

Down from the Mountain

Luke 9:37-43 | August 24, 2019 | Bryce Beale

Jesus entered our world from above.

“You are from below,” he told the Jews. “I am from above.”¹ He spoke of himself as “he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”² Paul wrote that “Christ Jesus *came into the world* to save sinners.”³ He was not in the world, and then he was.

We cannot measure how many ages passed as our Savior inhabited heaven unperturbed. In the timeless span before the beginning of the universe, there he was in the perfect bliss of fellowship with his Father and the Spirit. And when the Father did fashion our world, Jesus was there and was closely involved in the work; no doubt he joined the stars as they sang their joyful birthday song.

Then, century was overtaken by century like waves lapping the shore of time, and still Jesus dwelt in the realms of paradise. He was involved in the affairs of men, but not immersed in them.

Until, as Scripture states in those almost unbelievable words, “the fullness of time had come, [and] God sent forth his Son, born of woman.”⁴ “The true light...was coming into the world.”⁵ He was descending into it from above, like Bethlehem’s Star.

Those Greek thinkers in Ephesus, recorded in the nineteenth chapter of Acts, supposed that their sacred stone had descended from heaven, and so in defense of their heaven-sent rock they chased away God’s heaven-sent Son!

But that was just the sort of world Jesus chose to enter. “He was in the world,” as John records, “and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.”⁶ Jesus left a celestial home which was beyond the defiling touch of our fallen humanity, in order to enter our corruption. God sent him “in the likeness of

¹ John 8:23.

² John 3:13.

³ 1 Timothy 1:15; emphasis mine.

⁴ Galatians 4:4.

⁵ John 1:9.

⁶ John 1:10.

sinful flesh and for sin”⁷ as a precious and spotless Lamb set among ravenous wolves. I do not think we can ever comprehend how far different Jesus’ own heavenly purity was from the impurity of the leper he came to touch, or how distinct his own holiness was from the corpse-like religion of the Pharisees.

What we have been privileged to behold in the sacred word of God just this past week was the closest Jesus ever came on earth to revealing his own heavenly pre-existence. He showed the privileged three, Peter, James, and John, a glimpse of his glory—the glory which he had before the world was, and which he would receive anew when he returned to heaven. He was transfigured before their eyes, and they could hardly endure the sight.

But after falling to the ground, these disciples looked up and saw again the earthly Jesus, his glory once more concealed from human eyes. And then they walked with him from that holy mountaintop down to the mountain’s base and, as we shall see in our text today, they in one sense repeated Jesus’ earlier descent to earth. The Savior had at first come from his heavenly glory down into our inglorious earth to rescue us; in our text today, we find the same contrast. Jesus descends, from the top of the mount of his transfigured glory, down into a valley of our chaos, so that he might save.

Witness then the Son of God reenacting in miniature his own descent into our world.

LUKE 9:37-43

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record this incident, and all have it just after the Transfiguration. But Luke presents the transition from one to the other a little bit differently. Matthew and Mark recount a conversation that Jesus had with his three disciples on their way down the mountain, but Luke does not. In Luke, we have the Transfiguration, and then immediately we have Jesus down the mountain to encounter this possessed and epileptic child. What is more, Luke alone connects the Transfiguration to this present story with a note about time: “On the next day.”

Luke I think wishes for us to see these two events in contrast, and that is why he puts them beside each other and ties them together. Jesus is transfigured up on the mountain, and then the

⁷ Romans 8:3.

next day down in our world he encounters illness, demonic warfare, and unbelief. Up on the mountain, there is glory and the echo of a grand history; down in the valley, there is desperation and disbelief.

So we have verse 37: “they [came] down from the mountain.” Jesus came willingly from heaven’s flawless halls into our mire of foul disease; and here he comes down again from a moment of glory to a dirty, messy crowd.

Next week we’ll be reminded of just how far Jesus will descend to save us—he will foretell his own horrible death on our behalf. But at present, his attention is on an epileptic boy.

Let’s then follow Jesus as the verses take us, beginning with the desperate world he was not unwilling to descend into, and ending with the traces of heaven he brought into this desperate world. Start in the valley, as Jesus comes down from above.

Desperation

And see the desperation of that valley in verses 37-39:

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.

That first verse reveals that when Jesus descended from the mount, “a great crowd” awaited him. Why? Because this great crowd is just like us today—our world is a crowd of seven billion needy persons. We need healing for our sickness, help for the circumstances which we are enveloped by and which we cannot escape or control. We need bread; we need salvation. We too wait at the mountain’s base for a savior from above.

Notice when that Savior descends a single member of the crowd cries out. We are a crowd with so many needs, because each of us individually are needy. Here is one man with his problems, but you could have chosen any person in the crowd and they too would have needs that only Jesus could meet.

Luke focuses us on this one member of the crowd, a desperate father who cries out in his desperation. He is not ashamed to learn from Jesus: “Teacher,” he begins. And he is not ashamed to beg: “I beg you,” he says. He knows his own need.

And then he puts his finger on the poignancy of our sad condition in the valley. “I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child.” In other words, “If I lose him, whom else do I have? He is to me what Isaac was to Abraham: my son, my only son, whom I love.”⁸

And yet “behold,” he explains, “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.” The parallel in Matthew clarifies that this boy has epilepsy caused by or exacerbated by this demon, and that the demon tries to use the child’s seizures to cast him into fire or water, no doubt for his destruction. Mark adds that the child was tormented in this way from a young age, and that the demon made the boy deaf and mute—this father could not even speak with his tormented son to console him.

And isn’t this our condition today? Every detail adds to the desperation of the scene. It would be one thing for the father himself to have a serious ailment, but it is his beloved son who suffers. How many days and nights has this father’s heart broken for his child? How many times has he wished to comfort him, to cure him, but was utterly unable? The attacks come suddenly, and do not end easily. If you have ever witnessed someone have a seizure, you know the feeling of helplessness that attends the event. You can and should turn the person on their side so they can breathe—but beyond that, you watch and you wait, and you wait. Or if a loved one has contracted cancer or some incurable disease, you understand this father’s sense of inability, of brokenness and desperation.

And this world at the base of the mountain will break you—it is meant to. God has permitted so many sorrows here in part to show us that something has gone wrong in this universe. We cannot simply rest and enjoy our lives without pain; the pain is present to remind us, in the same way that our bodies do, that something has broken.

⁸ Genesis 22:2.

God would have us know our inability, so that we would be willing to beg. We are all like Naaman at first, that proud Syrian captain, refusing to dip seven times in the Jordan River, and would remain so if we were not granted a leprosy that knew no other cure. We would not seek a Savior for our souls and cling tenaciously to him if we, free from pain, imagined ourselves sufficient to cope with this life alone.

For our worst problem is not epilepsy or cancer—it is the sin which has brought these curses into the world. “[Y]our iniquities,” declares the prophet Isaiah, “have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.”⁹

That is the deepest and darkest part of this valley we call earth, and it is our most profound disease. This child’s demonic epilepsy cannot hold a candle to it. Yet the two diseases are alike in this: we have no cure for them. They excite desperation in us. They drive us to Jesus, for we have nowhere else to go. Who else can exercise this child’s demon, which even the disciples failed to cast out? And who else can purge our record of all our wrongs? There is salvation in no one else, and we will not find salvation until we, like the father in our text, come to the Teacher on our knees.

Disbelief

So first our world, down here at the base of the mountain, is one of desperation. But as we move along, we see we are not only in a state of desperation, but of disbelief.

See verses 40 and 41:

[The father continues,] “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?...”

Who precisely the Master has in mind when he bemoans the faithlessness of his generation is not entirely clear—but it does seem he thinks partly of every group around him.

The disciples, who had extracted so many demons before on their preaching journey at this chapter’s start, lacked faith. Matthew and Mark record that after this event, the disciples ask Jesus

⁹ Isaiah 59:2.

privately why they failed to exorcise the boy's demon, and he replies that they were lacking prayer offered in faith. They are, in Jesus' frequent words, "you of little faith." Too much they depend upon themselves; too little they depend on God.

The father in our text is also lacking in faith. Mark 9:22 recounts these words of his to Jesus: "if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." Jesus quite rightly responds, "If you can't!" and then adds, "All things are possible for one who believes." The Great Physician has found the point of illness in this father, and the father acknowledges it: "I believe," he cries, "help my unbelief."

Again, we find unbelief among the masses that surround Jesus and his twelve, most specifically in the religious leaders there, those who ought to have been richest in faith. Once more we must add detail from the account of Mark—in Mark 9, when Jesus descends from the mountain he finds his disciples surrounded by the crowd, and arguing with the scribes. The content of their argument we are not told, but most probably when the disciples of Jesus failed to exorcise the epileptic's demon, the scribes capitalized upon their failure to discredit them and their master. The religious leaders of Jesus' day did not want Jesus to be true, lest their positions of honor be threatened by him, so they refused to believe in him and sought opportunity to depose him.

The crowds as well were disbelieving, as any quick reading of the gospels will reveal—often they were seeking to see Jesus' signs, but not often did they believe in him from the heart. "An evil and adulterous generation," Jesus says, "seeks for a sign."¹⁰

It is no wonder then, considering the faithlessness of Jesus' whole generation, that he should say of his own return, as he does later in Luke, "when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"¹¹

Here then is the Teacher's description of our world in brief, in verse 41: "O faithless and twisted generation." It was true of his day, but it has been true all of our days since we first wandered east of Eden. And lacking faith in God, we are twisted—that is, we have turned from the right paths and have contorted our moral compasses. The consequence is an unstoppable tsunami of

¹⁰ Matthew 16:4.

¹¹ Luke 18:8.

perverted thoughts and deeds, which daily fill our planetary home.

As Jesus comes down from the mountain, he could easily have applied to himself those words of the Psalmist, who sings,

The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man,
to see if there are any who understand,
who seek after God.

They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt;
there is none who does good,
not even one.¹²

Jesus is not unlike Moses who, after beholding the glory of God on Sinai such that his face shone, descended the mountain only to see the sons of Israel sacrificing to a golden calf of their own crafting.

That is Jesus descending to our world. And so he sighs, “How long am I to be with you and bear with you?” He seems to be expressing that same sentiment he offered his disciple Philip, who asked to see God: “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip?”¹³

How long will it take before I get through to you?

From above

But there is more in that question than first appears, which turns us now from the valley of our darkly world to the light which has descended into it.

For Jesus asks, “How long shall I be with you?” and the answer, we know, is “Not very long.” Peak ahead at verse 44: “Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men.” He will not be with them long.

For the point of our text now is not how bad our world is—we could learn that, I think, with just a bit of common sense. Its point is that Jesus has come down the mountain into such a world as ours. There on the mountain he enjoyed a taste of his

¹² Psalm 14:2-3; see also Psalm 53:2-3.

¹³ John 14:9.

resplendence and pre-incarnate bliss, but then he set that cup back down, for he had another cup to drink. He spoke with Moses and Elijah, a refreshment for him no doubt—but he spoke with them about his own departure he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. Jesus revealed his glory on the mountain, but then he did not stay on the mountain, far from the crowds, high above the problems of the faithless generation below.

After praying on the mountain, he came down.

And we might be tempted to say, “He concealed his glory and came down,” but while that is somewhat true, it is not entirely true. If Jesus had glory on the mountain, he has glory in the valley. If he showed his disciples his majesty at the mountain’s top, he will show the world his majesty at the mountain’s bottom. He is not, as the Syrians supposed so many thousands of years before, a God of the hills but not a God of the valleys.¹⁴

He is not, as some regard him today, a God so far removed from sinners that he gives us no attention. The father’s prayer in verse 38 was, “I beg you to *look at* my son,” to pay attention to him in his dire need.¹⁵

And see now just what Jesus does, at the end of verse 41 onward:

[He says,] “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.

You may remember that the father had asked in Mark, “if you can do anything, have *compassion* on us and help us.”¹⁶ In Matthew, the father’s cry is, “Lord, have *mercy* on my son.”¹⁷

Yes, for so many eons, if we may speak in human terms, the Son of God shared perfectly the glory of the Godhead before his incarnation. When he was up on that mountain of eternity, so to speak, he shone uninhibited. Yet there was a portion of his intrinsic glory that went unexpressed—it was there, but it could not be seen. So long as God was on the mountain, far above our

¹⁴ 1 Kings 20:23, 28.

¹⁵ Emphasis mine.

¹⁶ Mark 9:22; emphasis mine.

¹⁷ Matthew 17:15; emphasis mine.

infirmities down below, a part of his compassion would always be veiled from our sight. We would not see it and savor it as we ought.

So he came down the mountain. Jesus, the eternal Son of God, was born in time, born of woman, born into our valley, in the likeness of sinful flesh. He encounters our depravity and, in just as matter-of-fact a manner as seen in our text, he rebukes it and heals us and restores us.

Sure, he could have displayed this power from above, could have healed the child from the mountaintop or from the highest heaven. Yet when he comes down to us, there is something of his glory we discover which we would not otherwise have known. This is what John means when he writes at the introduction of his gospel that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”¹⁸ Why is this significant? Because, as John explains, “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.”¹⁹

The same fact appears in our text today: Jesus comes down the mountain, saves the child, and then, verse 43, “all were astonished at the majesty of God.”

No doubt they marvel at this display of God’s *power* through his Son. But we could have seen this power displayed without the Son descending the mountain. The reason that we today, standing before this great text, are ourselves astonished at the majesty of God lies in this combination of supreme power with affectionate warmth.

We who are so accustomed to the frowns of this dark valley, who are not surprised to hear Jesus rebuke us with those words, “how long shall I be with you” —we are surprised by the answer in verse 44: not long, for soon he will leave us to go back up, not a mountain, but a wooden stake.

We marvel when we meditate on the perfections of our Savior in his preincarnate state, up on the mountain of his infinitude. But then when we see him descend the mountain and travel to the

¹⁸ John 1:14.

¹⁹ John 1:18.

lowest part of our valley, death, even death on a cross, we marvel anew.

In our text, Jesus not only delivers this boy from the devil, not only restores to him the health he had lost, but then restores him to his father, in verse 42. And so our Savior has done for us. He has come down, delivered us from the devil by his own death on the cross, has restored to us what we lost in Eden, our original innocence, and has presented us to our heavenly Father again.

If you, believer, are tempted to doubt that God could love you in your state of unbelief and desperation, or if you are prone to wonder if you have not driven him away by your uncleanness, then behold, the majesty of God.

He is not a God of the mountain only, but also of the valley. And forever his cross will stand as evidence that this Jesus came down the mountain for us.