

Transfiguration and the Cross

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[0 : 00] We've been in a series called Into the Wilderness. We've been exploring the life of Jesus and a couple different stories from his life when he goes into the desert and is tested by the devil and then when he goes up on a mountain with some of his disciples and is transfigured before them.

So we want to continue exploring those themes on Palm Sunday and as Jesus makes his way to another mountaintop, another form of wilderness, and that, of course, is the crucifixion.

So just a couple pieces of review for us all. Wastelands and mountaintops are both forms of wilderness, and God often shows up in both.

Wastelands and mountaintops are both forms of wilderness, and God often shows up in both. On the wasteland, the desert places, the places where life is hard and rough and tumble, God is there, and it's obviously wilderness.

But the part that may not come as naturally to us is the mountaintop is often a form of wilderness as well. If you've ever gone mountain climbing, you know that there's a point where the trees stop growing because they can't get oxygen.

[1 : 12] And we look at mountaintops of these things where you can experience God in this great, huge, massive, extreme way, and that's true, but I think that's also a form of wilderness because we come off of the mountain and we're not sure what to do with those experiences.

God shows up in both places, though, so it's a place for us to pay attention. What is God doing? What is God up to? We looked at the transfiguration, and we saw that, yes, Jesus begins to shine.

His clothes are shining white. It's this big aha moment for the disciples. But it's not about revealing Jesus's divinity. Rather, it's about revealing Jesus's humanity.

What God's intention is for every human that God has ever created, no matter if you are white or black, if you are gay or straight or trans, no matter who you are, what you've done, where you've come from, in God's mind, you are a glorious thing.

And so when Jesus is transfigured up on the mountaintop, it's not revealing his divinity. That comes later. That comes in a surprising way that we're going to talk about today. The transfiguration reveals God's intention for every human because it says in the book of Daniel, it says in the book of Matthew, that we are the light of the world, and Jesus is showing that in the transfiguration.

[2 : 25] What we want to talk about today is a very important question, and that is the question, what is God like? So if you're watching, if you can hear me or see me, I'd love for you to get into the comments in the chat and answer, like, what were some misconceptions, some ways that you thought about God when you were a child?

Or even an adult, and maybe you've changed your mind in your adulthood, but what are some of those misconceptions, some of those things that you've thought about God when you were a child or as you've been growing up that maybe you don't believe anymore?

I remember going to bed as like a 7, 8, 9-year-old and praying that prayer, if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take, which I thought was a very disconcerting thing as an 8-year-old because like apparently the chances of my death during sleep were so high that I needed to pray this prayer on a nightly basis.

That's weird. And then the other thing that I thought about God is that if I did not confess every sin that I had done that day before I fell asleep, and if I were to die during my sleeping period, during the night, that I would then go to hell.

So that's the weird thing to think about God, and I have come to believe that that's not true. What are some of the things that you have maybe believed or misunderstood about God as you were growing up?

[3 : 46] I know some folks talked about white beards and kind of like a Santa Claus looking figure, maybe God up on a throne, things like that. There are ideas that we have about God that hopefully at some point we have given up, we've abandoned, and what we believe about God matters.

In fact, A.W. Tozer said it's one of the most important things that we can believe. This is what he wrote. He says, What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.

The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and that man's spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God.

No religion has ever been greater than its idea of God. What we believe about God matters, because if we believe that God is angry and wrathful and judgmental, then we are going to create a society that probably looks a lot like that.

We are going to end up looking wrathful and angry and judgmental. Because neurotheology, the idea of what religion and spiritual practices does to our brain, does to our amygdala, teaches us that if we believe in a God that makes us afraid and scared and makes us want to run away, then the amygdala, that little walnut-sized piece in the middle of your brain that controls your fight-or-flight reflex and controls how scared you are and how angry you are, if you believe in an angry, wrathful, mean God, the amygdala actually grows.

[5 : 24] It grows because you are becoming more fearful and more angry and more afraid. And somebody talks about how God is spooky and scary. For sure. Absolutely. Some of us who grew up in the church had some really terrible experiences being told what hell was like and that this was God's intention for anybody who didn't accept him or who wasn't predestined to believe.

There are people on TV right now, I don't suggest turning the TV on, but there are people who purport to believe in God and they will tell you that God loves the world so much that he sent the COVID-19 and coronavirus to teach the world a lesson.

That God hates our sins so much that he wants us to die from coronavirus. That's what can happen when we have wrong ideas about God.

So I want us to have right ideas about God. I want us to believe what scripture says about God and what has been revealed about his character, about God's beauty, about his glory. Glory is this kind of nice biblical word.

Maybe you've shouted it in church once or twice in your day, glory. Glory. And throughout the Bible, it's a word used to describe what God is like, that God has glory, that God is glorious.

[6 : 38] So I want to explore that theme specifically in the life of Jesus and what Jesus reveals about God's glory. So if you have a Bible, I encourage you to open it up from home or turn it on with your phone or your iPad or whatever.

And we're going to be in the book of Mark chapter 10. Mark chapter 10, verse 35. And we're going to make some connections to Palm Sunday, but it's not our main focus today.

But let's take a look at this. This is the book of Mark chapter 10. It says, Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus. Teacher, they said, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.

And Jesus says, What do you want me to do for you? Hopefully the words are on your screen. And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, reply, Let one of us sit at your right hand and the other at your left hand in your glory.

So there's that word glory that shows that. Jesus replies, He says, You don't know what you're asking. Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with? And James and John, sons of thunder is their nickname.

[7 : 46] They say, Sure, yeah we can. Jesus replies, Yes, you will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with. They don't know what that means, but Jesus says, Yeah, that's going to happen. But, now listen to this, At my right hand or my left, it's not for me to grant.

These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared. Kind of mysterious, Jesus. But he's saying, You know, James, John, this is not for you.

There's somebody else who's going to sit at my right and my left in my glory. Yep, disciples have this expectation of what Jesus and his glory is going to look like. And if you were a Jew in the first century, you all basically had the same expectations.

You had been conquered by the Persians and the Greeks and the Romans and you were sick of being conquered and so you were waiting for Messiah, for the Anointed One, the Christ, to come, declare himself king, raise up an army, kick the Romans out of Jerusalem, out of the temple, out of Israel, Judea, Palestine, and set up a kingdom again.

And Messiah was not just supposed to set up a kingdom for the Jews, but it set up a kingdom for the world. And so glory meant military power, it meant military might, it meant sitting on a literal throne and James and John and the disciples wanted a piece of that action.

[9 : 04] They wanted to be part of Jesus' glory. But what does Jesus think glory is all about? So, we're going to go to John chapter 12. Now this is right after Palm Sunday.

Palm Sunday, Jesus does go riding into Jerusalem, not on a steed, but on a donkey. That's interesting. Not with an army, but with just some followers who are worshipping him, people who were formerly sick and crippled and lame and God knows what.

He goes marching into Jerusalem and this is what Jesus says. He says, The hour has come for the Son of Man, he's referring to himself, the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, that's a twist.

I thought we were talking about being glorified. Okay. Unless this kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed, but if it dies, it produces many seeds. Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say?

This is still Jesus talking. Father, save me from this hour. No. It was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name.

[10 : 13] How interesting. Jesus starts talking about being glorified and then he connects it with death. He's saying, his soul is troubled. Something scary is going to happen to Jesus.

And he says, is he going to say, Father, save me? No. This is the reason he came. Don't save me, Father. This is the reason I showed up. Father, glorify your name. Interesting. Let's keep going.

Still John 12. A voice comes from heaven. You know, this is a big deal, just like the transfiguration. A voice from heaven says, I have glorified your name and will glorify it again. Jesus replies, when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.

And then the editor of the Gospel of John puts this in. Jesus said this to show the kind of death he was going to die. Okay, there's that twist. I want to be glorified to glorify the Father.

The Father says, yes, I have glorified it. I'm going to do it again. Jesus says he's going to be lifted up. That sounds great. But he said it to talk about the kind of death he was going to die. So this is like this lifted up language.

[11 : 16] It happens throughout the book of John, throughout the Old and New Testament. It's not good. Like it's not being lifted up like in a crowd surfing kind of way. It's not like a salute the flag kind of lifted up kind of way.

Lifted up for Jesus means to be lifted up. It's a euphemism for the cross. You were nailed to a cross and then somebody hoisted up that cross and you were lifted up to point to the sky.

So now we have this really, really tight connection that Jesus has made for us between glory and his own death. This is a surprise. And if James and John, the sons of Zebedee, the sons of thunder, knew that that's what Jesus was going to be doing in his glory, they might not have been so quick to ask to be on his right and on his left.

Let's keep going. John 17. Jesus is now praying this kind of final prayer in Gethsemane before he's about to be arrested, before he's about to be put to trial and sentenced to death.

And this is what Jesus is praying to the Father. Jesus says this. He says, Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son that your Son may glorify you. And I love that relationship between the Son and the Father.

[12 : 28] There is mutual submission between the two of them. The Father glorifies the Son. The Son glorifies the Father. Jesus continues, For you have granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him.

Jesus says, I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.

This is the prayer that Jesus prays right before his death. And that's interesting. Excuse me. I love that part about the glory I had with you before the world began because if you're on a dinner party, you're going to talk about this in your questions this week.

But kind of a resonance of Philippians 2 that God in Jesus dying on the cross wasn't like a twist to the God story.

It wasn't that God used to be angry and wrathful and then Jesus came along and was like, ah, we're going to change our tune and be like a lot more loving than we used to be. That's not how it was.

[13 : 28] God has always been the kind of God that would give up his life for his creation. God has always been the kind of God that would empty himself of his divinity so that he might give divinity to humans.

So that they may, this is how 2 Peter puts it, partake in the divine nature. God has always been that kind of God. That's what Jesus reveals. So, now, remember, James and John, they request in Jesus' glory, they want to be on his right hand and on his left hand in these positions of honor when Jesus comes and does the thing that Jesus is going to do though they're not really quite sure what that's going to be.

Remember that and now let's read actually the story of the crucifixion. It says this in Mark 15, they brought Jesus to the place where Golgotha, called Golgotha, which means the place of the skull.

And again, recall, mountaintop, wasteland, wilderness, Golgotha. And they offered Jesus wine mixed with myrrh but Jesus didn't take it. And then I love the brevity of scripture here because it's probably too gruesome for print.

And they crucified him. Dividing up Jesus' clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get. It was nine in the morning when they crucified Jesus and the written notice of the charge against him read, King of the Jews.

[14 : 47] Jesus was trying to start a revolution. And then listen, listen, listen. And they crucified two rebels with Jesus, one on his right and one on his left.

And now, the light bulb should be going off, turning on. Oh, when Jesus talks about his glory, when Jesus talks about being lifted up, the climax, the epitome, the apex of Jesus' life is the cross.

The full revelation of God's character, of that most important question, what God is like, is Jesus dying for the world on a cross.

Of God himself in flesh, in Christ, suffering for the sake of others. That's what true glory is from the divine mindset.

The best way for God to reveal his glory was by voluntarily suffering for the sake of others. By putting aside, Philippians 2 again, putting aside his glory, putting aside whatever rights and privileges come with being God diploma, okay, setting those aside, and instead suffering for the sake of others.

[16 : 05] Number two, becoming human so that humans may share in the divine glory. This is 2 Peter stuff, New Testament stuff, that we partake in the divine nature.

Number three, experiencing death so that we can have eternal life. That was the John 17 quote. For God to reveal his glory was not about conquering people.

It wasn't about predestining some to hell and some to heaven. It wasn't about doing some huge massive magic show that would make everybody, force everybody to change their minds about God.

Rather, it was in the most subversive possible way for God to reveal his glory. It was through sacrifice. It was by giving up his divinity.

It was by experiencing death so that we can have life. The New Testament shows us repeatedly, again and again. Number one, that God is love.

[17 : 06] Not just that God is loving. Not just that God has some love-like characteristics. Not just that God is so high and above we can't possibly understand his ways.

No, God is love and that has meaning. We know what some love is and what loving is not and what unloving is. And 1 John tells us God is love.

His divine essence is essentially love. Jesus shows us what God looks like. The book of Hebrews says that Jesus is the supreme revelation of God's character.

That all God's glory in Jesus dwelled. And so when we look at Jesus, we're looking at what God is like. There's a comedian who says it, and I've said this before and I'll say it again.

God is at least as nice as Jesus is. Number three, the cross reveals what love and power and glory look like. The cross does.

[18 : 04] It's not the miracles, it's not the transfiguration, it's not splitting the Red Sea, it's not all that big powerful stuff, though God can do it, I don't deny that. Rather, it's the cross, about taking on all that evil and darkness could throw at God and taking it on himself.

That God became sin for us, took on the curse, became the curse for us, so that we may have life. In the transfiguration, we see humanity glorified, God's intention for every human revealed, and in the crucifixion, we see divinity allowing itself to be brought to shame.

In transfiguration, we see shining clothes, clothes of white, because we're going to be like shining stars. Jesus says, you are the light of the world, and in the crucifixion, we see divinity stripped naked.

In the transfiguration, we see Moses and Elijah, and God saying, don't listen to them anymore, listen to Jesus, what Jesus is like. Jesus reveals what God's character is like.

In the crucifixion, we see God identifying with two revolutionaries, thieves, brigands, whatever you want to call the other two on the cross. When we suffer, we don't suffer alone.

[19 : 20] When God suffers, God doesn't suffer alone. In the transfiguration, we see a bright cloud, kind of obscuring maybe what God is like. In the crucifixion, we see God in darkness, and we see God's face, and we see that God can identify with darkness.

If you've ever been in a dark place, God's been there too. In the transfiguration, Peter wants to stay. This is great. He's seeing his favorite dead celebrities come to life.

There's a bright cloud from heaven saying stuff. This is cool. In the crucifixion, when God finally reveals his character, Peter wants to run away. In fact, does.

Quick aside, don't let anybody ever tell you that Jesus was fully abandoned at the cross or by himself. The women stayed. Women tend to have a little bit more courage than the men, at least in the Gospels, and probably more places than that.

In the transfiguration, God declares Jesus' character and identity and mission. crucifixion, it's a Roman centurion. It's the enemy of the Jews who's the one who declares, surely this was the Son of God.

[20 : 35] So, it's paradox. Transfiguration actually shows what God intends for each and every one of us. And the crucifixion actually shows us what God is truly like, loving and kind and merciful and willing to suffer voluntarily for the sake of others.

God's character is far better than we could ever hope or imagine. I see in the comments some snaps for the ladies. I can get down with that. So, friends, what is God like?

I probably agree with Tozo that it's one of the most important questions that we can answer. Is God angry at you, sitting on a throne with a white beard, spooky and scary?

someone ready to strike? Or is God kind and willing to sacrifice for your sake? Is God loving and merciful and just in a way that makes us want to join him in that justice and fight for it and lay down our lives for it?

Is God good? good? These are the questions that we explore on a week like Holy Week starts with this Sunday and ends next week with Easter. Is God good?

[21 : 58] And I think the answer is yes, and I think Jesus shows us that, and we can hardly ever reach the depths of how good God is. We would be well suited to spend our time in prayer simply contemplating the love and the mercy of God, because when we contemplate a God like that, it changes us, transforms us, transfigures us to be more like that kind of God, to partake in the divine nature.

So, friends, as we go into this week, I want you to know the goodness of God. Let me pray for us. Father, Son, and Spirit, Triune God, you are the God who identifies with sinners, who loves who we would call the least.

You are the God who offers up yourself so that we might have life, that according to Philippians 2 empties yourself so that we might be filled.

Forgive us for the petty, small images of you that we have. Forgive us when we say stupid things like you brought coronavirus, that you have the worst out for us.

Now, God, we see how good you have it out for us. So transform us and change us so that we might be those same kinds of people, if only just a little bit, to bring light into this world.

[23 : 35] God, we thank you for the wastelands and the mountaintops. we thank you for the surprising places that we find you. God, continue to reveal yourself to us in all the ways that you can.

We pray in Christ's name. Amen.