

A MOUNTAIN TOP EXPERIENCE – Matt. 17:1-8

Practicing the Presence of God #12

Henry Ward Beecher is remembered as one of the most influential American pastors of the 19th century. Even though he departed from several key evangelical doctrines like the existence of a literal hell and divine creation of the universe accepting the theory of evolution, and was one of the liberal pioneers in reinterpreting the Bible emphasizing God's overriding love, Beecher did become well known mainly because of his dramatic and witty oratory skills. For 4 decades, he pastored the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn. One Sunday, Henry had his brother Thomas K. Beecher substitute for him as he took some vacation time. The marquis outside of the church advertised that Pastor Beecher was preaching that Sunday, but most did not know before the service time that it was brother Thomas Beecher rather than Henry who would be delivering the sermon. Many visitors and curiosity seekers had come to hear the renowned Henry Beecher speak. But when Thomas Beecher appeared in the pulpit instead of his brother, Henry, some people just got up and started for the doors causing some commotion. Sensing that they were disappointed because he was substituting for his brother, Thomas raised his hand for silence and announced, "All those who came here this morning to worship Henry Ward Beecher may withdraw from the church; all who came to worship God may remain."

We have been focusing on experiencing the presence of God in our lives during these past Sunday mornings. Today, we conclude this series looking at one of the rare times in the Bible when some human beings had the privilege of

having a physical encounter with supernatural bodies. They were tempted to worship their experience rather than the one who gave them emotions so that they might experience. Too many times, we also are like the many who left the service in disappointment because Henry Ward Beecher was not preaching. We might come to church because of the uplifting music or to visit with our friends and to be lifted up emotionally. Now God has offered many rich blessings through the vehicle of His church. Among those are the greatest music that this world knows, a social environment unlike any other, and stimulating study of His Word. But the primary focus of worship must be to experience the presence of Almighty God. This alone has the greatest potential to change our lives.

We just read the account where Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James and John on a high mountain. The word that is translated *transfigured* in this passage is the Greek term from which we get our English word *metamorphosis*. *Metamorphomai* – you can just hear metamorphosis in the word, can't you? Webster defines metamorphosis as *a complete change of form, shape, structure or substance*. A metamorphosis in our biological world is illustrated by the small, hairy, wormlike creature that wraps itself into a tough skinned chrysalis to become the delicate, colorful, beautiful butterfly. Whereas the caterpillar was heavy and earthbound before, the butterfly is feathery light and free to fly through the air after the metamorphosis.

This kind of complete change of form and substance is what is going to happen to our earthly bodies as they take on their resurrected form one day. These earthly bodies are like the homely caterpillar. But one day these bodies

are going to die. Then they will enter the coffin chrysalis and be buried in the ground. At the trumpet call of God, the metamorphosis will be complete as we will all receive our heavenly, resurrected bodies.

Peter, James and John had the privilege of seeing a foretaste of glory divine on that mount of transfiguration. It appeared at first to be a normal, routine evening for Christ and the 3 disciples with whom He spent the most of his time. Luke implies that it was in the later evening that Jesus took these 3 up a mountain apparently for the purpose of praying with them. And the Lord Jesus Christ and his disciples in short order assumed their normal positions in prayer – Jesus was fervently communicating with His father while the disciples were sleeping. The next thing that is recorded by Luke is that the disciples were startled awake to an amazing sight – the Lord Jesus Christ was completely changed in form before them and He had 2 guests who were talking with Him, Moses and Elijah.

It is interesting to compare the 3 gospel accounts of this event.

*Mark uses the glistening splendor of new fallen snow to compare to Christ's appearance –

His clothes became dazzling white like snow, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.

*Luke speaks of the change in terms of the lightening of a storm –

As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.

*Matthew here compares the change that passed over Christ with the sun-

His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.

As we put all 3 of these accounts together, we just begin to be able to imagine the impression that must have been made on these 3 disciples as they woke out of a deep sleep in the black darkness of the night on top of a mountain to this blinding sight. One thing was clear to them – the Lord Jesus Christ had passed into a different realm. Somehow in his prayer and communion with the Father, he had been changed and passed from this earthly realm into the heavenly one. His appearance had changed, his companions had changed – he had proven that He was not only the Lord of death being able to raise dead people back to life again, but He was also the master of his own death. He was superior to death. He Himself could transcend the most feared of all human elements – death itself.

So this was yet another lesson that Jesus was teaching these 3 inner core disciples as they grew in their faith and knowledge of their Lord. You will recall that on 3 separate occasions Jesus took only Peter, James and John with Him for critical events.

*Jesus had already taken these 3 into the upper room where He raised Jairus' daughter back to life from the dead. He proved there that He was the Master over death.

*Now Jesus took these 3 up on the mountain where He was transfigured before them. He proved here that He did not have to die, that He had the power to move from this earth realm to the heavenly one without the vehicle of death.

*And then shortly after this Jesus would take these 3 apart with Him in the Garden of Gethsemane. They would hear Christ submit Himself to the will of the Father there demonstrating His willingness to die as a substitute for others.

Now Matthew points out 4 responses that the disciples had as they experienced the divine presence of the Lord Jesus Christ on the mount of transfiguration.

The first response was that it was good to be there. *Lord, it is good for us to be here,* Peter said to Jesus. This is great, Lord. We've never experienced anything like this before. We've never experienced feelings like this before. This is the best.

I think we would all agree that there's nothing in life like experiencing the presence of God in worship. There is a euphoria, there is a contentedness, there is an emotional uplift found in truly experiencing the presence of God that can be found nowhere else. Now we can only imagine what Peter must have been experiencing on this mount of transfiguration. But if you have experienced the presence of God in worship you know how good it feels. It might have been through some song sung in a worship service, it might have been through an insight that you suddenly discovered in God's word, it might have been through a time of private prayer, but whatever the time, when we experience the presence of God, there is nothing else like it. Good just doesn't seem like it is an adequate word to describe experiencing the presence of God. And this leads us to Peter's second response.

Let's settle down and remain on this mountain forever. That is what Peter, in essence, was suggesting when he offered to put up 3 shelters. This feels so good that let's settle down here and never go back down to the valley again.

Who of us has not had this same desire when we had a mountain-top experience with the Lord. There is such a euphoria, it feels so good, we just don't ever want it to end. We want to just stay up there on that mountain top forever. We can sympathize with Peter's suggestion here for we probably would have had the same desire ourselves.

But Peter's suggestion was unrealistic. It's impossible to just stay on the mountain top. Our emotional makeup makes it impossible for one thing. God has made us as emotional creatures. But emotions are just a part of our makeup – we also have intellect, we have will. God never intended for our emotions to be the primary directing force in our lives. God intended for our will to direct the course of our lives receiving input from both our intellect and our emotions. Some have compared our emotions to the tail of a dog. You can see how a dog feels by looking at its tail. If the tail is wildly wagging, the dog is happy, in a good mood. If the tail is down between its legs, the dog is timid and fearful. If the tail is sticking straight out, the dog is ready to fight. But the tail is designed to follow the dog wherever it goes. The dog would be in real trouble if he walked backwards with the tail leading him around. Our emotions are like that tail. God never designed our emotions to lead or direct our lives. People that allow their emotions to direct their lives live in a very unstable manner because emotions go up and down all the time. Our emotions vacillate allowing us to express feelings in any situation. As the promo for ABC Sports put it for so many years, we can know both the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. Our emotions allow us to sense all of these feelings. Our emotions allow us to experience the exhilaration of happiness. They also allow us to experience the

sorrow of grief. By their very nature, emotions cannot remain at an extended peak, but must adjust and equal out over time.

One of the serious misconceptions that many Christians have today is equating worship with having an emotional high. Nobody doubts the sincerity of their intentions, but the goal is unrealistic. Many worship services are designed in this feel good fashion. They slowly build to an emotional pitch that concludes with everyone reaching a *spiritual high*. This is by design. There are seminars that explain how worship services can be set up to be directed towards an emotional crescendo.

Now experiencing the presence of the Lord in worship feels good. And we naturally have a desire to stay on the mountain top forever. But that cannot be. For fruit is not grown on the mountain top, but it is rather developed in the valleys. Have you ever noticed that? Yes, reaching the top of the mountain is an exhilarating experience – every mountain climber will admit to that. This is what drives him to accept and complete the challenge. But it is very barren on the top of the mountain. There are no fruit trees up there. The fruit is grown in the valleys. So it is in our lives. Whereas we need the mountain top experiences for encouragement, we also need the valleys for productivity in our lives.

And there also can be a danger on the mountain top. The thrill of exhilaration can cause us to lose perspective. Emotions feel so good that many begin to use their emotions as the standard for truth. As long as it feels good, it must be alright. This is very dangerous. Peter fell into this trap. His suggestion that 3 shelters be built was not pleasing to God because it put Moses

and Elijah on the same plane with the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the reason for the voice of God thundering from the heavens saying, *this is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him.*

You see, Peter felt so good and was so impressed with even Moses and Elijah that he lost perspective for a moment. He began to honor them on the same level as Jesus. Emotions can deceive us in this way. They can make us to feel so good that we begin to think that anything that makes us feel good must be equally right. This brings us to our third response.

The disciples felt the terror of the presence of God. Yes, experiencing the presence of God felt good and it made them want to just stay there forever, but it also brought the disciples a new sense of God's majesty and power that filled them with a sense of reverential fear. When the disciples heard the voice of God thundering from heaven, they fell down on their faces, terrified.

Christians who think that experiencing the presence of God in worship is just a feel good experience all of the time are not truly experiencing the presence of God. For when we truly experience God's presence, we have a renewed vision of His awesome greatness and power and majesty. This can't help but bring a sense of fear and terror to our hearts.

When Isaiah saw the Lord, high and lifted up, with the seraphim surrounding His throne crying out *Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God of Hosts, the whole world is full of his glory*, Isaiah was terrified in the presence of the Lord. He was so fearful that he thought he was going to die.

That's what happened to Peter, James and John on the mount of transfiguration. When they heard the voice of God and fully realized the

presence of God, they were terrified. They were filled with fear. They fell on their faces as dead.

But notice finally with me Christ's words of assurance and comfort.

⁷ But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid."

When we experience the presence of God in worship, there is also an awareness of God's love, His acceptance of us, His strength to comfort and encourage us.

It is an amazing thing that God would desire fellowship with us. I never lose the wonder of that. After all we have done to hurt him; after all we have done to disobey His righteous standards; after all we have done to ruin this beautiful world that He has made; God still loves us and desires for us to experience his presence in our lives. That simple fact should remind us of God's love for us. This brings comfort and encouragement and strength into our lives.

We just finished enjoying the competition of another winter Olympics a month or so ago. We were certainly impressed with the level of skill that athletes from all over the world exhibited as they came together to see who was the best in his or her field. But while we honored those who have worked hard and are uniquely gifted by God, we must never lose perspective. We are only a small part of God's creation. And if the Olympic games were open to all creatures, few humans would get medals in any field. The cheetah can sprint from 0-70 miles per hour in 3 seconds. What human being would be able to compete in a sprinting contest with it? The Pronghorn cruises at an average of 35 miles per hour for miles at a time. Sometimes it will accelerate to 60 miles

per hour to outrace a car across the grasslands apparently just for the thrill of victory. What human being is going to be able to compete in a distance event with this animal? How well do you think even the strongest humans would compete against the lions or elephants of the world? And God is infinitely greater than anything that He has created. It's no wonder that all of His creation is struck with a sense of awe in His presence.

When we really experience the presence of God in worship, we will be euphoric. It's good to be in the presence of the Lord. And our emotions will try to convince us to try and stay there forever. We will want to just bask in God's presence and never leave. Stay as long as you can – but realize that it's unrealistic to stay on the mountain top indefinitely. Our emotions couldn't take it – and it's down in the valleys where the fruit is grown. God has job for each of us to do, and that job is down in the valley. But if we really experience the presence of God in worship, there will be more than just an emotional euphoria. There will also be a sense of reverential fear and terror. But as we realize God's love for us and his acceptance of us as amazing as that is to us, we will also be comforted and encouraged. What a privilege it is to experience the presence of God in worship!

Jack Hayford was visiting Winston Churchill's boyhood home in Oxfordshire, England. Churchill came from a noble environment. His boyhood home is called Blenheim Palace. As Hayford was walking around the beautifully cultivated gardens and touring through the stately rooms of the mansion, he couldn't help but think of how this environment had helped to mold the man who influenced the history of this world to such a dramatic

degree. It was at this time that the worship chorus *Majesty* began to be formed in the mind of the California pastor. Listen to Hayford's own words as he describes his feelings:

I was thinking of how Churchill's early home life in such a regal setting would have contributed to his own perspective on himself. Then my thought leaped to the fact that we are daily invited to walk and talk with royalty. Suddenly I was stirred. Majesty! His majesty, whom I worship, not only welcomes my fellowship, but wants to infuse my life with purpose and power as I bow in His presence.

Jack Hayford went back to his room and scribbled out the words to that chorus. *Majesty, worship His majesty. Unto Jesus be all glory, honor and praise. Majesty, kingdom authority flow from His throne unto His own, His anthem raise. So exalt, lift up on high the name of Jesus. Magnify, come glorify Christ Jesus, the King. Majesty, worship His majesty; Jesus who died, now glorified, King of all Kings.*

Worship happens anytime we experience the presence of God in our lives. Let's go forth into this next week with a fervent desire to experience the presence of God in our lives wherever we might be, whatever we might be doing for the Apostle Paul wrote that whatever we do in word or deed, we are to do all to the glory of God.