

January 22, 2017

Suffering Servant, Sovereign Lord Coming Down From the Mountain

Mark 9:14 – 50

Oswald Chambers writes that, *"It is a wonderful thing to be on the mountain with God, but a person only gets there so that he may later go down and lift up the demon-possessed people in the valley. We are not made for the mountains, for sunrises, or for the other beautiful attractions in life— those are simply intended to be moments of inspiration. We are made for the valley and the ordinary things of life, and that is where we have to prove our stamina and strength."*¹ Last week we were on the mountain with Jesus and Peter and James and John, and to echo Peter's words, *'...we were eyewitnesses of His majesty'*. We saw Jesus transfigured on the mountain, the glory of God radiating from His very being, and we saw Him speaking with Moses and Elijah, talking about His coming exodus, and we heard the voice of the Majestic Glory out of heaven saying, *'This is My beloved Son; listen to Him'*.

And one of the things we should understand about this is that we all desperately need mountaintop experiences. We need to come to the place where Jesus is transfigured before us, and we start to see who He really is. We may, like Peter, not truly understand what we're looking at, but nevertheless that glimpse of glory will utterly change us. I believe that mountain top experience was one of the things that helped keep Peter's faith from ultimately failing even when he denied that he ever knew Jesus. I believe even in his darkest moments of despair, he remembered that mountain and the glory of God surrounding them and the revelation of who Jesus really was. I believe that when Jesus prayed for Peter that his faith wouldn't fail, He prayed something like, *"Father, remind Peter of that mountain. Remind him of the glory. Remind him of who I am. Let him hear Your voice again, 'This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased'"*.

Now I've never had quite the mountain top experience Peter, James and John had, but I have had several significant encounters with the risen Christ throughout my life. Perhaps the most vivid was an experience I had at one of the Bible camps we used to attend when I was a youngster. I was probably about 10 or so, and one night during the chapel service, I had an experience unlike any I've ever had. I can't remember the speaker, or the message, or what went on during the service. What I do remember however, is that at some point near the end, it was as if the whole room began glowing brighter than the day, and people around me were singing, and praying and weeping, on their knees and on the floor and up at the altar. The whole room pulsed with a kind of heavenly sensation and the presence of God was thick around me. Now I had come into the chapel with some of my friends, and at that age you are extremely self-aware and always worried about how you look to your friends. But looking back on that time, I couldn't tell you who those guys were or what happened to them because I was caught up in a massive tide of the very love of God that threatened to sweep me utterly away. That night, I saw the risen Christ and that experience changed me and has stayed with me in a way very little else has.

¹ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, October 1, (Barbour, Ohio, 1963)

But after camp was over, it was back down into the valley of the demon-possessed people. We need that wonderful mountain top experience, but as Oswald Chambers said, *"It is a wonderful thing to be on the mountain with God...[but]...We are made for the valley and the ordinary things of life.* It is in the valley and the ordinary things of life that the reality of the experience on the mountain is worked into our lives. God doesn't intend for us to stay on the mountain. He brings us back to where people live their lives so that we might serve those devastated by the ravages of sin. He brings us into the valley of despair to bring hope and healing through the gospel to the broken and sin-sick inhabitants. And what this text tells us this morning is what we need as His agents of redemptive love to live in the valley. I think Mark gives us the broad outlines of six things we need when we come down off the mountain: a posture of prayer; an unswerving obedience to God; joyful service to others; generous acceptance of one another; a ruthlessness toward sin; and a steadfast perseverance.

Look at the first thing that happens when they come down off the mountain. *14 And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. 15 And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. 16 And he asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" 17 And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. 18 And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able."* The first thing they face is an impossible situation. There's a boy who is demon-possessed and the disciples are unable to do anything about it. They had been given the power to cast out demons back in chapter 6, but here they are impotent. They're powerless. And instead of looking around for Jesus, they get into an argument with the scribes, no doubt over the correct way to exorcise a demon.

And Jesus' response gives us a clue to their trouble: *19 And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me."* Faithless generation. Jesus was not just making a general statement about the condition of Israel's unbelief but rather His disciple's unbelief. And it seems to be true that whenever the disciples are separated from Jesus, they get into trouble. This issue of faith is further emphasized when Jesus confronts the father of the boy who begs Him to do something if He can. Jesus replies and says, *"If you can! All things are possible for one who believes."* And *"Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!"* You see, the key is not the depth of our faith but the direction of our faith. Although his faith was nearly non-existent, this desperate father was looking in the right direction. His eyes were fixed on Jesus.

Furthermore, look at his prayer: *'I know I don't have enough faith, help me have faith'.* You have to admire his honesty here. 'I know my faith is weak and full of holes. But you are the only one who can do anything. If you don't do something my son will die. Help me in spite of me'. We need to let our weakness drive us to Jesus' strength. Everything is dependent upon the object of our faith, not the quality of our faith. A little faith in a great Savior is miraculous in its effects.

And Jesus responds to this man's prayer for more faith by healing his son. *25 And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."* But the lesson for His disciples wasn't over. *28 And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?"* That is the big question. Why did it work before, and it's not working now? No doubt they had had success back in chapter 6 and seen the demons cast out. But it's not happening here. And Jesus responds by saying, *"This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."* What was Jesus saying here?

At the risk of reducing this to a sound bite, what Jesus was saying essentially was "**No prayer, no power.**" In direct response to the question, 'Why couldn't we cast the demon out?' Jesus says, 'You have a serious lack of prayer. The demon is in too deep. You've come up against a powerful spiritual force and you're powerless to do anything because your prayerlife is bankrupt'. Was He saying they hadn't prayed over the boy? Probably not. After all, Jesus doesn't pray at all. He simply commands. The only one who prays here is the father of the boy. And guess what? His prayer is answered. I think the point of Jesus' word here is not that His disciples didn't pray over the boy, but there was a serious lack of prayer in their lives that was exposed by the situation. In other words, they weren't prayed up. When the crisis hit, their deficiency was exposed.

You see, in the valley of the demon-possessed, the first thing we need is a posture of prayer. Prayer says 'Everything depends on Jesus. If He moves, things happen. If He acts, people get saved, people get healed, things change. If He breaks the chains I am set free.' Whenever we act and move in our own strength and pride and self-sufficiency, we lose the battle. In a very real sense, faith is exercised through prayer. And it is a posture of prayer that is necessary in the valley. That is how Jesus lived. He was always in prayer. It seems that whenever Jesus went missing, the disciples found Him out somewhere praying. But the disciples had been caught out in a state of prayerlessness. They weren't in a posture of prayer. They had done this demon thing before and thought they had it handled. And they failed spectacularly. The question is, are you living a life empowered by you, or by prayer? If we are generally prayerless, we are generally powerless.

In the valley we need a posture of prayer, and we need an unswerving obedience to God. Mark tells us that they left that place and passed through Galilee and he was teaching His disciples, *"saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." 32 But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him."* As we've seen, the disciples idea of the mission of the Messiah, and Jesus' idea, were rather incompatible. They visualized a conquering king, He was headed for execution. And they really didn't want to hear anything about it. They were afraid to ask. Their policy was 'Don't ask – don't tell'.

But it was the Father's good will that Jesus go to the cross, and everything in His life was bent on obeying that will. Everything Jesus did, everything Jesus said, was in relationship to the will of His Father. His obedience to that will was to the death. Luke draws on Isaiah's prophecy of the Messiah to tell us that when it was time for Him to head to the cross, He **set His face** to go to Jerusalem. In Isaiah, it is even stronger, *"I have set My face like flint"*.

Jesus was dedicated to one thing in His life, to do the will of the Father; all the way to the end where we hear Him say, "Not my will but Yours be done". His whole life was about that and He's trying to get that across to His disciples. He is going to be delivered up into the hands of evil men because it is the Father's will that His Son would die so that we would not. We should never fear that what our loving Father has in store for us would ever be ultimately bad for us. His will for us is perfect in every way and we can trust Him.

Living in the valley also means a life of service to others. *33 And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" 34 But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. 35 And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."* It is ironic that these guys who utterly failed with the demon-possessed boy were now arguing about who is the greatest. I can imagine Jesus trying really hard to keep a straight face here. These guys think the kingdom is all about prominence and prestige but Jesus bursts their bubble by telling them it is all about service. He says, 'You want greatness? Become the servant of all. Take the last place.' He doesn't chastise them about aspiring to greatness, **but He redefines what it means.** 'You want to be great? Be great in things that matter to God, not to men'.

And then He does what He often does, He gives them an object lesson. *36 And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, 37 "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."* Jesus picks up a child who happens to be standing around and essentially says, 'Treat those who don't have any standing in this world as worthy of special care'. Now children in those times really had no standing in the culture. It may have been due to the fact that the mortality rate among children was so high that you really didn't develop a relationship with them given the fact that so many died before they became adults. It was definitely not a child-centered culture like we have today. And Jesus tells them 'If you hold ones like these in high esteem, if you receive them, you receive Me. And even more, you are receiving the Father who sent Me'. He was not just talking about children here. He was talking about all those who are marginalized and outcast in society.

Jesus points the way to real greatness: die to yourself, serve others, care for those rejected by everyone else. Receive them in Jesus name and you receive Jesus Himself. And you receive the Father. The way up is down. The way in is out. The way to get is to give. The way to be first is to be last. The road to glory is the road of suffering. The kingdom of God deals with that arrogant pride in every one of us that wants to be first, wants to be prominent, wants to be recognized. And the way it deals with that is that it makes everyone in the kingdom a deacon, a waiter on tables, serving those who have nothing to offer, no advantage to give, spending yourself for those need care, those who are a burden. It is service to others that frees us from ourselves. It gets our eyes off of our issues and onto the things that concern the Lord. Service to others is divine therapy for the insidious selfishness that sucks the life out of faith.

Living in the valley also means we need to be generous in our acceptance of one another. **38** *John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."* **39** *But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me."* **40** *For the one who is not against us is for us.* **41** *For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.* **42** *"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea."* There is a tendency within us to circle the wagons around our stuff. It is rather mind-boggling to see how these failed demon deliverers tried to put the kibosh on guys who were actually having some success here. But isn't it just like us to harbor envy and jealousy toward the success of others?

In Christian circles the first thing we do is we demonize their methods. 'We tried to stop them because they're not doing it like we do'. A woman came up to D. L. Moody once after one of his evangelistic meetings to complain and said. "Mr. Moody, I don't like the way you do evangelism!" "Well, ma'am, let me ask you, how do you do it?" Moody asked. She replied, "I don't!" Moody responded, "Well, I like my way of doing it better than your way of not doing it!" And I wonder why Jesus didn't ask His disciples when they complained, 'And how was your way of casting out demons working out for you there?' But Jesus is more generous than I am. What He says is 'Don't try to stop him. Rather, you stop what you're doing!' If demons are leaving under this man's ministry, it is by the power of God, not by any method or practice, or community affiliation, and it is evidence of the call of God on his life. Help him. Don't hinder him. Rejoice with him. Don't rebuke him. Because it is clear from the context that Jesus considers this someone a believer; and you despise a fellow believer at your own peril. In fact, Jesus says that its better for you to go swimming in the ocean with cement shoes than to despise one of these.

Living in the valley of the demon-possessed requires a certain ruthlessness toward sin. Listen to how Jesus puts it: **43** *And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.* **45** *And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell.* **47** *And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell,* **48** *'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'* Jesus is not telling us that heaven will be full of one-eyed, one-handed, monopods. Jesus is telling us that a saving faith is an intentional faith. It is an active faith. It is a warrior faith. It will fight the battle against sin with a deadly ruthlessness.

What does that mean? What does it mean to fight against sin? What does it mean to cut it off or pluck it out? What it doesn't mean is that the hand is the problem or the foot or the eye. Think about it. If my right hand causes me to sin and I cut it off, what about the left? Am I to suppose that one is fully sanctified? Or if my right eye causes me to lust, will it help to put it out? Would my lust problem be solved for good if I were simply blind? Are we to think blind people incapable of lust?

What Jesus is telling us here is that just as our eyes represent what we see and our hands represent what we do and our feet represent where we go, we need to deal ruthlessly with what we expose our eyes to, what we allow our hands to do, where we allow our feet to go. In other words, we need to take radical, even ruthless, steps away from sin and temptation. John Owen said it best, "*Be killing sin or it will be killing you.*" Unless we are ruthless with ourselves in regards to sin and the temptations to sin, we may find ourselves one day in hell. And I'm not talking about hell on earth. I'm talking about the hell Jesus talks about here and in many other places in the gospels.

It is a place '*where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.*' The word Jesus uses here is 'Gehenna' which was an actual valley south of Jerusalem where King Ahaz and Manasseh offered child sacrifices to the pagan god Molech. It was declared unclean by King Josiah during the reformation of the kingdom under him and became the place to burn garbage and dispose of corpses. It was a place of continually burning fires. It became a symbol of final judgment on the wicked, and it is described in the Bible as the place of unquenchable fire, a lake of fire and brimstone, an eternal fire, a furnace of fire, the outer darkness and the place of eternal punishment. In other words, hell is very real, very long and very hot.

Perhaps no other doctrine in the Bible is less taught on today than this one. And perhaps no other doctrine is as guaranteed to diminish the popularity of the preacher as the topic of eternal punishment. R.C. Sproul commented that '***I can't think of anything more politically incorrect to preach in 21st century America than the wrath of God, or the justice of God or the doctrine of Hell.***'² Most people today just want the pleasant bits of the gospel and prefer not hearing about the certainty of the punishment of those who reject God and reject His Son. Clark Pinnock, a Canadian theologian who considered himself an evangelical Christian, once wrote, "*It just does not make any sense to say that a God of love will torture people forever for sins done in the context of a finite life. . . . It's time for evangelicals to come out and say that the biblical and morally appropriate doctrine of hell is annihilation, not everlasting torment.*"³

The pastor of Spring Branch Community Church in Virginia Beach, Michael Simone believes the people who come to his church want to know how to improve their lives, their marriages. He says preaching a sermon like "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" wouldn't work today, when most Americans seemingly have it all. "*Today, I think the title of that sermon would be, 'I Went on Vacation and Felt Empty Inside,'*" he said.⁴ This is not a comfortable doctrine for many people. Let's just talk about love and light and social justice and feeding the hungry, helping the poor and loving your enemies. And we need to do that. But the context is very important. None of those things stand on their own. The impending weight of eternity is in everything we do.

2 <http://www.cbn.com/cbnnews/us/2007/March/Most-Dont-Believe-in-Hell/?Print=true>

3 Clark Pinnock and Delwin Brown, *Theological Crossfire: An Evangelical/Liberal Dialogue* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990], pp. 226-227)

4 <http://www.amightywind.com/hell/nolongerpc.htm>

Randy Alcorn said, *'If Christ's crucifixion and resurrection didn't deliver us from an eternal Hell, His work on the cross is less heroic, less potent, less consequential and thus less deserving of our worship and praise'*.⁵ And Jesus is saying that in light of eternal consequences, it matters how we deal with sin in our lives. Be ruthless in your fight against everything that would take you away from the presence of God.

Finally, in the valley we need a steadfast perseverance. **49** *For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.*" Jesus begins this by saying everyone will be salted with fire. And it is clear from the context that He is talking about everyone, not just His disciples. Everyone gets salted by fire. And because salt's main use in that world was for preservation, Jesus is saying that this salting by fire will be in a manner consistent with your relationship to Christ. For unbelievers who reject Christ, it will be the everlasting fires of final judgment in hell. But for those who embrace Christ, it will be the preserving and refining fires of trials and suffering that mark the road to glory.

Everyone Jesus says will be salted with fire. In other words, the fires of affliction and suffering will come into every life in some way. But in some the fire will consume them in frustration and failure; and in some it will burn away the dross and perfect them. This language of the refining and perfecting that goes on in a believers life is all throughout Scripture. In Malachi 3 we read, *"Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. 2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD."*⁶

There's a story about a man who went to see a silversmith one day. As he watched him work, the silversmith held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were hottest as to burn away all the impurities. The man thought about God holding us in such a hot spot; then he thought again about the verse that says: *'He sits as a refiner and purifier of silver.'* He asked the silversmith if it was true that he had to sit there in front of the fire the whole time the silver was being refined. The man answered that yes, he not only had to sit there holding the silver, but he had to keep his eyes on the silver the entire time it was in the fire. If the silver was left a moment too long in the flames, it would be destroyed. The man was silent for a moment. Then he asked the silversmith, 'How do you know when the silver is fully refined?' He smiled at him and answered, *'Oh, that's easy — when I see my face in it.'*

We need a steadfast perseverance in the face of this refining fire, knowing that the great silversmith knows exactly how long to hold us in the flame, and that His purposes for us are for our great good and His great glory.

⁵ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*, (Tynedale, 2004), 25.

⁶ Malachi 3:1-3 ESV

"It is a wonderful thing to be on the mountain with God, but a person only gets there so that he may later go down and lift up the demon-possessed people in the valley." This is what it means to follow Jesus. He came down from heaven's mountain to the valley of the demon-possessed to rescue those devastated by the ravages of sin. He lived a life of constant dependance and unswerving obedience to the Father, spending His life in joyful service to others, setting His face like flint toward the cross to deliver us and bring us to God, and He calls us to follow in His footsteps.

Our gracious heavenly Father,

Thank You for the mountain top. Thank You for granting us soul-satisfying glimpses of You on the heights that sustain us in the valley. Help us to follow in Jesus' steps. Remind us of Your glory when we are tempted to despair. Let our weakness drive us to Your strength. Help us aspire to greatness in the things that matter to You, and to spend our lives in service to others and not ourselves. Help us be ruthless toward the sin that so easily entangles us and to persevere in the purifying flames of Your love until it is Your image You see in us, we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.