

Luke 9:18-50: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 9 verses 18 to 50. And he said to all, But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.
- Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And as he was praying the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white.
- And behold two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 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. 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. As he was saying these things a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud.
- [1 : 5 7] And a voice came out of the cloud saying, This is my son, my chosen one. Listen to him. 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.
- On the next day when they had come down from the mountain a great crowd met him. And behold a man from the crowd cried out, Teacher I beg you to look at my son for he is my only child.
- And behold a spirit seizes him and he suddenly cries out. It convulses him so that he foams at the mouth and shatters him and will hardly leave him. And I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.
- Jesus answered, O faithless and twisted generation, How long am I to be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here. While he was coming the demon threw him to the ground and convulsed him.
- But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and healed the boy and gave him back to his father. And all were astonished at the majesty of God. But while they were all marveling at everything he was doing, Jesus said to his disciples, Let these words sink into your ears.
- [3 : 0 3] The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men. But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.
- An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side, and said to them, Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.
- For he who is least among you all is the one who is great. John answered, Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.

But Jesus said to him, Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you. After the feeding of the 5,000 in Luke chapter 9, Jesus asks his disciples who people say that he is.

The crowd seemed to identify him with John the Baptist, with Elijah or one of the prophets. Jesus' ministry very naturally follows from that of John the Baptist, and it's not surprising that there will be seen to be some resemblances.

[4 : 09] Herod the Tetrarch was already speculating about that connection. Like Elijah and John, Jesus spends much of his time at the moment in the wilderness. Peter, however, confesses that Jesus is the Christ, he's the anointed one, he's the awaited Messiah.

The disciples are strictly charged not to tell this to anyone. The time will come when they will do so, but that time is not yet. And here we reach a turning point in the narrative. The first phase of Jesus' ministry began with the testimony of John the Baptist, and then his baptism, in which the Father testified to him and the Spirit descended upon him.

That phase ended with a cluster of events. It ended with the death of John the Baptist, and speculation about Jesus being John the Baptist raised from the dead. Also with a commissioning of the disciples.

Now the second phase of Jesus' ministry, as he moves towards Jerusalem, begins with the testimony of Peter, that he is the Christ of God. Then the testimony of the Father in the transfiguration, which corresponds to the baptism.

And then that leads up to his own death and resurrection, and a second sending out of the twelve. And here Jesus announces the fact of his forthcoming death. A great shadow is coming over the story at this point.

[5 : 21] There have been veiled foreshadowings of Christ's death before this, but now it has been made more explicit. Jesus teaches his disciples about his forthcoming death in considerable detail.

Not only will he be raised, he'll be raised on the third day. Jesus doesn't explicitly seem to mention the manner of his death here, but immediately afterwards it's followed by a statement concerning those who would follow, that they must take up their crosses and follow him.

It can be very easy for us to forget the force of the symbol of the cross. The cross was not just a generic form of execution. It was a gruesome instrument of torture and public humiliation, and to take up your cross was to mark yourself out as a condemned man or woman.

An outcast of society to be scorned and humiliated. Willingly to take up such a thing would be to deny and resist every screaming instinct of self-preservation. Not merely our desire to avoid pain, but our desire to avoid being ashamed.

The humiliation of being made a public display in your agony and nakedness. We all want to save our lives, but Christ says that those who want to save their lives must lose them.

[6 : 30] Taking up the cross is not an optional thing to do. Our very lives must be held with an open hand, as we live like those condemned to death. There is a stark underlying choice.

Who are we ashamed of? Are we ashamed of the person that we are called to follow? The one who calls us to follow after him in bearing the shame? The one who calls us to take up our cross as he has taken up his cross?

Or are we ashamed of the world that rejects him? Ashamed of our sin? Ashamed of the things that tether us to this order? This order of shameful rebellion? Shame stands opposed to the concept of glory.

And there is going to be a revelation of glory. The glory of Christ as he comes with the holy angels. And Jesus teaches his disciples that those who are ashamed of him in that day will find themselves put to shame when his glory appears.

Jesus says to them that some of them will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God. And the various forms of this statement in the Gospels are each followed by the event of the transfiguration.

[7 : 32] There seems to be some connection between that statement and the event of the transfiguration. However, I don't believe that the transfiguration is the fulfilment of this statement. For one, it might seem rather strange to talk about some people not dying before an event that takes place only eight days later.

Rather, I believe that it refers to the events of AD 70 and the revelation of Christ's kingdom and power at that point. Part of the background here could be seen in passages such as Daniel chapter 7.

However, the transfiguration is an anticipation of the later coming of Christ. It's a trailer, as it were, for a later feature presentation. The transfiguration is a privileged preview of the reality of the resurrected Christ, the ascended Christ, and also the glory of the later coming of Christ.

In 2 Peter chapter 1 verses 16 to 18, the Apostle Peter speaks about this. In the event of the transfiguration, we're seeing a number of different themes coming together.

Christ is the glorious last Adam and the second man. There are themes of Sinai. The theophany of Sinai is God's glory appeared on the mountain to Moses and his face shone.

[9 : 01] Here, Moses again appears on the mountain, as does Elijah, two people who witnessed glorious theophanic appearances of God in the Old Testament. Here, Christ's face, unlike that of Moses, shines with a light of its own, not merely a reflected light.

Sinai was also the place where they built the tabernacle. And Peter here wants to build three tabernacles for Elijah, for Jesus, and for Moses, not realizing that Jesus himself is God tabernacled among his people.

Finally, the law was given at Sinai. And here, instead of giving the law, God declares that his son is the one to listen to. As Hebrews chapter 1 verses 1 to 2 puts it, Long ago, at many times, and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.

But in these last days he has spoken to us by his son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. Beyond these connections and the presence of Moses, we might also think about what they're talking about.

Jesus is talking about the departure, or very literally, the exodus that he's about to accomplish at Jerusalem. In using the word exodus here, Luke makes clear to his reader that the events that are about to take place fulfill the meaning of the Passover and all the other events of the exodus.

[10 : 15] Christ is accomplishing a new deliverance for his people. I don't believe we should think of this exodus purely in terms of Christ's death either. The exodus is achieved in his death, his resurrection, his ascension, and in the gift of his spirit at Pentecost.

Indeed, these are events that can be mapped onto the Old Testament story of the exodus. The story of the Passover, the story of the crossing of the Red Sea, the story of the arrival at Sinai, and the gift of the law.

All of these things are fulfilled in Christ's work. Moses and Elijah appear alongside Christ, representing perhaps the law and the prophets, or the great witnesses, the wilderness forerunners.

Jesus only takes three of his disciples, the three core disciples, Peter, James, and John, with him up the mountain. They will witness things here that the others will not witness. However, what they witness will help them to understand what comes next.

The transfiguration will help them better to understand the cross. When they see the power and the glory of the heavenly high priest and his glorious robes, they will know that the events of the cross do not befall him unwillingly.

[11 : 18] Rather, he has taken up his cross. He has willingly walked towards this fate. He has purposefully determined this as his path. From the vantage point of the Mount of Transfiguration, we see a glimpse of the future, of the glorious King, who will one day display his glory in the coming of the kingdom.

There is also an unveiling of the past. Moses and Elijah appear with him as two witnesses. They are people whose ministry pointed forward to his, and in their appearance, we learn something more about the way that Christ relates to the Old Testament and the events within it.

In the glorious transfiguration of his face, we see something about the character of the appearances of God to his people in the Old Testament. In the Gospel of John, for instance, on a number of occasions, the glory of Christ is connected with Old Testament appearances of God's glory to his people.

Isaiah chapter 12, verse 41, connects the vision of Isaiah in the temple with a vision of Christ's glory. John chapter 1, verse 51, speaks of angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man, connecting Christ with the vision of Jacob in Jacob's ladder.

In verses 14 to 18 of chapter 1 of John, we're seeing a contrast and comparison between the glory of Christ and the glory witnessed by Moses on Mount Sinai, and the glory of the law.

[12 : 37] What we see on the Mount of Transfiguration, then, is an unveiling of the identity of the one who had appeared to Israel throughout its history. Moses saw his back on Mount Sinai. Isaiah saw the train of his robe filling the temple.

Ezekiel, in chapter 1 of his prophecy, described in the most elliptical way the lower parts of his appearance in bodily form. But now, on the Mount of Transfiguration, we see the face, and the face is that of Jesus Christ.

The glory of Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration, then, is a revelation that opens up history and its meaning, both the meaning of Israel's past and its anticipation of Christ's work, and in Christ's work in veiled form in the Old Testament, and the meaning of the future of Israel and the world, as the glorious King has seen in all of his splendour.

Following the majesty of the mountain appearance, there is a return to earth with a bump. Jesus had left the nine other disciples at the foot of the mountain, giving them the duty of looking after the people, and they had failed miserably in his absence.

We might think here of the example of Moses. Moses descends from Mount Sinai, where he has received the law, and he goes down to the people, who he had left in the charge of Aaron, and he sees that they've gone wild, and they've built a golden calf, and they're worshipping it.

[13 : 54] He casts the tablets of stone to the ground and shatters them, and the people are judged on that occasion. Here, I think, we're seeing much of the same thing. Jesus has left his disciples behind, as Aaron was left behind.

The disciples, just like Aaron, have failed miserably. And I wonder whether we're supposed to hear some allusion to the story of Exodus chapter 32, as the demon casts the child to the ground and shatters him.

In calling the people a faithless and twisted generation, Jesus is taking up the language of Moses. Deuteronomy chapter 32, verse 5, They have dealt corruptly with him.

They are no longer his children, because they are blemished. They are a crooked and twisted generation. And in verse 20 of that same chapter, And he said, I will hide my face from them. I will see what their end will be, for they are a perverse generation, children in whom there is no faithfulness.

Jesus then demonstrates his power over the demon by casting it out. And at this point, as everyone's marvelling about his power, and Peter, James and John are in wonder at what they saw on the top of the mountain, Jesus tells them, and says that the words must stick in their ears.

[15 : 00] He is about to be delivered into the hands of man, and they still do not understand what he's saying. At this point, of all the things to be preoccupied with, the disciples start to get into an argument about who is the greatest.

This is the typical human desire for exaltation over others. And Jesus' response to it is to show them a child. The kingdom of God does not work in the same way as earthly kingdoms.

The example of the child challenges us to humble ourselves, not to be people who vaunt ourselves over others, with a sense of superiority. We are not players of the competitive game of honour that utterly consumes other people's attention and concern.

We must recognise our dependence, our unworthiness, and to resist the pursuit to exalt ourselves over others. Greatness, true greatness, comes through loving service of others.

Greatness also requires welcoming and receiving the weak, receiving them as we would receive Christ. In this respect, children are representative of a wider group of weak and dependent people, but important in their own right.

[16 : 04] Receiving children means paying attention to and honouring the people who cannot give you anything in return, the people who might threaten your status rather than raising it up. In receiving such persons, we follow Jesus' own example.

Jesus surrenders his rights for the sake of people who have nothing to offer him, nothing to commend themselves to his attention. This incident is followed by another failure of recognition on the part of the disciples.

There is a man casting out demons in Jesus' name, and the disciples seek to rebuke him because he is not one of their band. This is reminiscent of Numbers chapter 11, verses 26 to 29.

Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the Spirit rested on them. They were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp.

And a young man ran and told Moses, Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp. And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant to Moses from his youth, said, My Lord Moses, stop them. But Moses said to him, Are you jealous for my sake?

[17 : 04] Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit on them. Jesus here challenges any sort of sectarianism. His disciples are called to build his kingdom, not to build their own kingdoms.

And learning to rejoice when they see other people doing the work of God, even though they're not of their camp, is one of the ways that they will grow into this calling. A question to consider, why is there a cloud and a voice on the Mount of Transfiguration?