

# THE GLORY OF CHRIST

Luke 9:28-36

The Transfiguration of Our Lord (Series C)

March 2, 2025

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The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 9, verses 28 through 36. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 9, beginning at verse 28, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>28</sup> Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. <sup>29</sup> And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. <sup>30</sup> And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, <sup>31</sup> who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. <sup>32</sup> Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. <sup>33</sup> And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said. <sup>34</sup> As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. <sup>35</sup> And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!" <sup>36</sup> And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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There is a difference between who we want God to be and who God actually is. And this difference is as wide as the difference between glory and suffering. It is as wide as the difference between a splendid light and a gloomy shadow. It is as wide as the difference between the mountain of transfiguration and Mount Calvary. It's as wide as the difference between condemnation and forgiveness.

God can only be known through suffering. These are his terms. This is not the way we naturally think of God, and it's probably not what we want, especially according to our sinful natures. But this is how God has chosen to reveal himself. God can only be known through suffering.

Natural theology, which is guided, at least in part, by our sinful natures, thinks of God in terms of power and glory. And God, most certainly, is powerful and glorious. But this is not how he has chosen to be known, because to be known by his power and glory would mean instant and everlasting destruction. Instead, God has chosen to be known through suffering, which means everlasting redemption for all who know him through suffering.

God can only be known through suffering. And when we talk about knowing God, we mean a lot more than simply knowing *about* God. God's power and glory can be clearly seen in creation (Rom. 1:20). But perceiving these attributes by the natural order of the universe is a far cry from actually *knowing* God. If we look for God in powerful and glorious things, we might learn something *about* God. But if we look for God in suffering, then we will find the true God,

and we will know *him* as our crucified Savior. And this is a completely different kind of knowing. Knowing him as our crucified Savior is much, much different than knowing about his power and glory. Do you want to know *about* God? Or do you want to *know* him? We can only know him through suffering.

So consider the way you want God to be or the way you think he should be. And I don't mean, consider what Scripture tells you to believe about God. That, of course, is the way we should think. But where does your natural mind lead you? What are your desires for God? What do you want him to be? How do you think he should be? And the reason I want to consider this is so that we can contrast our desires with how God has actually revealed himself. Because, too often, our picture of God is based more on our natural reasoning, and less on the way God has truly revealed himself. And this occurs without us even realizing it.

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We crave a god of glory. The natural definition of God goes something like this: *God is the highest authority. He is the most powerful force in the universe. He's the one who doesn't have to answer to anyone. He's the one who gets his way and doesn't have to compromise with anyone else. He's the one who doesn't have to suffer. He's the one who gets to make the rules. He's the one who gets to punish anyone who breaks his rules. He possesses all glory, and he has the right to share that glory with whomever he wants.* We could call this a "theology of glory."

And this theology of glory always leads to a religion of works. If we want this god of glory to be pleased with us, then we should keep his rules. This is how we get to share in his glory. The funny thing is, we usually assume that his rules are a lot like ours. Whatever we think is good and just, we assume God must think the same way. So we end up with a god who rewards us for living the way we think we should live, so our glory depends on how well we live up to our own expectations. You might live up to your own expectations, or at least think you do, and this leads to pride. Or you might fall short of your own expectations, and this leads to despair. And the people who don't live the way we think they should ... well, our god will punish them. Our god has all glory, and if we're on his good side, then we will get glory too. This a "theology of glory."

But the true God has revealed himself in a different way. And we could call this "the theology of the cross." God has revealed himself in suffering. Now, he does possess the glory we crave, but that is hidden from us, at least most of the time. Instead, he has chosen to be revealed in suffering.

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You might think that the transfiguration of Jesus is an odd time to talk about this, because the transfiguration is the one time in Jesus' ministry where his divine glory shines through in a visible way. But when we actually take a look at this glorious event, we will see that it's really all about the disfiguration that will occur at the cross.

So let's take a look at this event. First, we should define what "transfiguration" means. This isn't a word that we normally use, because this sort of thing just doesn't happen in everyday life. "Transfiguration" means that Jesus' appearance changed. "The appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white" (9:29). For a brief moment, his divine glory and majesty shone through in a visible way. For nearly every moment of his earthly life, the glory and majesty of the deity was veiled by his human flesh. But for a few short moments on that mountain with Moses and Elijah, some of that divine glory shone through. I'm sure it looked miraculous, but the real miracle is that the divine glory was always there, but Jesus kept it hidden within his human flesh. So that's the transfiguration. It's a brief glimpse of Jesus' divine glory.

But why does Jesus give Peter, John, and James this sneak peek? It's really helpful to understand the context of the book of Luke. Chapter 9 is a turning point in the book. The first eight and a half chapters reveal who Jesus is. We see his miracles. We listen to his teaching. We learn that Jesus is the Son of God. But chapter 9 is a turning point. Jesus finally asks his disciples, "'Who do you say that I am?'" And Peter answered, 'The Christ of God.'" That's chapter 9, verse 20. If you have a Bible handy, take a look so you can see what I'm talking about. And it is at this point that Jesus reveals to his disciples that he "must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (9:21). Everything up to this point in Jesus' ministry reveals who he is: the Christ and the Son of God. Once his disciples confess this, Jesus pivots to what he must do as the Christ and the Son of God. The first eight and a half chapters are Jesus' epiphany season. The rest of the book is his Lenten season, where he turns his face toward the cross (9:51).

The disciples don't really like this. This comes through a little bit in Luke, but it comes through especially clearly in Matthew and Mark. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record this exact same sequence of events, where Jesus asks his disciples who he is, Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God, then Jesus predicts his crucifixion and resurrection, he also commands them to take up their crosses and follow him, and then comes the transfiguration (Matt. 16:13-17:13; Mark 8:27-9:13; Luke 9:18-36). Matthew and Mark record more of the disciples' opposition to Jesus' prediction of the cross. Peter actually pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him (Matt. 16:22; Mark 8:32). That's a really bold thing to do right after you confess this guy to be the Son of God (Matt. 16:16). The disciples were theologians of glory. They wanted to see Jesus in his glory, or at least they thought they did. And they wanted to share in his glory. That's what they were in this for. After the transfiguration, Jesus would predict his crucifixion two more times (9:44; 18:31-33). And right after the second prediction, they argued amongst themselves about who was the greatest (9:46). They did not understand why Jesus would be crucified, and they did not accept it. They were expecting Jesus to establish a glorious kingdom on earth, and they wanted seats of power and glory in this kingdom. That's their desire for Jesus.

It's so ironic that they believe Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God, but they refuse to listen to him when he tells them what he must do. They confess him to be God, but they refuse to accept what he says. They still want him to be the god of their imaginations. Of course, we do this too. We confess Jesus to be the Christ and the Son of God, but then we fashion him after our own imaginations. We still try to set the terms for who we want God to be. But God will have none of this. His will is to be known through suffering.

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The transfiguration is all about the disfiguration Jesus will suffer at the cross. This is what Jesus is talking about with Moses and Elijah. It's always interesting to notice the different little details that the gospel writers include. Luke is the only gospel to tell us what Jesus was talking about with Moses and Elijah. They "spoke of his *exodus*, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (9:31). Most translations say, "They spoke of his *departure*." And that's a fair translation. But the actual word here is "exodus" (ἐξοδος). And it's supposed to make us remember the Exodus from the Old Testament.

So let's hop in our way back Old Testament machine for a moment. The Exodus is the big salvation story in the Old Testament, much like how Jesus' death and resurrection is the big salvation story in the New Testament. The Exodus is the story of how God redeemed the people

of Israel from slavery in Egypt and brought them into a new land. He sent plagues on Egypt to help drive the people out of Egypt. He instituted the Passover so that the people could paint the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and be spared from the final plague: the death of the firstborn. He opened the Red Sea so that the people could finally escape from Egypt. Then the LORD led them in the wilderness for forty years, miraculously providing for all their needs, and he settled them in a new land, driving out the inhabitants before them. It's the story of how Israel became God's own people. Before the Exodus, they were slaves in Egypt. They belonged to Pharaoh. After the Exodus, they belonged to God. It's how he bought them. It's how he redeemed them. In a prophetic sense, they passed through death and into life. So the word "exodus," especially when it's used in the Bible, means much more than simply a departure. Even more important than what God brought the people out of is what he brought them into. He brought them out of Egypt, and into a new land. He brought them out of Pharaoh's oppressive authority, and into his gracious authority. He redeemed them out of the house of slavery, and made them heirs in his kingdom. And it was not the people of Israel who accomplished this Exodus, but the LORD.

So when Moses and Elijah are speaking with Jesus about his Exodus, they're not really talking about Jesus' departure. It's not like Jesus is just going away. Even when Jesus does finally ascend into heaven, he still promises to be with us until the end of the age (Matt. 28:20). No. Moses and Elijah were talking about the redemption Jesus was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. That's his Exodus. That's his journey. From this point in *The Gospel of Luke*, Jesus is on a journey to Jerusalem and the cross. There he suffers as both the firstborn and as the Lamb of God. He does this to redeem us out of slavery to sin, death, and the devil, and to make us heirs with him in his kingdom. Jesus' Exodus is the redemption he accomplished by his disfiguration at the cross and his resurrection from the dead.

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Peter and the other disciples slept through most of this discussion. But they woke up in time to see Jesus' glory. And when Moses and Elijah start to leave, Peter suggests that they should make three tents, one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus. I suppose part of this is that Peter doesn't want them to leave, and he really doesn't want Jesus' transfiguration to end. This is the glory he's been craving. But he's also terrified of this glory. This is one of the details we pick up from Mark's gospel (9:6). It's kind of like the tabernacle during the Exodus. The word Peter uses for "tent" actually means "tabernacle" (σκηνή). During the Exodus, God took the form of a cloud as he led the people through the Red Sea, and as he led them through the wilderness for forty years. And whenever they stopped to set up camp, which they did quite a bit, the cloud settled in the tabernacle. This was God's dwelling place during the Exodus. So the LORD could be present with them without terrifying them by his presence. And this is what Peter wanted to do with Jesus when he was shining with glory. He wanted that glory to stay, but he also needed a shield from it.

But as Peter was speaking, "A cloud came and overshadowed them" (9:34). Remember the cloud from the Exodus? This is that same cloud. "And they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud saying, 'This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!'" (9:34-35).

Imagine how Peter, John, and James must have felt in that moment. If they were afraid before, this must have been a new level of fear, the kind that mortals don't have a strong enough word for. The glory and terror of the transfiguration intensify until God the Father finally speaks. And it's an echo of what he spoke at Jesus' Baptism. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record both

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the Baptism and the transfiguration of Jesus. And they all record God the Father's words at both events. The transfiguration is an echo of Jesus' Baptism, but there are a couple slight differences. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include this addition at the end. God the Father says, regarding Jesus, "Listen to him!"

Why does he say this? It seems pretty obvious already that they should listen to Jesus. But remember, they were not listening to him. This was the part of Jesus' ministry where he started to talk about the cross. His disciples didn't understand, and they refused to accept it. So Jesus leads them up on this mountain. There he shows them a glimpse of his glory, and it terrifies them. Then the Father comes. He dials up the glory meter, and with it he dials up the fear. And when the glory and the fear are most intense, which must still be only a fraction of God's actual glory, he says, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!"

Then it ends. The cloud is gone. Moses and Elijah are gone. It's just Jesus, looking like he did before. That divine glory is still there, but Jesus resumes the miracle of veiling it behind his human flesh. He appears again as a humble man on a journey to his death. Peter, John, and James thought they wanted to see the glory of God. But they learned they couldn't handle it.

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God can only be known through suffering. If God were to make himself known to us through his glory, and I mean his pure glory, without the veil of human flesh, and without the covering of a cloud, it would mean instant and eternal death for us. So he graciously spares us from what we want. Instead, he reveals himself in a way we don't really want, but the only way that can save us. He reveals himself in suffering. We can only know God through Jesus. No one has ever seen God, but the Son, who is true God, has made him known (John 1:18). We can only know the Father through the Son, who suffered for us (John 14:6-11).

This is how God has chosen to reveal himself. The Son of God has revealed himself through suffering. This is actually the clearest picture of God. It's even clearer than the transfiguration. Because at the cross, the primary attribute of God is front and center: love. God is love (1 John 4:8). So he reveals himself in suffering. He suffers for us in order to forgive us. This is God, not as we imagine him, but as he truly is. And this is his true glory. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.