

Lessons on Discipleship (Part 3)

Luke 9:28-36

We are back to our series on Luke today, back to where we left off before Christmas – in Luke chapter 9. Jesus was just wrapping up his ministry tour in Galilee and beginning to move on to the areas around Galilee. It was about two years into his ministry with his disciples and one year away from the cross. In Luke 9 we see several interactions that Jesus had with his disciples during that time which I am seeing as several lessons on discipleship that we can take away from this chapter. So we've looked at a couple of these so far and today we look at another one that came from a very frightening encounter that three of the disciples had with Jesus.

Fear is not something that we want or enjoy, and it can be a very negative thing in our lives, but it's also not hard for us to see that fear can be a good thing. Fear can prevent us from making bad decisions. Even this past week with the third epic snowstorm of the winter and terrible road conditions we can see that fear has a good and rightful place in our lives. The roads were dangerous and it was good to have a healthy fear of them. Fear causes us to drive slower and be more cautious and keep a closer eye on oncoming vehicles. It prevents accidents and injury and expensive car repairs.

And you can see this in many other avenues of life as well. Fear can be bad if it's overboard and crippling, but it can also be good and necessary in our lives. And the fear of the Lord is the same way. We don't want to be so afraid of God that we are crippled by it, but we do want a healthy fear of God that keeps us on the right path because there are enormous and eternal consequences at stake.

When it comes to Jesus, we don't usually think about fearing him, we usually think about him as our brother or faithful companion who came to earth and became just like us so he would know what we're going through and be able to sympathize with our weaknesses. We like to think of him as our friend who loves us and wants to help us. And that's part of who he is. But our human nature can cause us to take advantage of that so that we become lazy when it comes to dealing with temptation and sin, and we can become lazy when it comes to obedience – especially when Jesus calls us to do things we don't really want to do. So it's good for us to see Jesus as our companion and friend, but we also need to

learn to fear him as well, and that's what we're going to see in the encounter we look at today.

The disciples knew Jesus as an amazing man who could do miracles and healings and he was kind and good and generous and loving. But he had just broke the news to them that he was going to Jerusalem to die and if anyone would come after him, they must deny themselves and be prepared to suffer and die as well. This was the opposite of what they were expecting and hoping for in their relationship with Jesus. I imagine the following days would have been very difficult.

Nothing is recorded about those days, but you have to wonder what they'd been thinking. What kind of conversations do you think they had with each other? What kinds of struggles and doubts came to mind? If I put myself in their shoes, I think I would have had a really hard time coming to grips with such a drastic change to my future plans. Jesus was truly amazing, but if following him meant giving up my hopes and dreams for the future and facing suffering and death instead, all of a sudden it's not so easy. Do I really have to follow him? Is there another way to please God without being a disciple of Christ?

If I think about their situation and what they needed at that point in their discipleship journey, I can see why it would have been important for them to have the frightening encounter with Jesus we're going to look at today.

Read Luke 9:28-36.

Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. ³⁰ And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, ³¹ who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³² 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. ³³ 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. ³⁴ As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen

One; listen to him!”³⁶ 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.

It sounds like Peter, James, and John were napping after climbing up the mountain, but they were awakened by voices and a vision of Jesus that jolted them to their senses. This was Jesus like they’d never seen him before. Luke 9:29 says, *“the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white.”* Mark 9:2-3 says, *“And he was transfigured before them,³ and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them.”* And Matthew 17:2 says, *“And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.”*

Mark and Matthew use the word “transfigured,” which is the Greek word ‘metamorphoó’ (meta-mor-fuh-oh), from which we get the English term “metamorphosis.” It means transformed or transfigured. Jesus’ appearance was altered in such a way that he resembled the brightest, most glorious white light that they had ever seen. It was like light was emanating from him. The thing that comes to mind is Galadriel in The Lord of the Rings movie. When she came near to the ring of power, she was transfigured into a terrible and powerful being in front of Frodo and it was very frightening. I’m guessing Jesus didn’t look quite like that, but glorious and frightening nonetheless. He no longer had just the appearance of man, but the appearance of the divine.

You hear a similar description of God in the prophecy in Daniel 7:9: *“As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire.”* Similarly, we hear Jesus described in Revelation 1:12-14: *“Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands,¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest.¹⁴ The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire.”*

So Peter, James and John saw Jesus in a glorious way, and we see that he was speaking to two men who had a glorious appearance as well – Moses and Elijah. This would have been significant in a couple of ways. One was that it confirmed that Jesus was neither of them, like some people had been speculating. He wasn’t

Elijah or one a prophet of old that had been raised back to life – he was the Christ of God, the Messiah. Second, the ESV Study Bible points out that these two men represented the Law and the Prophets in the Old Testament, which all pointed to Jesus, and particularly to his substitutionary sacrifice, which is exactly what the three of them were talking about – “his departure that he would accomplish at Jerusalem.” This was the very same thing that had the disciples so confused during the past week.

So this view of Jesus was very significant for the disciples – it revealed him in his divine glory and showed them that his death was part of the plan of God from the beginning – rooted in the Law and Prophets. They were bewildered, and also frightened. Luke 9:33 said that Peter didn’t know what to say and Mark 9:6 says it was because he was terrified.

But rather than just keep quiet, Luke records that when Peter saw Moses and Elijah about to depart, he spoke up: “*Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.*” The way it’s recorded is that he spoke without really realizing what was going on. And it’s almost like God interrupted him to open his eyes a little more, because at that very moment Luke says a cloud came and overshadowed them. This made them even more afraid, and a voice from the cloud said: “*This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!*” Matthew’s account says, “*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.*” At this, Matthew 17:6 says “they fell on their faces and were terrified.”

After that, it was over. Moses and Elijah were gone, and the glory of Jesus was back to his normal human form.

In all these things that they saw and heard, the thing that sticks out as a common theme if you look at all the gospel accounts is that they were very afraid. They had never seen Jesus like this. They were afraid at the sight of him in his glory, they were terrified when they were engulfed in a cloud, and they were terrified when they heard the voice from within the cloud. This whole thing was a very frightening experience and I assume that was intended. I think this experience was meant to give them a healthy fear of the Lord and I think that’s what they needed at that time.

Proverbs 9:10 says, *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”* Wisdom is having good judgment and making good choices and not necessarily just the easiest or most convenient ones. And as the proverb says, it’s the fear of the Lord that’s the beginning of wisdom.

The disciples were faced with the difficult reality of a future that was much different than what they had been hoping for. And it would have been tempting for them to stop following Christ for the sake of an easier road. But this experience on the mountaintop opened their eyes to the bigger picture and gave them a healthy fear of their Lord that would help them apply wisdom to their situation.

If Jesus was full of divine power and glory, and if he was God’s beloved Son whom they were supposed to listen to, and if his death that had been so confusing to them was known and approved by Moses and Elijah, then to believe in him and follow him is the wisest thing they could do, even if it meant they must go through hardship and suffering in this life. To stop following him would be very foolish. Fear would lead them to wisdom which would mean continuing to follow Christ and I think that’s at least part of the purpose of this transfiguration experience. They needed to learn the fear of the Lord.

And we do too. We need to know that Jesus is kind and patient and loving, but we also need to realize that he is the sovereign Lord of all creation and history and he is not someone to be trifled with. He is someone to be worshipped, adored, and bowed down to in reverent fear.

Paul realized that, and he reminded the Philippians of it while urging them to persevere in obedience. Philippians 2:9-13 says: *“Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. ¹² Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”* We are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling because of who Jesus is. This is the fear of the Lord and it is a very good thing.

I remember a story about my dad. My older brother and I had just smarted off to my mom – we were probably around 14-16 years old. And then my dad came home and got the report from mom. He came down to the basement where we were lifting weights and I remember him speaking in a way that chilled us to the bone. He didn't yell or scream but he did make it clear that he was angry and if we ever did that again, we would have to take it up with him. It was a frightening experience. And we didn't make that mistake again. Fear led to wisdom.

We've been reminded today that Jesus is worthy to be feared. He loves us deeply and shows us unbelievable kindness and patience, but we need to be careful to not let that lull us into a complacent attitude when it comes to temptation and sin and obedience to him. As his disciples we need to learn to bow in humble submission to him, joyfully surrendering to him in obedience so that we follow his good purposes.