

Transfiguration

WORKING STIFFS

Exodus 24:12-18

Transfiguration

Analysis by Jerome Burce

12 The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." 13 So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. 14 To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them." 15 Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. 16 The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. 17 Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. 18 Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

DIAGNOSIS: Burned Out

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *The Addict*

Speaking of transfiguration: notice how God's seventh day (v. 16) morphs suddenly from a sabbath rest (20:10) into a frenzy of work that stretches out for 40 days and nights (v. 18). That's the glory that Moses steps into, and with him every other workaholic you've ever known, including—just by the way—the ones

who insist on turning Lent into a 40-day frenzy of fasting, prayer, and works of charity. Think too and especially of that work-addicted creature you stare at in the mirror every morning.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *The Fire Inside*
Speaking of that creature: notice how fixated she is on this Sinai-style glory, not that she can help it. Born to work, she is, and, if American, bred to celebrate a work ethic, Protestant or otherwise, that glories in superior devotion to kids, company, career, coursework, or, better still, to any and all combinations thereof: "Blessed be the driven, for they shall be recognized." See, for example, those breathless little notices in Time or Newsweek about the 18-hour work days of the up-and-coming lawyer, or the White House staffer. "He's got a fire in his belly," we say; and saying it we're pretty sure we've paid him the highest compliment there is. Arbeit macht frei? No, that was the Nazi lie, hideous, sickening, wicked beyond words. But arbeit macht glorious? That one we do believe, by God...

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Heat from on High*
Speaking of God: notice the link between the fire in our bellies and that fiery LORD atop his holy mountain (v. 17). For forty days and nights he labors, instructing Moses. The result? Six and a half chapters of meticulous instruction on how to design, build, and furnish a tabernacle as an earthly repository for the glory of his presence (25:1–31:11). His closing word: "According to all that I have commanded you, they shall do"(31:11). There you have it. Do, do, do, never letting up, questing always for the "all" that God commands and never getting there. "A devouring fire"—that's how the glory of the LORD appears to folks at the mountain's foot (v. 18). Sure enough, it consumes us. Burnout, we call it, prelude to a final flameout. As Bill Murray puts it in Ghostbusters, "This chick is toast." Ditto for "this guy."

PROGNOSIS: Fired Up

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *God the Burnout*
Speaking of “this guy” and toast: notice how God becomes both when, “in the fullness of time” (Gal. 4:4), he quits waiting for Israel or anyone else to do all that he has commanded and sets out to do it himself in the person of Israel’s scion and Christ, a.k.a. “my beloved Son” (Matt. 17:5). In the process he transfigures the very concept of glory by predicating it on a brand new Jesus-specific command (cf. John 13:34), whereby his is not to do, do, do, but rather to undo—“your sins are forgiven” (Matt. 9:2 et al.)—and in undoing, to be himself undone. Comes the ultimate transfiguration, the frenzied God of Sinai reduced to utter passivity first by nails, then by tomb. Is it mere coincidence that he occupies that tomb on the seventh day (v. 16)? Or shall we understand that God is signaling his own return to sabbath rest, i.e. to respite for us all from heat of his demands? Easter—the Re-Doing of the Undoing One—invites us to believe the latter.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Glory to God in the Lowest*

Speaking of believing: notice how faith in the Undoing One undoes old attitudes about work. You might say that work itself is transfigured in Christ, a point strangely missed by the pushers of the old Protestant ethic. There diligence is read as a first sign of one’s fitness for the mountaintop, be it heavenly or secular. Hence the view of work as an upward path to glory. To trust Christ is to see this for the nonsense he has made it to be. These days glory camps out at the mountain’s foot where the masses cower; and it shines most brightly amid the inept, the incapable, even the indolent. They too get to hear what I hear: “Your sins are forgiven.” Where and how can the glory be greater? So once food is on the table and the kids clothed, why work at all? Well, for the same reason the likes of

Paul once did: as a means of spreading the wealth. Noblesse oblige as the old aristocrats used to say.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *The New Addiction*
Speaking of aristocrats: notice how Christ has ranked us these days among the truly leisured class of saints and angels, with all the rights and privileges pertaining thereto. Among these is the right to wait on God as Moses did (v. 12) and the privilege Moses enjoyed of bearing God's gift to others. Or shall we say the heightened privilege, the gift we bear being finer by far than one Moses delivered. His meant toil amid a heap of "instruction" (v. 12). Ours gets passed along "so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord," as the first of the new aristocrats were moved to put it (Acts 3:20). Sabbath rest for all, in other words, a prospect so stunning in sweep and promise that they beat the bushes of the world to tell of it. Fired up, they were; and the Spirit's flame devoured them (Acts 2:3; cf. v. 17). Dare we call them Christaholics, so addicted to Jesus that it wound up killing them? Not a bad fate, that. You might even call it glorious. So maybe I start commending it every day to that creature in the mirror, or to anyone else whose ear I can bend. What better use for Lent, come to think of it.