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Matthew 17:1-9:

## **Glory That Goes to the Grave**

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## **Glory That Goes to the Grave**

### **Matthew 17:1-9**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,

Few pleasures match up to a good vacation. The recharging of batteries for many is essential to getting back to the mundane of our vocations in daily life. Vacations just hit us differently as we get to try new things, explore new areas, and get a breath of fresh air from what otherwise consumes the days of our lives. For me, the best vacation is an umbrella, a towel, and an ice-cold drink on the beach. For others, it's the fun of a theme park like Disneyland or the thrill of seeing some of the wonders of the world, like the Grand Canyon or Yellowstone. Though nothing beats the sound of the ocean waves, I don't mind those either! No matter what strikes you as peak enjoyment, there is a familiar feeling that can almost ruin a good vacation if you take it too far. It's the dread that no matter what, all good things must come to an end.

Our things from home must eventually be packed back into the suitcase. We must eventually say goodbye to the beach or the theme park. The national park must be reduced to good memories, a few pictures, and maybe a couple of souvenirs. And sometimes, on that last evening, as the sun is setting and the air is just right, someone will say what everyone is already thinking: "I wish we could just stay." We linger a little longer by delaying the packing. We try to stretch the moment, but no matter what, the morning comes anyway. There is a plane to catch, or the car must be loaded. No matter how beautiful the view is, this life does not allow us to live on vacation.

### **I. Wanting Glory to Stay**

That instinct to stay stuck in the best moments and keep them from fading is not just something we feel on a beach or at a theme park. It is something we feel whenever we get a glimpse of something truly glorious. And that is exactly what happens on the mountain of the Transfiguration.

As we read the words of the apostle Peter and his desire to stay in the moment, we find that it is something we can relate to as well. Peter says, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." While there is some theological debate over his intentions, it seems safe to conclude that Peter simply did not want the most glorious moment he had yet seen in his life to come to an end. So, in his Peter way, he speaks up in a moment that he should have just witnessed in reverence and awe. As the Lutheran commentator R. C. H. Lenski observes (and here this quote is condensed and paraphrased for clarity),

"It is, of course, like Peter to speak when he should have kept still. What he says is valuable in one respect. He feels it 'excellent' to be here (a better translation than 'good'). In its original language, this word is especially expressive. Peter felt as though he and his fellow disciples were very near to Heaven. Peter's one desire is to prolong this experience."

No vacation can compare to what the disciples must have felt as they looked upon the majesty of our Lord. The Lord had once told Moses, "You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." Yet here, on this mountain, they are granted a veiled glimpse of divine splendor. It is not the full blaze of Heavenly glory, but it is enough to overwhelm them. It is a foretaste of the life to come, when faith will give way to sight, and we will behold Christ in His fullness.

And that is precisely why Peter wants to stay. If this is what heaven feels like, why not set up tents to stay? If this is what glory looks like, why leave? From a purely human perspective, Peter's instinct makes sense. Who would willingly trade glory and light for the darkness? Who would choose suffering over splendor? But the mountain of Transfiguration was never meant to be a permanent dwelling. The glory revealed there was not an escape from what was to come, but rather, it was preparation for it.

## **II. Glory That Refuses to Avoid the Cross**

What makes this moment even more striking is its place in the Gospel account. Only days earlier, Peter had pulled Jesus aside and rebuked Him for speaking about His suffering and death. As written in Matthew 16, Peter says,

“Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” But He (Jesus) turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

The thought of a Messiah who would go to a cross was unbearable to Peter. And now, on the mountain, he speaks with ignorance again. This time, he does not openly object to the cross, but his instinct is the same: stay in the light and preserve the glory. This is deliberate. The disciple who resisted the grave now tries to remain on the mountain. In both moments, Peter is expressing the very human desire for a Christ without a cross. But the glory revealed on the mountain is not given to replace the cross. It is given to reveal who it is that walks toward it.

We don't think about it often, but both believers and unbelievers alike may tend to resist the cross and the glory that is to come. We don't often stop to consider it, but we, too, can be like Peter. We may never dare to say it out loud as he once did, but this doubt and fear show themselves in subtler forms. We want a Christianity that comforts without confronting, that promises Heaven without first exposing our sin, that offers strength without first bringing us to weakness. We prefer the glory that is on top of the mountain over the descent or the climb that involves the exposure that comes from the Law of God.

It is abrupt and often unnoticed, but Peter's concern for the situation only stands in the way. And often, our earthly concerns that are not grounded in the Word of God stand in the way too. More important things are going on. The cloud overshadows them, and the Father speaks. The text says,

“He (Peter) was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him.’”

Peter's concern, no matter how sincere it may have been by human logic, only stands in the way. His instinct is to hold the glory in place, but this glory has somewhere to go.

The disciples would soon see their Lord arrested, beaten, mocked, and crucified. Everything about His mission would appear like weakness and defeat. So, before they witnessed the point of His humiliation, they were allowed to see His majesty. The Transfiguration reminds the disciples and us of this truth: the One who will soon hang on the cross is, in fact, the one who will bring about the salvation of our souls. The Lord Jesus Christ is not a helpless victim but the beloved Son of the Father who refuses to avoid the cross. And He does this purely out of love for us. As described in Hebrews 12, Jesus is “the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

### III. Tents Are Being Made for Us

Peter wanted to build tents on the mountain. He desired to build small shelters to preserve a passing glimpse of Heaven. Peter, the one who stood so confidently here, would soon deny Christ three times. But while Peter was thinking about building something for Jesus, Jesus ignored his offer because He was already determined to build something for Peter, for you, and for me.

The glory that shone on that mountain, that confirmed Christ as the fulfillment of Law and Prophecy by the presence of Moses and Elijah, had been sent into the flesh to overturn human expectations. He willingly walked down the hard and terrible road of suffering for the entire world. Christ goes to the grave, and this is the heart of the Gospel. It is not only to suffer and to die, but to rise again, ascend into Heaven, and as Christ Himself says, "... (to) go and prepare a place for you. (John 14)"

The One whom the Father declared "well pleased" would soon suffer the punishment that our rebellion against God deserves; this was all part of the divine plan set in place before any of us were conceived. Christ went willingly to the grave for us. And when that glory entered the grave, it was not swallowed by it. On the third day, the same Jesus whose face once shone like the sun walked out of the tomb alive. The grave did not conquer glory, but glory conquered the grave.

Even though we may think like Peter, Christ was not interested in preserving a glimpse of Heaven on earth for a few disciples or even for us. He was intent on opening Heaven for sinners by His own righteousness, death, and resurrection. The tents Peter imagined would have sheltered three men for a short time, like a lovely vacation in an otherwise dreadful world. But the cross and the empty tomb secure an eternal dwelling for all who believe.

And now, even as we walk through a world still marked by suffering, even as we face our own crosses and the grave remains a reality in this fallen creation, we do not walk toward it alone or without hope. As Hebrews 12 continues, "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted."

So, when we hear of Christ's glory in the transfiguration, we do not say, "Let us build tents and stay here." We say instead, "Thanks be to God that He did not stay." He came down the mountain. He walked to Jerusalem. He went to the cross. He entered the grave. And He rose again. The **Glory That Goes to the Grave** has made a place for us that will never end. There will be no packing, no departure, no fading moment to preserve. We will be home.

Amen.

Pastor Lucas Abbott