

Down from the Mountain

Passage: Luke 9:37-45 | From the series: Luke

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Jamie and team, thank you for leading us in worship. It has been such a joy to have our summer interns with us for the past six weeks! They have been contributing so much to our ministry here at PBC. Three of them just got back from a week at Hume with our middle and high school students. Many of them helped with the three summer camps that we have hosted here at PBC. They have been leading our college ministry as about 30 college students have gathered each Thursday evening. And, as you saw this morning, they have helped lead us in worship. Can we thank God for these great interns?

Well, if we have not met yet, my name is Dan, and I am one of the pastors here. This morning, we are continuing our series in the Gospel of Luke, picking up just after the story of the Transfiguration, which we looked at last week. The transfiguration, as we saw, was a mountaintop experience for the disciples. It took place on a literal mountaintop, but more importantly, this was a spiritual mountaintop experience. Jesus' glory burst through his humanity – face glowing, clothes radiating light – and the disciples saw him as he truly was. In that moment, they experienced a glimpse of God's glory, a taste of heaven.

In our passage for today, we are going to see what happens as the disciples come down the mountain. As they do, they enter into the valley. They encounter opposition – a demon who has possessed a young boy. And they experience failure – they are unable to cast it out. As the disciples come down the mountain, they step into weakness, failure, and confusion – all on the heels of glory.

The Renaissance master Raphael captures this beautifully in his last and most famous painting, [The Transfiguration](#). Look at this image. On the top, you have the transfiguration. Notice the way the light draws your eyes to the top of the image – to Jesus. The glory of Jesus is revealed on the mountaintop.

On the bottom of the image is the next scene. A desperate father brings his demon-possessed son to the disciples, looking for healing. The disciples are frantic. Chaos dominates the scene. They are unable to help. Yet, light also illuminates parts of this scene as well – because just as there are lessons to be learned on the mountaintop, there are also lessons to be learned in the valley. As we will see today, the mountain reveals the glory of Jesus, but the valley reveals our need for him.

This morning, as we look at this story from Luke 9:37-45, we will consider how moments of weakness, failure, and confusion are meant to deepen our faith in Jesus.

A Rough Reentry

Let's see what happens as Jesus and the disciples come down the mountain and reenter their normal lives. **Luke 9:37-39:**

³⁷ On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. ³⁸ And behold, a man from the crowd cried out, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. ³⁹ 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.

Jesus and his disciples have hardly even made their way off the mountain when they find themselves back in the throws of life, confronted once again with the powers of evil — a demon who is tormenting a child, incessantly throwing him into epileptic seizures.

This demon is a reminder that though we follow the one who radiates the very glory of God, we still face an enemy who seeks to steal, to kill, and to destroy. No mountaintop experience changes that. And while Satan and his demons don't always manifest themselves in this way, we must let the Biblical story remind us that we are always in the midst of a great battle. There is a spiritual realm that we may not see with our eyes, but it is just as real as the material realm that we inhabit with our bodies.

So when we come down from the mountain — when we close our Bibles after powerfully encountering God in his Word, when we walk out of this room after a tangible experience of God's presence, when we come back from a transformative week at camp (as many of our students just have) — we must remember as we re-enter life that we have an enemy who wants to rob us of our joy, derail our faith, and cause chaos wherever he can.

The father of this boy cries out to Jesus, *I beg you to look at my son... and to heal him.*

But then he adds one more thing: **Luke 9:40-41**

⁴⁰ "And I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." ⁴¹ Jesus answered, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here."

We have fallen off the mountain into spiritual opposition, into the pain of a father, and into the failure of the disciples.

The "disciples" refers to the Twelve minus Peter, James, and John. Nine disciples of Jesus, unable to cast out this demon.

Well, sure, we might think. How could the disciples cast out this demon? They are merely humans.

True, but remember what we saw a few weeks ago when Jesus sent his disciples out for the first time? Let's look back at **Luke 9:1-2**

And he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, ² and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.

The disciples had already been given power and authority over demons. What's more — they had been successful! Casting out demons was not new for them. They had done this before!

Ah, but in the kingdom of God, past results are no guarantee of future success. Because ministry is not about magic or methods. When it comes to pushing back the forces of evil and ushering in the kingdom of God, there is no incantation or magic spell we can use. This is not Hogwarts. But neither is there a playbook or a strategy or a method that will guarantee results. That is not the way things work in the kingdom of God.

Look again at the way Raphael depicts this scene. Look in the bottom left corner [of the painting]. That figure is one of the nine disciples, and he is holding a book. He's looking for instructions. *How do we do this again? Where is the part that teaches us how to cast out demons that are throwing boys into epileptic seizures? Surely Jesus included this in the manual somewhere!*

It seems that the disciples were relying on their past success, their knowledge, their strategies. They thought that power over evil was something that could be learned, mastered. They were relying on themselves and their own power rather than relying on the power of God.

Friends, we must **Rely on God's Power**. We must rely on God's power.

If you find yourself here today and you feel trapped — trapped by sin, trapped by anxiety, trapped by anger — rely on God's power. If you are here today and you feel stuck — stuck in your own failure, your own shame and guilt — rely on God's power. If you are here today and you feel like you have it all together, like life is going your way and you have what it takes — rely on God's power.

It is so easy to rely on our own strength. Our own ability. It is so easy to fall back on our track record of success. Our past results.

And I am speaking here from personal experience. It is so easy for me to rely on my own power, to feel like I have what it takes. It's so easy for me to feel like I can provide for myself, solve my own problems, trust my own methods. *It's worked in the past; it will work again in the future.*

In those moments, Jesus says, *You faithless and crooked generation. How long must I put up with you?*

I have to admit that I don't really like these words of Jesus. This is a strong rebuke. *How long must I put up with you?* Imagine trying that one in marriage. That wouldn't go well!

This rebuke from Jesus is not just a critique of their lack of faith. Rather, Jesus rebukes them for falling back into their old ways. In calling the disciples a "faithless and crooked generation," he is lumping them in with the whole mass of the faithless and wayward people of Israel, both in their generation but also throughout the history of God's people. The stiff-necked nation of Israel frequently heard rebukes much like this from the prophets: "you faithless and crooked generation" — continually relying on their own power, their own strength, their own effort rather than on God.

Apart from God, this is all we have — our own power, our own strength, our own effort. Apart from God, we must rely on ourselves. But now that we are in Christ, that we have the Spirit of God living in us, we need to stop relying on our own power and rely on the power of God. We must stop falling back into our old ways of self-reliance and truly learn to surrender ourselves to the power of God.

The Majesty of God

Though Jesus rebukes the disciples, he responds to the father with compassion. Let's see what happens as we pick up the story in v. 42. **Luke 9:42-43a:**

⁴²While 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. ⁴³And all were astonished at the majesty of God.

What was impossible for the disciples is easy for Jesus. After one last fit by the demon, Jesus casts it out.

Notice that Luke describes this miracle in three steps: Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit. He heals the boy. And he gives the boy back to his father.

Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit, addressing the spiritual issue at the root of this problem. He heals the boy, addressing the physical need — the epileptic seizures are gone. And he gives the boy back to his father, addressing the emotional distress of a parent who had been watching his son suffering.

Spiritual healing. Physical healing. Emotional healing. Jesus comes to bring all three.

And as he does, *they were all astonished at the majesty of God.*

On the mountaintop, the disciples had this incredible experience of God's glory in the person of Jesus. After having come down the mountain, they have another experience of God's glory. This time, however, the glory of God is put on display because of their own failure. The failure, the weakness, of the disciples leads to God's glory. And that is exactly what happens when we learn not to fear failure, but to trust God with our failure.

The subtle temptation of success is to seek our own glory. The powerful reminder of failure is to **Seek God's Glory.**

Our failures have a powerful way of shifting the attention from us to Jesus. If the disciples had succeeded in casting out this demon, perhaps they would have been tempted to draw attention to themselves. But instead, their failure became the stage upon which God's glory was displayed.

When Confusion Continues

As the people marvel at Jesus after this healing miracle, Jesus shifts the conversation in another direction. **Luke 9:43b-45:**

⁴³ ... But while they were all marveling at everything he was doing, Jesus said to his disciples, ⁴⁴ "Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men." ⁴⁵ But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.

For the second time in this chapter, Jesus begins preparing his disciples for his coming betrayal, and ultimately his crucifixion: *the son of man is about to be delivered into the hands of men*. Jesus tells his disciples to let these words sink into their ears.

On the mount of Transfiguration, the voice of the Father spoke from heaven, saying, *This is my Son; listen to him*. Listen to him. More than just a command to listen to Jesus in the abstract, this was a command to listen to what Jesus had to say about his coming crucifixion. The reason God said that, and the reason that Jesus repeatedly tries to prepare his disciples for the fact that he is going to be betrayed, tortured, and crucified, is that this message was so hard to understand. Indeed, here we see that the disciples didn't understand what Jesus said.

It's not that they literally didn't understand the words coming out of his mouth. Rather, it's that they couldn't make sense of this. Why would Jesus say this? Why would he be delivered into the hands of men? Why would the messiah suffer defeat, face death? They could not wrap their minds around this.

Even more, God didn't want them to fully understand his plan at this point. It was *concealed* from them. Why would God do this? Does he want them to know what's about to happen? Isn't that why Jesus is telling them?

Yes. But God doesn't only want them to *know* what is going to happen. He wants them to *trust* him in the midst of the unknown. So he shows them part of the plan, keeps some of it concealed, and says, "Will you trust me?"

This is often exactly what God does with us as well. He gives us just enough of a picture of what he's doing to know which direction to go in, and then says, "Will you trust me?"

In this text, we have already been encouraged to rely on God's power and to seek God's glory. Now we are invited to **Trust God's Plan**.

Trust God's plan even when you don't know exactly where things are headed. Trust God's plan even when things feel scary and confusing. Trust God's plan even when it feels like you are walking into a cloud of uncertainty.

Gregory of Nyssa was one of the early Church Fathers. Writing in the 4th century A.D., he spoke about the spiritual journey as a journey from light into darknesses. Not from darkness into light, but from light into darkness. By darkness, he did not mean evil, but rather uncertainty. Gregory used the life of Moses as a paradigm. Moses' first major encounter with God happened at the burning bush. It was light. It was bright. It was easy to see.

However, as Moses' life continues, his encounters with God take place on Mount Sinai, which is covered in a cloud. The closer Moses gets to God, the harder it becomes to see — because God is teaching him not just to see, but to trust.

In biblical thought, faith is not the opposite of doubt. Faith is the opposite of sight. Faith is what we have when we can't see the whole picture, when we don't understand exactly what is happening.

Jesus tells his disciples of his coming death, and they just don't understand. It just doesn't make sense. And that's exactly what God wanted for them at that time, because he was invite them to *trust his plan* even when they didn't understand it.

Jesus' invitation for us today is the same: to trust his plan — not because we know exactly how it will play out, but because we trust that he is good, that is able, and that he is in control.

Growing in Dependence

Earlier this summer, I was teaching Rhett, our youngest son, how to ride a bike. After teaching my first two how to ride, I learned a little trick. I take a towel, roll it up, and wrap it around their chest like a harness. Holding it from the back, I can stabilize him while he learns to get his balance. As he gets the hang of it, he is doing more of the work and I am doing less until he doesn't need the towel at all. He is learning to ride independently.

Our kids are now 5, 7, and 9 years old. We have reached a new phase as a family. It's been 2 years since I've changed a diaper. Everyone gets themselves ready in the morning. Our kids are growing in independence. I know that trajectory will continue. Soon enough they will be learning to drive, heading off to college, building their careers, starting their families. More and more independence. One day, I will even depend on them to take care of me.

This is all part of the process of growing up — becoming more and more independent.

In our lives with Jesus, it is just the opposite. Growing in faith is not about graduating from dependence; it's about growing in dependence. Spiritual maturity is about becoming more and more dependent on Jesus over the course of a lifetime.

Here's the crazy thing: as we become more independent in life, it becomes more difficult to truly depend on God. This is why Jesus says we must become like little children to enter the kingdom.

And yet the invitation from Jesus stands: depend on me. Trust in me. Acknowledge your need for me. Place your faith in me.

Let's pray.