

Luke 9:28-36

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Introduction:

What would your reaction be if suddenly a whole lot of people in glorious splendour (whatever that means to you) appeared in the seats beside you, and to boot they were all famous people - Carey, Paul, Spurgeon, Moses, Wilberforce and Isaiah and whoever else you care to name, and somehow you instinctively knew who they were. I somehow think that your reaction would not be "Oh hello Isaiah, fancy meeting you here." I for one who would be pretty shaken up and unsure about what to say or do! At then at the end of the service they disappeared, quietly and unnoticed. What would you do then when you got home? Phone everyone you could think of and tell them that Moses and Isaiah was at our service today?

Context:

Before we start to look at this passage and what it means for us today I want to say a few words about where this story fits into the gospel history as it is quite fascinating. The transfiguration happens shortly the Peter's confession of who Christ is. The crowds were convinced in the main that Jesus was some sort of prophet, possibly even one of the prophets of old returned. But it is Peter who answers for the disciples and hits the nail on the head - The Christ, the Messiah, of God. Jesus then tells them not to tell anyone and goes on to explain that he must go up to Jerusalem and die there at the hands of the elder, chief priests and teachers of the law. And that if they wish to follow him they must take up their cross and follow him. Jesus ends that teaching with the statement "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God". The transfiguration story immediately follows this in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). Unfortunately the NIV has a break at that point in all three gospels so the obvious connection between the two is lost.

Doctrine:

Explanation:

Luke tells us that Jesus often withdrew into lonely places to pray, and often prayed through the night. When Jesus asked Peter, James and John to accompany him up the mountain on this particular occasion so that he could pray they were probably not overly enthusiastic. Nevertheless they went with him. Jesus probably withdrew a little way away from them to pray while they settled down, most likely to sleep. Suddenly as he was praying Jesus face shone like the sun (as Matthew tells us) and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. They may have been half a sleep but if someone we knew well was transfigured before us, even if we were half a sleep, the impact would still be significant. Mark tells us that they frightened. Two men also appeared with Jesus and it certainly seems to be implied in the passage that the three disciples knew instinctively who they were even though they had never seen them before. All three passages say that Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus only. Peter, James and John had entered the kingdom of God.



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The result was what we would today call serious culture shock. James and John could think of nothing to say but Peter in his normal fashion had to say something even if it meant sticking both his feet in, which is basically what he did. Both Mark and Luke tell us he did not know what he was saying. And if you think you would have done better than them I seriously doubt whether you would have. There is a vast difference between thinking we could handle such a situation and being in it!

However, things were about to get a lot worse. While Peter was jabbering a cloud appeared and enveloped them. Luke tells us they were afraid as they entered the cloud, Matthew is a bit more blunt. He tells us that they fell face down to the ground terrified. And a voice came from the cloud saying “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.” They were in the presence of God.

When they recovered enough to look up from the ground only Jesus remained.

So how many of you want the kingdom of God to come now? We often pray for the presence of God in our services, but if God answered us literally as in this case, would we pray for it as often as we do?

Moses and Mount Sinai: When God moves in power and makes his presence known people generally find that it’s not as much fun as they thought it would be. In the Old Testament Moses was intrigued by the burning bush, but was afraid when God spoke to him out it. At Mount Sinai the people voted for Moses to go up and speak with God, not because they were being nice or polite or anything like that but because they were terrified and afraid of being struck dead by God. God was happy to speak to all of them. They weren’t. Yet even despite the remarkable presence of God, they still managed to get themselves into a lot of trouble.

Job: Job thought he had a good case to present before God but then God answered Job out of the storm and suddenly Job changed his tune.

Then Job replied to the Lord:

“I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.

You ask, ‘Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?’

Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,

things too wonderful for me to know.

You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak;

I will question you and you shall answer me.’

My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.

Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

Isaiah: Isaiah was not much better - “Woe is me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” You’ll often here this passage used to promote evangelism but most people ignore what Isaiah was actually told to go and tell the people.

Read Isaiah 6⁹⁻¹⁰

What fascinating is the Jesus uses this passage to describe his ministry in John 12³⁷⁻⁴⁰. And in



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verse 41 John tells that it was Jesus that Isaiah saw!

Belshazzar: When Belshazzar felt the presence of God when the finger wrote on the wall we are told his face turned quite pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way, or a more correct if less pleasant rendering would be that he lost his bowels.

John: Just so that you don't think this was purely an Old Testament phenomenon you can turn to Revelation. When John saw Jesus in his gloried state on the throne in heaven he fell at his feet as though dead.

So do you still want God's presence in our midst?

Despite this though our answer should still be yes because the presence of God transforms us and changes us, which is what we do want, or should at least want. One of the problems we face though is that we tend to think of God as a God of love and indeed he is. But he is also a holy God and holiness requires justice, and justice requires punishment, and punishment invokes fear. But rather than degrade love, it actually puts into it's proper perspective. What do I mean?

I want you to think about something. We say that Christ dies to save us from sin. Well then just how serious is sin? Do we have a way of figuring out just how bad sin is or is not. Yes we do. God sent his ONLY Son in this world to die a horrendous death on the cross at Calvary because that was the ONLY WAY a sufficient punishment/sacrifice could be found to cover our sins. Let me repeat that. God sent his ONLY Son in this world to die a horrendous death on the cross at Calvary because that was the ONLY WAY a sufficient punishment/sacrifice could be found to cover our sins. So now I ask you - is sin serious? God's justice demanded a sufficient penalty and God found one. In his love he gave us his Son. Now you can see just how much he loved us. So if you want to understand the love of God, understand the sacrifice that was made for you. It will also make you humble if you've understood that correctly. It also explains why Paul sometimes get side tracked when talking about the love of God.

So yes, we do desperately need God's presence, even if it brings fear. For the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. As the priestly blessing says

The Lord bless you and keep you;

The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;

The Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.

We need the Lord to turn his face towards and shine upon us.

Application:

So is there anything else we can learn from this passage?

The one application which will seem really cliché but is still none the less true is the fact that if Jesus considered prayer important, then we probably should to. Luke especially points out some of the occasions when Jesus set aside time to pray - Luke 5¹⁶ for example - But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. He spent the night in prayer when he chose the disciples (Luke 6¹²). He was praying when the transfiguration happened.

A true revival is not a very comfortable experience. It's not very often these days that the



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presence of God is felt in our midst in a tangible way. But if you look at the history of revivals you will find one characteristic which quite frequently comes through. People are struck with fear and a sense of unworthiness. One particular example comes to mind of a small church that was experiencing a genuine revival and a gentleman who was walking along the road near the church minding his own business with no thoughts of church or God when suddenly the fear of God struck him and he fell down and asked God to forgive him his sins and was converted there and then on the street. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. As John says perfect love drives out fear but how many of us here have perfect love for the Lord Jesus Christ?

This passage has some incredible implications for death. Death may not be the worlds favourite topic but death is something which is not racist, sexist, or anything. It will take young or old, black or white, male or female, homosexual or heterosexual, pagan or Christian. The fact that Moses and Elijah were there talking to Jesus (they obviously knew who he was) means that death is not the end and that there is life after death and that who we are continues on. They had glorified bodies, but the essence of them, their spirit or soul or whatever you want to call it, was there. That is what could make Paul write that he desired to depart and be with Christ which is better by far. Oh death, where is your sting?

Conclusion:

The disciples kept this to themselves, and told no one at that time what they had seen. Do you blame them? John doesn't even mention the transfiguration in his gospel. And you? Do you really want the presence of God in your life in a tangible way? Or would you prefer if things stayed as they were?

