way is the best way in a world full of valleys between mountaintops. And that's where we are going today.

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So would you stand with me as we read Mark 9 starting in verse 2? Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Mark 9:2-29]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Now this is a strange text. Jesus takes His three closest disciples, Peter, James and John, up to a mountaintop experience. And He glows like the best Tide commercial ever. And Moses and Elijah are there. And there's a cloud and God speaks out of it. If there has ever been a mountaintop experience, this is it. So, what's going on here?

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Well, this might seem strange, but if you know a bit about the Old Testament it starts to sound familiar.

So there is a mountain. And Moses and Elijah are there. Now obviously these guys didn't coexist. Moses came first, Elijah was later. But both these guys had all sorts of mountaintop experiences. So Moses went up Mount Sinai. And a cloud covered it, and everyone was terrified. And on that mountain Moses met God and received the Law.

And on that mountain that he begged God to show him His glory. And God hid Moses in a cleft in the rock and passed in front of him. And Moses came down from this encounter literally shining so that people begged him to put a bag over his head so he wouldn't scare them. Moses was a man of the mountaintop.

And Elijah the prophet was the same. He was constantly going up a mountain. It was on a mountain that he called Israel to be faithful to God and reject Baal. And fire fell and the people repented. It was on a mountain – actually Mount Sinai again – in a cave, that the still small voice of God whispered and told him the rains were coming.

And now Jesus is on the mountain with Moses and Elijah – this is the new Sinai and the new Exodus. Here the New Lawgiver and the New Prophet has shown up to bring people into an encounter with God. But there's one major difference between this and every other mountaintop experience in the Bible.

And it has to do with the cloud. You see when Moses was up the mountain in the cloud, and even when he wore the glory of God back down, Moses was shining like the moon – He reflected God's glory. Moses didn't have any glory it was God's glory.

And then when that started to fade Moses was embarrassed and so kept wearing the bag, so people thought he was still shining. That's a classic human trick, isn't it?

And when Elijah called down fire from heaven it wasn't because he was anything special. James tells us:

Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain... for three and a half years. (James 5:17 BSB)

James says, "Elijah's just a dude. He's got no glory. It's God's glory!" But Jesus isn't surrounded by the glory of God, He's producing it. Verse 2 says He was transfigured before them. And the picture here isn't of putting on God's glory like clothes, but actually of unzipping the clothing of His humanity, like Superman, to allow His divinity to shine out. Jesus is not changed into something new, but out of something that didn't fit Him perfectly.

God's glory is emanating out from Him. He's the source. And that's because unlike Moses and Elijah who pointed to the glory of God, Jesus is the glory of God in human form. That's why in Hebrews we read:

The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and He sustains everything by the mighty power of His command. (Hebrews 1:3)

That's who Jesus says He is. And when He says this He puts Himself in a very unique category. No longer can He be a phenomenal leader like Moses – someone you should follow. Nor can He be a powerful prophet like Elijah, someone you should respect. At this point He is either lying and should be kicked to the curb like the scammers who try to steal your bank information, or you have to worship Him and center your life around Him. There's no middle ground with Jesus.

And of course this is what Peter is fumbling with when he offers to build some houses. Mark tells us, verse 6, he didn't know what to say because he was so frightened.

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Now here we come across something interesting in the text. The word "house" or "shelter" can also be translated "tabernacle." And this is probably what's on Peter's mind. You see when Moses returned from the Mountain the Israelites built a tabernacle to house the 10 Commandments and a couple other things. But really what they were housing was the glory of God which threatened to consume them. And they hung this huge sheet in the tabernacle to protect themselves from Him.

And then they set up priests to stand in the gap and offer sacrifices on their behalf. And so Peter says "We're going to die. We need a tabernacle." But then something happens that blows him away. Verse 7:

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is My dearly loved Son. Listen to Him." Suddenly, when they looked around, Moses and Elijah were gone, and they saw only Jesus (Mark 9:7-8)

So God's glory shows up and they don't die. And then it's just Jesus there. And this is Mark's way of saying "You don't need a tabernacle to shield you from the glory of God, Jesus is the only priest you need. He's the sacrifice. He's the One who stands in the gap. And He's God on the other side." And as such Jesus can give us what Moses and Elijah could never do, the embrace of God.

You see when the glory surrounds Peter, James and John they were ushered into the love the Father has for the Son. They heard His voice and felt His presence. And this is what we are all hungry for. We long to be accepted and embraced and invited onto the team, not just by Pepe le Pew, but by the God of the universe. Don't you want that?

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Just a word here: Friends, seek the God of the mountaintop. Hunger for God to reveal Himself to you. He wants to do this. In fact He created us for relationship with Himself. He doesn't want us to know stuff about Him, He wants us to know Him. And Jesus is the proof. In Jesus the God we worship put on skin to be known by us.

So hunger for this and pursue it. Spend time seeking Jesus. And surround yourself, not with people who know about Him, but who actually love Him; people who have been transformed by Him. Invite Jesus to take you to His mountaintop.

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That's point 1. Jesus is worthy of our worship, He is the bridge to God's embrace, and He wants us to see His glory first hand. But next, the amazing thing about this is how practical it becomes.

So immediately after the mountaintop the disciples come down and run headlong into real life. There's confusion and evil. The Pharisees are there with nothing good to contribute. And the other disciples are casting out a demon and it won't go. Have you ever had a day in the office like that?

Well it turns out this is nothing unique. When Moses finished up with God on the mountain, he got the same thing. The people are worshipping a cow when he came down.

And here's the thing with mountaintops – they are incredibly important; they are life changing experiences. They can inspire our direction and focus. But we don't live there. We weren't made to build houses on the mountain. And that's because ultimately following Jesus is a journey to the cross. Most of life with Jesus is about walking step by step through the valleys on the way to the cross.

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How do you feel about that? Has Jesus made a bad sales pitch? If you think so you aren't alone. When Jesus said I'm going to suffer and die Peter and the disciples pushed back pretty hard – "Uh, uh, uh Jesus. No, You're going to Jerusalem to rule and I'm coming with You." That was last week. This week the pushback comes in verse 11 where Peter says:

"Why do the teachers of religious law insist that Elijah must return before the Messiah comes?" (Mark 9:11)

What Peter's getting at is the prophecy in Malachi where it says Elijah returns just before the fearful and awesome day of the Lord. And the thought was that Elijah was the sign that God's Messiah was just about to smash his enemies. But Jesus replies:

"Elijah is indeed coming first to get everything ready.... I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they chose to abuse him, just as the Scriptures predicted."

(Mark 9:12-13)

Now we know from other texts that John the Baptist was who Jesus meant. He was preparing the way for the Lord. And at this point in the story he's dead. And Jesus says "I am God's Messiah, but I'm on J the B's path because I'm not coming to bring political freedom like Moses, but freedom from sin and death. And to accomplish that I must die. And guess what, if you're following me there's a cross for you too."

Now, how hard a pill is that? Have you ever cried out from the valley "God, it's not supposed to work like this. This isn't the plan. I'm being good. I'm following You. How come You aren't cooperating?" Have you ever prayed that prayer?

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Friends, the God of the mountaintop knows stuff we don't know. He's huge and glorious – and He has plans for our suffering we can't possibly comprehend. But they are good. He wants our good and His glory. But there's a choice in this. Will your cross make you bitter, or will you let it soften and mold you to look like Jesus?

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You probably know people who have responded in both ways. You know some who have experienced terrible things and now are angry and bitter. Do you know people like that? And you might know others who have gone through the same fire and come out soft and beautiful.

You see suffering and pain is a crucible, it's a furnace. And furnaces consume things, but they are designed to purify gold. And this is why Jesus wants us to follow Him. This is what Jesus has for you. He doesn't want your destruction, He wants your purification. He wants you to come through suffering looking more like Him. And He wants this because He knows this is what is best for you – it's your good and His glory.

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So first, on the mountain we see Jesus emanating the glory of God and He's either a liar to be discarded or He is Lord to be worshipped. But then we come down the mountain and life is full of chaos and pain and suffering. And maybe you are in that spot now. And the question is will you be burnt up and destroyed in your valley? Or will you come out shining like gold?

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Well nobody wants to become a bitter and angry old person. So what do we do? How do we get where Jesus wants to take us? Well, there is one person in this text who responds right, and we learn two things from him. So verse 14 tells us:

When they returned to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd surrounding them, and some teachers of religious law were arguing with them. (Mark 9:14)

It's chaos in the valley. People are arguing. And Jesus asks what's going on. And we read:

One of the men in the crowd spoke up and said, "Teacher, I brought my son so You could heal him. He is possessed by an evil spirit that won't let him talk. And whenever this spirit seizes him, it throws him violently to the ground.... So I asked Your disciples to cast out the evil spirit, but they couldn't do it.... Have mercy on us and help us, if you can." (Mark 9:17-22)

The father in this story shows us something no one else in the text understands and it's beautiful. And there are two things we need here if we are going to be refined instead of consumed by suffering.

First, if you've come down from a mountaintop and you're in a valley right now – or maybe you've been in the valley a long time and you can't even remember the mountaintop, there's good news when it comes to coming to Jesus.

Look how the father approaches Jesus. He comes hungry but helpless. "I brought my son to You for healing.... Have mercy on us if You can." And then we get that famous exchange.

Jesus says "Everything's possible if you believe." And the father says, "I do believe, help my unbelief." In other words, "I believe but I doubt. I don't want to doubt, but I do. Please help me." Have you been there?

And beauty of beauties Jesus doesn't say: "Yeah, about that. You go figure that doubt thing out and then come back. When you are totally surrendered to Me then we can talk about healing. Jesus doesn't say that. He doesn't say "Be full of faith – be faithful – and then I'll bless you. If He did that would be us earning His acceptance. Instead Jesus meets the man where he's at.

And here we see that what Jesus wants from us is to come to Him hungry but helpless. He wants us to recognize that He is our only hope. And that's what this father does. "I've got doubts, and I can't do this on my own. I need a Saviour." And that's saving faith. Ironically it is in hunger and helplessness that saving faith happens. The only way through the valley is admitting Jesus is your only hope.

And this is so different from every other religion. Everything else says get yourself right. Get some religion. Follow the rules. Do the right things. And then God will bless you. God helps those who help themselves. But with Jesus it is about recognizing that we are helpless and only He has what we need. If you are going to survive the valley that's the first thing you need.

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But second, and this is where it gets hard; notice what the father brings to Jesus. He brings his son. He brings what is most important to him. If you've ever had a sick kid you know your whole world can center around this. And he brings this to Jesus and guess what – it looks like it gets worse not better.

When the evil spirit saw Jesus... the spirit screamed and threw the boy into another violent convulsion and... the boy appeared to be dead.... But Jesus took him by the hand and helped him to his feet (Mark 9:20;26-27)

If you are in a valley right now what is it that if you lose it will be the end of you? What is most important to you? Maybe it's a relationship or your health. Maybe it's the money to pay your bills. Will you trust Jesus with this even if in doing so it gets worse?

Friends, trust means going with Jesus' agenda for the valley not your own. You see we want the valley to go away. But Jesus wants to use it. And look where Jesus takes this father, He takes him to the cross. Can you imagine what it was like to see his son lying dead at Jesus' feet?

But this is why we need the God of the mountaintop. We need to see Jesus on one hand emanating the glory of God and on the other hand embracing us and drawing us in. And He can do this because He stretched out His hands on the cross and took our place.

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On the mountain Peter, James and John heard the words "This is My Son whom I love." And they were there. Friends this is the ultimate glory of God, to be embraced, with Jesus, in God's love. That's what we hunger for.

And Jesus made it possible for this to be ours when He went to the cross and cried out "My God, My God why have You forsaken Me?" Jesus was rejected so we could be embraced as children of God.

And the fact is you can only trust Jesus in the valley, and with the most important aspects of your life, when you see who Him in this way – as God of the mountain. You are seeing things right if when the cloud dissipates only Jesus is there.

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At the end of that summer I came down that mountain and went back to normal church and school. And I brought all my long hair and lack of fashion sense. But there were a few things from that summer that still stick with me to this day. I'm not the same.

And when you've been embraced by Jesus it's then that the valley and the road to the cross that He calls us on, becomes the path to the abundant life that He wants for us.

So have you seen Jesus? Have you seen His glory? Do you know Him and what He's done for you? And if you have will you lay your very life at His feet in worship? If you will then His good news is that even in the darkness of the valley you will not lose your footing.