

[Luke 9:28-36](#)

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there what I now first felt in my heart. But it was not long before the enemy suggested, "This cannot be faith; for where is thy joy?" Then was I taught that peace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation; but that, as to the transports of joy that usually attend the beginning of it, especially in those who have mourned deeply, God sometimes giveth, sometimes withholdeth, them according to the counsels of His own will.

Longstanding Methodists should recognise that extended quote as coming from John Wesley's Journal for the date 24th May 1738, the date we sometimes call his conversion.

And I read it today as an illustration of Christian experience. His heart is strangely warmed. Yet on the other hand he then expects to be filled with joy but he isn't, and he learns that sometimes God gives joy and on other occasions he doesn't.

This live experience of God is something Wesley emphasised as a way of knowing God and his ways in addition to the classic triad of Scripture, the traditions of the church, and human reason.

And if the story of the Transfiguration is about anything, it's about Peter, James, and John having a vivid experience of God. I think it gives us a good vantage point from which to consider why God does and does not grant us significant spiritual experiences.

Firstly, a spiritual experience is about *grace*.

Peter, James, and John are not chosen due to their merits or superior spiritual status. No, they are simply chosen by Jesus to accompany him. No more.

We need to remember, then, that if someone has a profound experience of God they are not to be thought of as somehow better than the rest of us. For those who do have the privilege of such things, it can be tempting to think that they are closer to God than others. But it isn't necessarily the case. A spiritual experience is not a badge to wear, it's a gift to receive with gratitude. And like Wesley in his analysis of joy, we may or may not know why God has granted it.

If you want any evidence that Peter, James, and John are not of a higher status than the other disciples, you have only to look at what happens after this incident. They come down from the mountain to find the other disciples failing to cast a demon from a boy. But do Peter, James, or John with their extraordinary encounter intervene and sort it out? No. They are no more competent than the rest of the Twelve. They have not been elevated by what happened on the mountain.

If you are granted some special meeting with Almighty God in your life, do not set yourself up as better than your brother and sister Christians. Instead, appreciate the wonder of God's grace.

And if you come across someone who has a dramatic appointment with God, then equally do not regard yourself as inferior, and do not be envious. And I know this one: I've sat in meetings where speakers have picked out people to give them prophetic words from God, but they never pointed to me. Was God not interested in me? Was I not special to him?

But it is all about grace. God has his purposes. Sometimes we understand them, sometimes we don't, but grace is at the heart of his actions.

Secondly, a spiritual experience is a *glimpse*.

What do we make of Peter's blabbering suggestion to put up three shelters – one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah? Even Luke says that Peter didn't know what he was saying. (Verse 33)

It could be some kind of monument. There are examples in Scripture of people building something to commemorate a particular divine encounter. But the trouble with monuments is we turn them into museums, and we don't continue with a live, on-going relationship with God in Christ, we just look back with Instagram filters to the past and appoint curators instead of prophets.

I think the New Testament scholar Ian Paul has got it right in assessing Peter's mistaken suggestion when [he writes](#),

He has not yet understood that this is a momentary drawing back of the curtain, giving him and the other two a glimpse of the heavenly reality of who Jesus really is, but that this is not the end of the story—yet.

'A momentary drawing back of the curtain.' Peter, James, and John catch a glimpse of what is to come. It isn't now, but it's a sign of what's to come.

So any Christian who tells us that we should be living in a permanent state of bliss and of heightened spiritual experience is wrong. The end of the story hasn't happened yet. We know it will come, and occasionally God grants us little foretastes to assure us it's on the way. But right now we cannot spend all our lives on the mountain in the cloud of glory.

That isn't meant to be an excuse for those of us who want the very minimum experience of God: those of us who want enough of God to be forgiven but not so much that we are challenged; those of us who are happy to give him Sunday but not Monday to Saturday.

But it is to say, let's keep spiritual experiences in perspective. We can expect they will happen from time to time (although we cannot predict them). But they happen to keep us oriented towards God's great future. The true fruit of a powerful divine experience is that we live more passionately for Jesus and his kingdom as a result.

Thirdly and finally, a spiritual experience is an *encouragement*.

The context is important here. Just before this incident Jesus has given his first prophecy to his disciples that he is going to Jerusalem where he will be betrayed, suffer, die, and be raised again.

It's picked up in the reading, when Moses and Elijah talk with Jesus:

They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem. (Verse 31)

His departure? Well, remember there's an Old Testament book called 'Departure.' Exodus! And that's the Greek word here: *exodos*. Just as God set his people the Israelites free from the oppression of Egypt in the Exodus, so

now his Son will set people free from the oppression of sin by his own *exodos* at Jerusalem, in his cross and resurrection.

But to face that is terrifying. Nowhere do we see that more clearly than when Jesus prays in Gethsemane. I believe that to help him face that terrible time the Father grants his Son a profoundly close encounter, where he affirms him above all others – even above Moses and Elijah:

A voice came from the cloud, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.' (Verse 35)

I don't think it's a coincidence that some of the most vivid accounts of people meeting with God come from the testimonies of the persecuted church. These are folk who need the encouragement to stand firm, even in suffering for the name of Jesus. The spiritual experience is not some heavenly tickling just to make us feel good. Often God makes himself known in the most powerful way to those who most need that encouragement.

Certainly, I can look back on the deep experiences of God I have occasionally had and realise that several of them were clustered around a very dark time of my life. God reminded me he was still there and he still had his hand on my life, no matter what I was going through.

As we **conclude**, note how the story ends:

When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves and did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen. (Verse 36)

They don't go back and boast about it. Maybe they sense what I said at first that these experiences are about God's grace, not our merit. Perhaps they realised the privilege they'd been granted in being given a glimpse of how the great story ends. They might also have felt encouraged, even though doubtless they still didn't understand the necessity of Jesus suffering.

But I pray that we're all open to whatever God is saying and doing when he interrupts normal service with something special.