

Jesus Gets Us in Shape to Walk the Vía Dolorosa!



An Exegesis of Matthew 17:1-9

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Introduction

America is in sad shape...*Literally!* 63% of Americans are either overweight or obese. One out of three kids is considered overweight or obese. Today, only about half of Americans exercise the stated minimum 30 minutes, 3 times a week, which is actually too little. We typical Americans eat the typical American diet where 40% of calories come from animal foods such as dairy, meat, eggs, and chicken and 50% of calories come from processed foods such as pasta, bread, soda, cereals, and chips.

You know what those statistics mean, don't you? Rapid aging, heart disease, depression, diabetes, cancer, and early death. Our diet alone is killing us softly.

The only thing worse than the sad physical shape of America is the sad spiritual shape of the Christian Church in America! Not only are more American Christians today better able to recite the four Beatles—John, Paul, George, and Ringo—than the four Evangelists—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. More tragic and horrifying is that the central message of the Bible, of the Lenten and Easter season, the cross—the cross for Christ and for the Christian—is being minimized and replaced with a message centering on the self and a pleasant life here and now. Do you know that a majority of American Christians believe Ben Franklin's unbiblical axiom, "God helps those who help themselves" is a passage of Scripture? Such a large segment of the American church has set aside the message of sin and grace that an article appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* titled "To Hell with Sin," criticizing the church for no longer talking about sin and its solution in the cross! Now just stop and consider what an indictment it is that even the blind unbelieving world sees how far off track the Christian church in our country has gone! More and more it seems that God is important not because he came to die for us that we might live for him, but because he's our genie in a bottle, whom we can conjure up only when we're in trouble, and who will give us what we want, if we just rub him the right way.

Hey, listen. The bulging guts and widening hips are concerning enough, but being spiritually out of shape is far more alarming, because the stakes are so much higher: peace with holy God and eternal life. And because of this: if you smoke, are overweight, and don't exercise, you *don't have to* enter a marathon, but if you're a Christian, you are in a brutal race, whether you realize it or not, whether you want to be or not—the race called "Cross Walk." "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*" (Mk 8:34).¹

The One who walked the *Via Dolorosa*, the way of suffering, the way of the cross, for us and for our salvation desires nothing more than for us his pastors and every sheep and lamb he has placed under our care to make it to the finish line, where he stands with the crown of gold in his pierced hands eagerly waiting to place it on our heads. To ensure we all get to experience that last great eternal victory, through the last great epiphany on the liturgical calendar, his transfiguration, Jesus gets us in shape to walk the *Via Dolorosa*.

¹ Introduction to the writer's sermon "Jesus Gets Us Ready for Crosswalk," preached at St. John Lutheran Church, Victorville, CA on March 6, 2011.

Context:

"After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they...intended to come and make him king by force..." (Jn 6:14,15). The people's reaction in the wake of Jesus' miraculous feeding of the 5000 shows very clearly the misconception people had over the term "the Christ" (ὁ χριστός). When the 5000 plus looked at each other, realizing that they had all just stuffed themselves with fish and bread from a boy's lunch box, they misread the road sign (σημεῖον) Jesus had posted for them. They didn't read Jesus' miracle as "Bread of Life Here." They didn't use the miracle to feed their faith with the truth, "This Jesus of Nazareth, this lowly carpenter's son, is God in human flesh, the Bread of Life come down from heaven who will feed our souls the food of immortality—the good news of his perfect life and innocent sacrifice for our sins. Instead, they read Jesus' miracle as "Bread King Here," and abused the sign by using it to feed their misconception of "The Prophet" (the designation for Messiah taken from Dt. 18:15) or "The Christ" as a glorious, earthly king here to make *this* world a better place and give them no more than good times on this perishing earth. So, they rushed to hoist him on their shoulders and hail him their "Bread King."

Where did this misunderstanding come from? Didn't the OT speak of Messiah as a suffering servant? Of course! It doesn't get much clearer than Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. Unfortunately, the Jewish church had chosen to listen to its sin-blinded reason and Satan instead of God's Word. Because it did, it couldn't make heads or tails of the central teaching of the Bible. It couldn't get how the Bible spoke of Messiah, on the one hand as being a suffering servant, and on the other as being a conquering king. Guided purely by blind reason, at first, the religious leadership tried to solve the dilemma by coming up with two Messiahs: a conquering king from the tribe of Judah and a suffering servant from the tribe of Levi. But talk of a suffering servant, talk of the cross, isn't a popular, pump-you-up message. So, more and more the Jewish church swept the prophecies of a suffering Savior under the rug and spoke only of the prophecies of a glorious king. *"As a result...more and more the Jews failed to see that the redemption of the world would come through the suffering of the Messiah...Instead they began to envision a Messianic victory not over sin and death and Satan, but over earthly enemies. They basked in dreams of an earthly king who would come to glory through a military conquest."*² This is what the people, including the disciples, had learned in church. This was their norm, their hope. This is why the cross was the farthest thing from the minds of the people, and yes, even of his disciples.

"Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself" (Jn. 6:15). The truth, however, is that Jesus is no mere Bread King come to bring us no greater glory than a free lunch; he is, in fact, the Bread of Life come from heaven to bring the infinitely greater glory of a free heaven. It is a glory that could and would come in no other way than through the cross. So, in love for the people, his disciples, and the world, the Savior escapes another of Satan's javelin throws to keep the Savior from the cross. Jesus miraculously slips through the crowds, escorts his disciples through the frenzy of oncoming "paparazzi," and sends them across Galilee, while he "went up on a mountainside by himself to pray" (Mt. 14:23).

² Becker, Siegbert, W. *Revelation: The Distant Triumph Song*. NPH. Milwaukee, WI. 1985, 2.

"At this the Jews there began to grumble about him because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven'" (Jn 6:41). If Jesus didn't have to contend with the roadblock to Calvary of phenomenal popularity, then he was forced to overcome the hurdle of phenomenal scrutiny. If the devil failed to hinder Jesus' path to the cross by giving him superstar fame and having him swept up in the limelight, then he attempted to do so by giving him outlaw notoriety, inciting Jesus' people, and especially the church leaders against him. This final year of his ministry would be the year of fiercest opposition from the Pharisees and religious leaders. It all began in earnest in the wake of his "Bread of Life" sermon.

"Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi" (Mt. 16:13). Clearly, Jesus had some major hurdles to Calvary to contend with and overcome—the rabid and raving opposition of the Pharisees and the terrible misconception and misunderstanding of what it meant to be "the Christ" infecting even the minds of his own disciples. Here's the thing: the cross is looming. At this point in the narrative of the Gospels, we're only about six months out from Holy Week. And so, in the same grace and mercy that moved him to come from heaven to take up the cross, Jesus gets out of Dodge with his disciples to be out of sight and out of mind of the Pharisees and to teach his disciples plainly and explicitly what his true mission and ministry as the Christ really is and what life will be like for his followers here below—the cross! Knowing how impossible the message of the cross was to swallow, Jesus took his disciples on a quiet getaway thirty miles north of Galilee to the lovely vacation spot of *"Caesarea Philippi"*³ to give them the correct theological understanding of Messiah's mission.

"Who do people say the Son of Man is?" ... "But what about you? ... "Who do you say I am?" (Mt. 16:13-15) Jesus prepares his followers for the theological bombshell the cross for the Christ by confirming their faith in him. *"Who do people say I am?"* Jesus asks. *"Some say 'John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others one of the prophets.' "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"* "You are not just another forerunner—we don't care what the people say about you. 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' Peter boldly confesses for them all. "Right answer, my boys! Thank God for giving it to you," Jesus confirms.⁴

"Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah" (Mt. 16:20). Jesus, once again, clears his path for his sprint to his wooden throne. Precisely because the people "were too easily satisfied,"⁵ envisioning no more than earthly glory in the titles "Christ" or "Son of Man," Jesus raises his index finger to his mouth, "Shhh! Make sure that what you confessed in Caesarea Philippi stays in Caesarea Philippi."⁶

³ If the reader desires a vivid description of Caesarea Philippi for homiletical purposes, e.g. to set the scene, this writer suggests Alfred Edersheim's comments on Caesarea Philippi in *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 524.

⁴ Mt. 16:17.

⁵ Lewis, C.S. *The Weight of Glory*, 26.

⁶ Mt. 16:20.

"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things...that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (Mt. 16:21). The disciples were probably quite puzzled by his censoring them, but almost immediately Jesus' censorship of any evangelism efforts, at this point, will become clear when he drops what to them was a bombshell. Jesus *began* (ἤρξατο) to teach them something that they should have been taught but obviously never were; at least, not like this: that it was not just possible for 'the Christ,' the one predestined and anointed to be the Savior (ὁ χριστὸς) to suffer many things and die, but it was, in fact, necessary (δεῖ) that it happen! Why δεῖ? Why no cross, no Christ? Because no cross, no crown! The cross was the instrument to acquit sinners and enable them to wear heaven's crown, and in God's enormous heart that was the most necessary thing of all!

"Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him" (Mt. 16:22). No cross, no Christ, because no cross, no crown! Nobody, of course, got this better than the Christ. However, it's clear that nobody really got this truth *but* Jesus! When Jesus asked the disciples who the people thought he was, the people had actually come to a consensus, despite their differences in opinion: he was one more in a line of forerunners sent to prepare the way for Messiah.⁷ It's equally clear that while the disciples were so right, they were so wrong. They were right on—Jesus was the Christ; they were dead wrong about what this meant. In their minds Christ and cross did not belong in the same sentence. To them a dead Christ was no Christ, or a good-for-nothing one, because when they heard the term "Christ," or "the Son of Man" the image that immediately came to mind was a glorious God-man descending from the sky leaving everyone squinting at the sight of his glory; they never imagined a condemned man suspended a foot or two above the ground, leaving everyone cringing in revulsion at the grotesque sight. Such an image was completely offensive, and borderline blasphemous. Plus, even though Jesus had a lowly and humble exterior, for the past two and a half years, they witnessed with their own eyes him doing what the Old Testament prophets said Messiah would do: make the lame leap like deer, give sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. The miracles they saw confirmed that he was just the kind of Messiah they had always envisioned. The thought of the glorious "Son of Man" lifted up on a cross repulsed them. The statement that the cross was *necessary* (δεῖ) for the Christ offended and disgusted them to the core. And so, Peter, acting on behalf of the other eleven, scolds his Master. A picture comes to mind here: Peter grabs Jesus by the sleeve, pulls him aside, puts both hands on his upper arms, and begins chewing him out as if he were a child. Even though Peter knows that Jesus is the Son of God, because that is what he had just confessed moments before, Peter tells Jesus that he is wrong, and even implies that he will do everything in his power to keep the Christ away from the cross. "God forbid, Lord. This will never happen to you."⁸ Can you almost hear an "over my dead body" in that?

"Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan!'" (Mt. 16:23) Jesus instantly recognizes Satan's ugly grinning face trying to pull the same stunt he did in the desert at the beginning of Jesus' ministry—tempt him to go around the cross to glory. Jesus sees Satan hiding

⁷ Mk. 8: 28. What do "John the Baptist," "Elijah," and "one of the prophets" have in common? They are all forerunners to the Messiah.

⁸ Mt. 16: 22. ἰλεως σοι κυριε ου μη εσται σοι τουτο

behind and peeking out from the corner of one of his closest allies, tempting him to forget this whole business of the cross. With ferocious love the Savior rebukes Peter and us for our loathing of the cross, and reaffirms the rightness of the cross for Messiah, reminding us that avoiding the cross is the thinking of man not God, because the thinking of man is earthly glory without the cross; it's the cushy life, the making-a-name-for-oneself-life, the standing-up-for-oneself-life. God's thinking is glory through the cross—the reconciliation of the world that offended him and the eternal rescue of his people.

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mt. 16:24). Jesus, then, reaffirms that like Christ, like Christian, no cross, no Christian either. As necessary as the cross is for the Christ, so necessary is it for his followers, as a natural, inescapable consequence of being his followers! Each and every Cristianus is and must be a crucianus! In other words, every Christian must also walk the *Via Dolorosa*. Sin is all about self-first. Being a follower of Christ's necessarily means him first and others second, that is, it means *self-denial*. Self-denial is a tortuous, murderous thing for sinful nature; it is cross.⁹

Peter's reaction that embodies our natural aversion to the cross for Jesus and for us shows us how we are naturally in no shape to walk that path. If it hadn't dawned on us yet, it simply has to now that Jesus needs to do everything in his almighty power to prepare his followers well for the cross—his and ours! Nothing less than our eternal salvation hangs in the balance. This is what he does powerfully and masterfully in our text, the account of his transfiguration.

Text

Καὶ μεθ' ἡμέρας ἕξ παραλαμβάνει ὁ Ἰησοῦς τὸν Πέτρον καὶ Ἰάκωβον καὶ Ἰωάννην τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἀναφέρει αὐτοὺς εἰς ὄρος ὑψηλὸν κατ' ἰδίαν. 2 καὶ μετεμορφώθη ἔμπροσθεν αὐτῶν, καὶ ἔλαμψεν τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ ὡς ὁ ἥλιος, τὰ δὲ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο λευκὰ ὡς τὸ φῶς. 3 καὶ ἰδοὺ ὤφθη αὐτοῖς Μωϋσῆς καὶ Ἠλίας συλλαλοῦντες μετ' αὐτοῦ. 4 ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ Πέτρος εἶπεν τῷ Ἰησοῦ· Κύριε, καλὸν ἐστὶν ἡμᾶς ὧδε εἶναι· εἰ θέλεις, ποιήσω ὧδε τρεῖς σκηνάς, σοὶ μίαν καὶ Μωϋσεῖ μίαν καὶ Ἠλίᾳ μίαν. 5 ἔτι αὐτοῦ λαλοῦντος ἰδοὺ νεφέλη φωτεινὴ ἐπεσκίασεν αὐτούς, καὶ ἰδοὺ φωνὴ ἐκ τῆς νεφέλης λέγουσα· Οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν ᾧ εὐδόκησα· ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ. 6 καὶ ἀκούσαντες οἱ μαθηταὶ ἔπεσαν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον αὐτῶν καὶ ἐφοβήθησαν σφόδρα. 7 καὶ προσῆλθεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ ἀψάμενος αὐτῶν εἶπεν· Ἐγέρθητε καὶ μὴ φοβεῖσθε. 8 ἐπάραντες δὲ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτῶν οὐδένα εἶδον εἰ μὴ αὐτὸν Ἰησοῦν μόνον.

9 Καὶ καταβαινόντων αὐτῶν ἐκ τοῦ ὄρους ἐνετείλατο αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς λέγων· Μηδενὶ εἴπητε τὸ ὄραμα ἕως οὗ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐκ νεκρῶν ἐγερθῇ.

ἀναφέρω - Frequency in New Testament: 10; Gloss: to lead up, offer (a sacrifice), bear (sin); Definition: to bear, or carry upwards, lead up, Mt. 17:1; to offer sacrifices, Heb. 7:27; to bear aloft or sustain a burden, as sins, 1Pet. 2:24; Heb. 9:28.

⁹ Professor Daniel Deutschlander expounds on this invaluable point in his book *The Theology of the Cross*.

μεταμορφώω - Frequency in New Testament: 4; (pass.) to be transformed, transfigured, changed in form. Definition: to change the external form, transfigure; mid. to change one's form, be transfigured, Mt. 17:2; Mk. 9:2; to undergo a spiritual transformation Rom. 12:2; 2Cor. 3:18*

φωτεινός, ή, όν - Adjective. Definition: bright, luminous, full of light.

ἐπισκιάζω - Frequency in New Testament: 5; Gloss: to cast a shadow, overshadow; to envelope with a cloud. Definition: to overshadow, Mt. 17:5; met. to shed influence upon, Lk. 1:35

σφόδρα - Frequency in New Testament: 11; adverb. Gloss: very, greatly, exceedingly

ἅπτω - Frequency in New Testament: 39 (here: aor mid ptcp nom sg masc); Gloss: to touch, hold, handle; (act.) to start a fire; to touch a woman means to get married.

Jesus walks us up a mountain

Καὶ μεθ' ἡμέρας ἕξ - Matthew's opening words direct us to the crucial context that makes clear what Jesus was up to in taking his disciples up a mountain to pull the curtain back and give them a glimpse of the divine glory, which he set aside to fulfill his work. Matthew tells us that Jesus took his disciples up the mount of Transfiguration "after six days." The question the Holy Spirit has us ask, of course, is, six days after what? Six days after Peter and the disciple's went from heroes to zeros, where one moment they boldly and clearly confessed with their mouths the spot on faith of their hearts, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," and the next moment they boldly put their foot in their mouths with their well-intentioned but totally misguided attempt to do the Son of God and everyone else a favor by attempting to slap some sense into him for this "crazy" talk of it being necessary to suffer and die on a cross!

παραλαμβάνει ὁ Ἰησοῦς τὸν Πέτρον καὶ Ἰάκωβον καὶ Ἰωάννην...καὶ ἀναφέρει αὐτοὺς εἰς ὄρος ὑψηλὸν κατ' ἰδίαν - It's clear: the walk down the *Vía Dolorosa* is humanly impossible. Carrying his cross down the *Vía Dolorosa* would prove physically impossible for Jesus, who though almighty, chose not to use his power to help him carry his cross, so that he stumbled physically under the weight of the cross. Jesus knows that left up to us, we would stumble morally and spiritually. We would drop our cross and leave him, as the rich young man did, or as the majority of the crowd did after his Bread of Life sermon. The disciples' obvious and terrible misunderstanding of the nature and mission of the Christ with their knee-jerk aversion to the cross make abundantly clear what poor shape we're in when it comes to following behind him to the cross, bearing out own. So, about a week after Jesus plainly and boldly proclaims the cross for him and us, Jesus walks his inner circle—Peter, James, and John, and us with them—up a high mountain, maybe Mt. Hermon itself.

καὶ μετεμορφώθη ἔμπροσθεν αὐτῶν... - Jesus gets right to work to build their faith in the way he had done so at critical times in salvation history: the Lord revealed his visible glory, if only a glimpse and if only for a moment. This visible glory had a name in the Old Testament: the *Cavod Adonai*, the glory of the Lord. By this glorious epiphany that was the *Cavod Adonai*, the Lord would either carry out a rescue for his people or announce that he was about to keep his

promise to rescue them, in order to strengthen his people's faith in his promises and in the conviction that the way of the cross is the way to life! Back in the day, the "Cavod Adonai" appeared in the form of a floating pot of fire and smoke in God's contract with Abraham, in the form of a burning bush in the call of Moses, in the form of pillars of cloud and fire leading Israel out of Egypt, and as we see in the 1st Lesson for Epiphany 3 (A), in the form of the smoke and fire on Mt. Sinai. Now, at this key point in salvation history, the ancient "Cavod Adonai," makes another dazzling appearance. Off come Jesus' rags of the μορφῇ δούλου (Php 2:7) that he took up at his conception and birth, the lowliness of the human body in its natural limitations of power and its natural frailness under the curse of sin—its physical imperfections, aging, mortality, in his case, an olive-toned lackluster skin. On came the royal garb of his μορφῇ θεοῦ (Php 2:6) the blinding, incomparable glory and majesty of the great I AM, the eternal, self-existing, absolutely holy, honest, and all-powerful God. Matthew tells us here that Jesus face "shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light" (Mt. 17:2). Standing there in his natural brilliance was the Personal Power that spoke the mountain he was standing on and the stars under which he stood into being! Standing there in his dazzling array was the Holy One of Israel, the Almighty, the one, true God!

This vision was a tremendous muscle-builder for the cross. It confirmed that a week earlier when Jesus talked about it being necessary for him to go to the cross, he didn't suddenly come down with a case of martyr's complex; he didn't somehow lose his mind, and become suicidal. Rather, his "cross talk" was good and right, even if they didn't quite get how. This vision of divine glory confirmed that Jesus would not go to the cross a loser, or a tragic victim of circumstance, but that this was the well-thought out, carefully written out script and determined plan of a good and all-knowing God!

καὶ ἰδοὺ ὤφθη αὐτοῖς Μωϋσῆς καὶ Ἠλίας συλλαλοῦντες μετ' αὐτοῦ. - Then, Jesus gave their faith another boost. He had the two great representatives that embodied the Old Testament of the Law and the Prophets—Moses and Elijah—appear before him. This too would prove a tremendous muscle-builder for the cross, because what does their appearance say?

1. First it says that all of the Bible is about Jesus. Moses represented the first five books of the Bible he wrote under inspiration of the Holy Spirit: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Elijah represented "The Prophets," a title for the remaining 34 books of the Old Testament. And so, on this mountain we have the entire Old Testament focused on, zeroing in on Jesus. God's Word is all about Jesus! So turn to him, follow him, wherever he leads, even when he tells you it leads to where you don't naturally want to go: to "Jerusalem where he will be betrayed, beaten, mocked, and killed," and to your own self-denial and cross-bearing.

2. Moses and Elijah say, the path to glory comes *only* by way of the cross, but it comes *surely* by way of the cross! Both men of God experienced their own "exodus" or "exit" to glory by way of the cross. Who can measure all the opposition and rejection and complaints Moses endured by his own people for being faithful to God's word? Who can forget the opposition Elijah faced by King Ahab and his wicked wife, Jezebel, for his faithfulness to the word of God? In this way, both were types of Christ and the Church.

Both came to glory through the way of the cross. That is how it must be for Christ. That is what he has to endure for the joy of having us by his side in heaven forever! That is how it must be for us because being on Jesus' team means we're the hated rivals of Satan, the world, and our sinful nature. And so, we must suffer their attacks everyday! But both Moses and Elijah assure us that the finish line of the *Vía Dolorosa* is glory. "They appeared in glory," Luke says. Elijah appeared with his glorified body. Moses in a glorified spiritual state perhaps. At any rate, what we can see here is that both OT prophets were reaping the benefits of Christ's work that he was about to fulfill. And so, it's clear: "the cross is followed by a crown, suffering is followed by glory." As an author said, "*Jesus now reveals...the greatness of His own glory as the Son of God, and in having Moses and Elijah with Him also in glory, He indicates that...His Christians, shall share in this heavenly glory.*"¹⁰

ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ Πέτρος εἶπεν τῷ Ἰησοῦ· Κύριε, καλὸν ἐστὶν ἡμᾶς ὥδε εἶναι· εἰ θέλεις, ποιήσω ὥδε τρεῖς σκηνάς, σοὶ μίαν καὶ Μωϋσεῖ μίαν καὶ Ἠλίου μίαν. - Tragically, Peter and the disciples are more out of shape than we imagined. Except for his outrageous actions a week earlier in scolding the One he confessed to be the Son of God and doing his level best of getting in Jesus' way to carry out the work that meant his redemption and salvation, nothing reveals the desperate need for Jesus to prepare Peter and the disciples, us included, for the cross. Once again, we see Peter's natural aversion to the cross and thirst for glory without it! Moses and Elijah start to walk out the door, so that Jesus can get on with displaying his greatest glory yet: the world's acquittal and redemption by the cross! And Peter and the disciples don't want that to happen! When, Peter realizes that this vision of glory is coming to an end, he tries to prolong it for as long as he can. Notice what Peter is really saying. It's not, "Lord, it's beneficial (ἀγαθός) for us to be here. Lord this is so good for our faith." It's, "Lord, good thing we're here...Good thing we were in the neighborhood. Now we can gather up some wood and leaves and build three shelters, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." We sense that by the fact that an inspired Matthew records Peter as saying, καλὸν ἐστὶν ἡμᾶς ὥδε εἶναι not ἀγαθὸν ἐστὶν ἡμᾶς ὥδε εἶναι. Regardless of the grammatical nuance, Peter gives away what he's really saying by his question to Jesus about putting up the shelters. Luke is right. Peter did not know what he was saying. Glorified bodies and souls don't need protection from the elements. More sinister yet, Peter's question smacks of the natural offense at the cross that we saw rear its ugly head a week prior. In Peter's request for permission to build shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, shining in glory, what can you almost hear in the background of Peter's mind? "Now that's what I'm talking about. This is more like it Jesus. Forget this nonsense of the cross." And so, in trying to keep the vision of glory going, we, for all intents and purposes, hear a milder version of his rebuke of Jesus from a week earlier—"No, Lord the cross will never happen to you!" This moment fits nice and neat within the box of how he thought of Christ and his people—outwardly glorious, victorious, powerful.

Like Peter, we too are in worse shape than imagined to walk the *Vía Dolorosa*. We set our sights on God's blessings of a healthy body and a healthy bank account, success in our daily endeavors, things following our plan of being where we want to be and having what we want to have at this point in our lives, peace in our human relationships, obvious victory over a particular

¹⁰ Wenzel. F.W. *The Wenzel Commentary*. Arrow Printing, Bemidji, MN. 1986, 371.

struggle or weakness. Because our heavenly Father really is good, he often gives us such blessings. When you take the whole of our life, more often than not we can respond to people's "How are you?" with "Good" or "Okay" and really mean it! The thing is these blessings have two sides, but we're prone to see only one: good days and times of victory are both God's Valentines, his ways of saying "I love you," "UR Mine," and they're oases, rest stops on a mountain peak! We see the Valentines' side of sunny days and victory, but, sometimes, we miss seeing that these gifts are breathers to help prepare us for a life of struggle and cross-bearing to glory. We want to build nice cozy shelters for the good days and hold on to them exclusively, because, while we understand that life can't be all ups, that we have to face challenges, setbacks, and sorrows, that life isn't going to be perfect, and isn't supposed to be, that daily we are to deny ourselves—put the Lord's Word and others' best interest ahead of our own, and suffer the pain for doing so; and while we hear that these things are necessary for our spiritual and eternal well-being, we don't, by nature, believe it. "Lord, I want to stay on the mountain, and keep going higher." As Lucy once implied to Charlie Brown, "I don't want life to be ups and downs. Just ups."

The sad truth, however, is that, like Peter, we don't know what we're saying. Our desire to stay on the mountaintop and shelter God's pleasant blessings here is a devilish and self-destructive desire. You see, at heart, our natural desire is to be strong and sufficient in ourselves. If life were only ups, if we had no angry Egyptians bearing down on us, that is, if we had no struggles to endure, no crosses to bear, no weaknesses and sins and consequences of those sins to feel ashamed of, it would make it too easy for our natural hearts that hate Jesus to take a pass on him. "Thanks but no thanks. I'm doing well on my own." That's not the path to certain glory but certain doom! I've heard the confession more than once: "I don't need to come to church. I've been good." "I don't need to read the Bible. I'm doing fine." The German proverb is right, "Lord, give me strong legs to stand up under good times." The truth is, some of the most spiritually dangerous times in our lives are when everything is humming along smoothly. That's when our eye-lids tend to droop spiritually, and we fail to watch and pray. The truth is, if we didn't have any of things we wished to be rid of, our worship of God would degenerate first into a cold, thoughtless, passionless going through the motions, then into thinking that such worship was our good deed for the day. It's in the dark, in the struggle of cross, trial, and weakness that our hearts seek God for us and others with a passion we could never muster in the daylight. "Lord, help me! Deliver them! We need you!" It's then that we run from our insufficient self-sufficiency to the one thing that is sufficient for life: Jesus' saving cross! "Lord, Jesus, have mercy! Forgive me! Save me! How can you not love me now, you died to have me!" His cross is the one sure path to the real and lasting glory that all the pleasant things and days in our life foreshadow. And so, if we are to end in that glory, the last thing we need is to stay on the mountaintop!

ἔτι αὐτοῦ λαλοῦντος ἰδοὺ νεφέλη φωτεινὴ ἐπεσκίασεν αὐτούς - Then, the Father makes sure that the point of Jesus revealing his divine glory is not lost on them: it was not done to feed some need of the Son to stretch out his almighty muscles, but to prepare them to cast their eyes on the even greater glory of the cross! As he did at Jesus' baptism, the Father puts his stamp of approval over his Son's ministry; and this time he does it...*after* Jesus had plainly told them about his cross and theirs! God, the Father, therefore, is confirming that Jesus' talk of the cross is not crazy talk. The cross is God's carefully thought out plan and will for our rescue. Jesus'

transfiguration accompanied by the Father's nod is the rock-solid, indisputable confirmation that his journey to Golgotha was not the unplanned for, unforeseen, tragic miscalculation of a great prophet but the eternal plan of God's victory coming to fruition!

καὶ ἀκούσαντες οἱ μαθηταὶ ἔπεσαν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον αὐτῶν καὶ ἐφοβήθησαν σφόδρα - Peter doesn't realize what he's asking. Given enough time of sinful him basking before the Sun of Righteousness, Peter will die quicker than an albino in the sun with no sun-screen. But Peter doesn't care! He wants nothing more for Jesus or for him and the disciples than visible glory. So, even though his knees are knocking and his heart is pounding, even though he's dangerously close to dying, he wants to keep the glory going. But the truth is, if Peter wanted to bask in dazzling glory forever, this vision would have to end. Jesus would have to take up the nature of the servant, descend this mountain and ascend the raised plot of ground outside Jerusalem that was shaped like a skull!" So, in love, in great love Jesus makes him aware of his need, he allows him to get swallowed up in the cloud of God's glory that strikes terror in the heart of every sinner, so that he has an inner longing for the cross, for the cleansing of his sin!

Jesus deals with us the same way. In our weakness to embrace a Christ of the cross—a Savior who appears weak in our lives and to carry our cross of self-denial—Jesus confirms our faith with the mountaintop experience. Here he confirms our faith that he is the almighty God. His cross and mine are part of his well-orchestrated plan of love to save. Just as Jesus gave Peter, James, and John a mountaintop experience to confirm their faith in him, he does the same for us, so that the cross accomplishes his good purpose: the advancing of our sanctified lives. Jesus gives us mountaintop moments, times when we can plainly see evidence of his promises in our lives and ministries, to prepare us for the crosses, for the moments when that evidence is all but hidden! But, then, when we show our ongoing aversion to the cross his and ours, Jesus takes us to the mountaintop of God's holiness and has us stand before the searing light of his holy law, leaving us cringing in the fetal position, longing for one thing: his cross!

Then, in great love he gives us our longing.

Jesus walks with us down the mountain

καὶ...ὁ Ἰησοῦς...ἀψάμενος αὐτῶν εἶπεν· Ἐγέρθητε καὶ μὴ φοβεῖσθε. Ἐπάραντες δὲ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτῶν οὐδένα εἶδον εἰ μὴ αὐτὸν Ἰησοῦν μόνον. - Since Jesus' glorious presence is to sinners what my dog is to a squirrel—the cause to run and hide—Jesus reveals the most brilliant glory of his mercy and grace in our text. He once again hides his divine glory beneath the robes of his lowliness. In the midst of their terror, right after the Father gives his stamp of approval and not a moment sooner, they look up, and Jesus is alone and lowly again. Jesus touches them, probably puts his hand on their shoulders, and tells them to stand up before him and not be afraid. What marvelous grace! Just think: if we were to rewrite the script, we would rather have Jesus agree with Peter. "Sure, Peter put up three shelters. Let me bask in the glory that is mine from eternity. In fact, I'm taking back my glory right now. No one, not even you, will appreciate what I'm going to do for you. You're even going to deny me. So yes, I think I'll stay up here." But, that's not what we see. Instead, we see Jesus once again veil his deity behind the cloak of humility, and deal with them according to his lowliness, so that they can stand before God with

confidence, be touched by him, encouraged by him, and strengthened by him to follow him to Jerusalem, watch him walk the *Vía Dolorosa* for them, and then follow him down the *Vía Dolorosa* in life, carrying their own cross as his followers.

This is the glorious grace Jesus puts on bright display for us in his lowly word and Sacraments. In Word and Sacrament, our glorious Savior veils his majesty so that we can stand in the presence of God without fear, and be given the strength and stamina to bear our cross. Through Word and Sacrament, Jesus enables you and me to come to the Mt. of Transfiguration without being blown away and dropped to our knees with his and his Father's holiness. He enables us to sit relaxed in the chancel pew, or at our desk or couch at home, and calmly receive the reassuring truths of the transfiguration—how the death of Jesus on the cross was the death of God that covers all of our sins; how the Son willingly set aside his divine glory for a time for the joy of redeeming us for him; how the Father loved us enough to give up for us the Son with whom he is one in essence and whom he dearly loves; how the Father gave his Son the stamp of approval that we might know that Christ carried out his Father's will perfectly; how by Christ's cross, our cross-bearing days will end in glory!

Καὶ καταβαινόντων αὐτῶν ἐκ τοῦ ὄρους ἐνετείλατο αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς λέγων· Μηδενὶ εἴπητε τὸ ὄραμα ἕως οὗ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐκ νεκρῶν ἐγερθῇ - What great faith building mercy and grace beams from verse 9. Jesus descends from this Mt. of glory to set his face like flint to ascend the Mt. of even greater glory, Golgotha, and be the Savior he was born to be! He even commands his disciples to keep quiet, so that he has minimal interference to the cross. Jesus' coming down with them also means that he would go with them every step in the valley of their cross-bearing!

Herein we see the true brilliance of the Morning Star shining on the mountaintop—his blinding grace! Consider it well, pastor. Standing there in his dazzling splendor is the great I AM, the God who needs nothing whatsoever from us. What is he doing standing there? He is dealing with his disciples' weakness in handling the news of his cross and theirs! He is utilizing every bit of his total wisdom and power in love to enable them to cling to him and his cross, and follow him, clinging to their own. When we see Jesus on either side of this moment when he shines in his blinding luminescence as the eternal, independent, almighty, holy, and gracious God, and see him lowly, obedient, weak, we realize that he is restraining himself from the full use and enjoyment of his glorious splendor for one reason and one reason only—to win a righteous life for unrighteous me, to bear all of my guilt and be the holy sacrifice that alone enables me to stand before my holy God in peace and one day stand before him in splendor. Then, when it's time to descend into the valley of the cross, just as he was with the disciples—once strengthened and not a moment sooner—he leads us down the valley and goes with us the whole way helping us carry our cross by having us fix our eyes on his! Praise be to you, dearest Jesus, for this great glory!

Conclusion

Jesus' faith-building work of walking us up the mountain and then walking down with us into the valley works! The confirmation of his deity was sown like a seed deep into the disciples' souls and minds. Unbeknownst to them that seed would sustain them through their Lenten

journey. After Easter and Pentecost we see that seed sprout and bear fruit in the disciples. We read in his second letter what a spirit transforming reality Jesus' transfiguration was for Peter (cf. 2 Pe 1:16-18). Jesus' transfiguration was for Peter a powerful piece of evidence that confirmed for him that Jesus really was the God-man, his Savior; it was a tremendous source of comfort, strength, and stamina every step of his cross-bearing life down the *Vía Dolorosa*.

Jesus' faith-building works the same in you and me too! When you hear the Father's stamp of approval, *six days after* Jesus spoke of going to the cross, you know that the cross was the Father's will for Jesus, because, yes, he truly loves your life more than the life of his own dear Son! When you see Jesus coming down from the Mount of Glory after taking you up with Peter, James, and John, you see how well your Savior knows your weakness, your struggles and doubts. He plans mountaintop experiences just for you—good days and good people—to give you a breather from the crosses he lays on you. When you see Jesus coming with his disciples down the mountain, you realize that Jesus is going to be with you every step of the way of your walk down the *Vía Dolorosa* to give you his strength to cross the finish line a victor. Seeing all this in the account of the Transfiguration, there is no quit in you, dear pastor! No, here you are putting one foot in front of the other. In your hurts and daily needs you cry to Jesus in prayer! In your falls to temptation, you cling to his cross for forgiveness! Then, you get up from his cross, committed to take up your own, and you do! You fight the good fight. You deny yourself the sinful pleasures that feel so good to you. You deny yourself first place in life to put Jesus, church, and the people he put in your life to serve ahead of you! In the wake of Easter and Pentecost that have clarified the mission and ministry of the Christ, you now joyfully embrace your Savior's "de-censoring" of the word about him and follow his strict command, "Go and tell everyone what you have seen."

And so, thanks to Jesus walking us up a mountain and walking with us back down the mountain, here we are sweating it out in the middle of our walk down the *Vía Dolorosa*...in the best shape of our lives!



Soli Deo Gloria