

# **The Transfiguration of Our Lord**

## **GLORY LOST, GLORY FOUND**

**Luke 9:28-36 (37-43)**

### **The Transfiguration of Our Lord**

**Analysis by Ron Starenko**

28Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. 30Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. 33Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" – not knowing what he said. 34While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" 36When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

(37On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. 38Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. 39Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It

convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. 40I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” 41Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” 42While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. 43And all were astounded at the greatness of God.)

*Author's Note: The Epiphany season closes with a terrifying, yet comforting, experience, though the impact seemed to be momentary, as the disciples head down the mountain. At first, expecting glory in the wrong place, they are surprised by the final outcome. To get a handle on the Transfiguration story, the preacher has several options to consider, antitheses, e.g. Old Testament vs. the New Testament, law vs. gospel, discontinuity vs. continuity, nostalgia vs. awakening, all both/ands, two sides of the same reality, what is fading and what is emerging. What takes place on the Mount of Transfiguration is a bridge between what happens on Mount Sinai and Calvary Mountain, communicating a glory lost, a glory found.*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Glory Lost, a Looking Back**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Tabernacle Building**

The first impulse these amazed disciples have, following this spectacular vision of their transfigured Lord, is to build a monument. Today we call such building “the institutionalized church,” a later development. It is noteworthy that the early church met in homes. Gradually, however, cathedral-building grew out of a need to compete in the world with other institutions, a grasping for power. King David, for example, succumbed to the

worship of power by building the temple, even when he was warned against doing it. Later, when the temple was destroyed, it was rebuilt. We continue inexorably hooked on capturing the past, some glorious moment, building tabernacles with a capital "T." We look backward, hoping to overcome our fear of discontinuity.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Hooked on the Past***

Behind our tabernacle-building is our enthrallment with Moses and the Law, the old covenant, an even more backward pursuit. In today's second lesson (2 Cor. 3:12–4:2), St. Paul calls Moses, meaning the law, "a ministry of death" (2 Cor. 3:7), a "ministry of condemnation [that]...once had glory has [now] lost its glory" (2 Cor. 3:10). We have a need always to validate our past, if not in building buildings, then also, as the institutional church, coming down hard on the law, assuming the position of being the watch-dog for morality, fearing a loss of power, hooked also on preserving the past, as though that were the purpose and guarantee of our existence. Upholding Mount Sinai, elevating the Law, thereby collapsing the tradition, we become like the convulsing child described at the end of the gospel lesson, having "an unclean spirit," becoming "a faithless and perverse generation" (Luke 9:41-42), a disfigured humanity, its glory fading, a further sign of discontinuity

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Disappearing, Fading***

By elevating the Law we have sealed our fate. St. Paul calls the killing power of the law "a ministry of condemnation" (2 Cor. 3:9). He means to say that there is no continuity by means of the law, as it confirms our discontinuity. We can never escape our past performance, for by trying to change it we only make matters worse, as St. Paul also reminded the Romans, as "sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in [us] all manner of covetousness ... deceived [us] and through it killed [us]" (Rom. 7:8, 11). And so, whatever glory we seek, whether in

our efforts or accomplishments, which are fading, we are left “holding the bag,” ultimately having no promise of life, no future, no continuity, as the pay-off is death, the final terrifying experience, glory lost forever.

## **PROGNOSIS: Glory Found, a Looking Forward**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Transfigured Reality***

While we have no answer for that, God has the last word. In the Transfiguration story, while Moses and Elijah fade from view—and that includes us—the glory of God persists, as Jesus finally “was found alone” (v. 36). Jesus is the answer to “the law and the prophets,” a ministry to be fulfilled, a radical change to be inaugurated. What happened on the Mount of Transfiguration was a glimpse of the future God had in store for us, transfigured in Jesus. However, like his baptism, the transfiguration event where he is also the Chosen One, prepares him for a ministry that from the beginning is downward, as he is coming “down from the mountain” (v. 37) the next stop, the cross. Ultimately, there will be no radical change in our fate unless God would somehow bring an end to the power of the law and the reign of death, unless Jesus would “go down” and “rise up” to save us from God. The “glory that lost its glory” will be regained when Jesus completes his downward ministry, endures the suffering and death we deserve, suffers away the wrath we earned, totally disfigured (Isa. 53:2a-3) on our behalf. When everything is going backwards, God finds a way to move us and all things forward, as the cross of Jesus is followed by his resurrection, a new reality, a radical change already prefigured in Jesus’ transfiguration.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Identifying with the Eternal***

As a result, the church (and the world, too, which has no other

hope) lives out its destiny by faith, trusting the good news, how we get transfigured in the here-and-now, created into the image of Jesus in the experience of our baptism by water and promise, and in the Eucharist through bread and wine, transformed into the same image (2 Cor. 3:18), in the likeness of the Eternal Christ, who rebuked the "unclean spirit," disposing all of the powers against us, healing a boy (v. 43), even now giving us back to God and to one another, made whole.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution)** : *Living out the New*  
Such good news is more than enough to make us ecstatic in our freedom (v. 17), how we persevere in our boldness, not losing heart (2 Cor. 4:1), living out the new. We already have a glimpse of the end in Jesus' dying and rising. We are the church, mobilized to be his healing body in the world, to comfort those who chafe under the burden of the law, who confront death and dying every day on the tube and in personal tragedy, motivated to take action as we are able to relieve suffering, to confront terror, to heal divisions, to inspire hope. We are the transfigured body of Jesus, glorying not in power or importance, but rather getting involved in the messy business of turning back the demons and healing the ruptures in life, being a sign that there is life in the midst of death, a glory found, forever present and available.