

Let's Build an Altar

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Text: Matt 17:1-13

We're going to look at this account, but first we need a bit of background. For that, we need to go back to Exodus 24. There, God calls Moses to meet Him on a mountain. That chapter begins with God saying to Moses, "*Come up to the LORD ...*" He was to bring seventy-two elders to the foot of the mountain to worship "*... but Moses alone is to approach the LORD.*" The next morning, Moses got up and built an altar at the foot of the mountain. He set up twelve pillars to represent the twelve tribes, and then they made sacrificial offerings. Moses read to them the Book of the Covenant, which we have in the form of Exodus, chapters 19-23. He sprinkled blood from the sacrificial animals on the people and declared it *the blood of the covenant* (24:8) that God was making with His people. Then, verse 12, God invited Moses up the mountain a second time, and, verse 15, Moses went, where he communed with God for forty days.

Now, When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it; the cloud is the dense cloud of Exodus 19:9, where God told Moses that "*I am going to come to you in a dense cloud ...*" The idea here is that God's voice would be heard, but God himself would not be seen. In fact, in all of this account, there are only two manifestations of God. One is here in chapter 24, where God manifests himself as a Guest at a holy meal. But the only description is of the pavement under God's feet, as if the elders dared not look up to gaze directly upon their Holy God. They share this divine meal and are not condemned in the presence of God. Twice it says they saw God, but they did not see His face. The second time is in the latter half of chapter 33, where Moses asks God to show His glory (v. 18). God passed by him, covering Moses with His hand, and lifting only as He passed, so that Moses saw only the back of God (v. 23), for "*my face must not be seen.*"

When the episode ends, near the end of chapter 35, Moses came down from the mountain with the tablets of the law, already given in chapter 20. *He was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD.* The people reacted to him. *When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him.* So Moses covered his face with a veil. He removed the veil when he went into the Tent of Meeting, when he entered the LORD's presence, and put it back on when he came out. Paul intimates in 2 Corinthians 3:13, that Moses kept the veil on so that the people would not see that the radiance of God's glory had faded. Paul likens that to a veil over the hearts of those who read the Scripture without understanding. That's interesting, but not germane to our discussion this morning. What is important to us is the meeting with God on the mountain and the dense cloud.

After six days, Jesus took with him Peter, James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. Six days would not have been long enough for the trip deep into the southern desert to stand on the same mountain, Sinai, where Moses had met God. It would have been enough to travel to Mt. Tabor, overlooking the Valley of Jezreel, or to Mt. Hermon, which now straddles the

border of Lebanon and Syria and which is the source of the Jordan River. The peak of Mt. Tabor is about 1900 feet, and the summit of Mt. Hermon is over 9200 feet high. Mt. Tabor is the site traditionally labeled for this event, but Mt. Hermon is also a distinct possibility, and certainly qualifies as a “high mountain.” I must add that we often spend a lot of time on trivia such as this – where was it? The place may be significant, but the event is far more so. People want to know where along the Jordan River Jesus was baptized. It doesn’t matter precisely where, although the Jordan is significant. But the baptism is far more important.

But there on the mountain, Jesus is transformed. Our translations say “transfigured.” The Greek μετεμορφώσθη (metemorphosthe) means to change form. Jesus appearance was changed. Let’s be careful here: while his appearance is like that of the angels, Jesus did not turn into an angel. *His face shone like the sun*, which means they could not gaze into his face. They could no longer look at him. *His clothes became as white as the light*. In the prologue to his gospel, John refers to Jesus as the light. He was *the light of all mankind*. He was *the true light that gives light*. In his first letter, John says that *God is light* (1 Jn. 1:5) *and in him is no darkness*. When we walk with him, we walk in the light (1 Jn 1:7).

Paul’s charge to Timothy and benediction regarding the appearing of Christ refers to *God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see* (1 Tim 6:16). What I’m trying to tell you is that Jesus showed to the three his deity, cloaked in divine light. Jesus showed the disciples that he was indeed one with the Father. And we must note that in the New Jerusalem, there is no need of sun or moon, *for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb (Jesus) is it’s lamp* (Rev. 21:23). He is our light and the light of the world. As believers, we are called to walk in his light and to live as children of the light.

Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Oh, how we would love to hear that conversation. Here’s what is significant about that: The end of Deuteronomy records the death of Moses. Except this is quite strange. Deuteronomy 32, has Moses climbing Mt. Nebo to view the Land of Promise that he would not enter. *And Moses the servant of the LORD died there in Moab, as the LORD had said. He buried him in Moab ... but to this day no one knows where his grave is* (vv 5-6). It sounds as if they went and searched. They did not find a body, nor did they find a grave. As far as Israel was concerned, Moses simply went up the mountain and disappeared. I think they assumed that he had died and that God had buried him. Moses went up the mountain and never came back down. He is recorded as having died, but, well, no one really knows. Did God take Moses as he had taken Enoch? Perhaps.

And Elijah went up to heaven in a chariot of fire. 2 Kings 2:11 – *As Elijah and Elisha were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.* It is partly because Elijah did not die that Jews leave a chair and an open door for him at Passover, and anticipate the return of Elijah to usher in the age of the Messiah. It is why people thought John the Baptist might be Elijah, and why, after John had been executed, some thought that Jesus might be Elijah.

And now, here on the mountain to men of God, two men who walked with God, who stood for God in the toughest of times, are walking and talking with Jesus. Can you say “holy ground”? What a place to be, don’t you think? And because of who these two are, I suspect the conversation had something to do with life and death, with mortality and immortality, and perhaps with resurrection. Jesus had begun to talk with his disciples about his coming suffering and death. Perhaps this was the Father’s way of preparing Jesus for dangerous times and assuring the Son that *for the joy set before him he could endure the cross* and would sit down at the right hand of God (Heb 12:2).

Now, what happens next is not just Peter. There’s a little bit of all of us. We want to stay on the mountain. Those mountain-top experiences are formative for us. They are important. We feel close to God, closer than usual. It’s what we desire most – to stay in the presence of God. That’s why we return year after year to those special places where we have experienced the nearness of God. It’s why the altar has become so important in our churches – not because it is a place of repentance, necessarily, but because it is there we have experienced the near presence of God.

Let me quote C. S. Lewis again:

The Christian says, ‘Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim; well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. [Now, note this:] If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing.’¹

We find in ourselves the desire to be with God, to enjoy His presence, to feel Him near. And we gravitate to those places where that seems most likely. But perhaps that desire is merely the foreshadowing of the place we are meant to be. And those places merely models of the place we desire most to be. So we desire to build temples, to erect monuments, to build altars, as Abraham did at Bethel, for there he met God; as Jacob did at Peniel when he realized he had wrestled with God; as David did at the threshing floor where he saw the angel of God standing. We build altars where we have found God.

But God himself interrupts Peter. *While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”* Remember the cloud that covered the mountain with Moses. We are to realize that the Father has now joined the conversation, and he is not speaking to Elijah and Moses, but to Peter, James, John, and now to us. God the Father lays claim to Jesus as his Beloved Son. But more than that, he instructs us to listen, not just hear, but to listen intently to what Jesus teaches us.

There’s something vital we need to learn at this very moment and in this very place. Jesus

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 136

does not need shrines and altars. Jesus does not want us to build monuments to him. We are his monuments. We are living altars. Christ does not dwell in a place, but in a people. He is not enclosed in four walls and a ceiling, but dwells in the hearts of those who listen to his words and follow his instructions. Peter wanted to build temples to Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. God stopped him in his tracks. Because God will not be confined to a mountain. He will not be kept like a pet or a museum artifact. He will not be locked into time and space. Christ did not come to build a building, but to inaugurate a kingdom.

Let me say this very clearly: we have gotten into the habit of “going to church.” We announce “church work days” in order to paint, mow, remodel, or whatever may need doing to a building or a property. We think of church as a place and time – Sunday mornings at 10:45 is when we “have church.” The Bible knows of no such thing. The church is not a place. In fact, the very word we translate “church” does not refer to a place at all. It refers to a people. William Tyndale, when translating the New Testament into English, chose the word *congregation* to translate ἐκκλησία (ekklesia). The word literally means *those who are called*, the called people, the gathered people, the gathering. We do not go to church; we are the church. Wherever two or three are *gathered* in his name, there is the church. The kingdom of God is not a place; it is a people, and Jesus came to gather to himself a people to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (1 Pet 2:9). The kingdom is not defined by borders, but by the Holy Spirit dwelling in the hearts of God’s people. There is no need of a temple, or a shrine, or an altar. Your heart is the altar of God. Your life is the shrine of God’s presence. Your testimony is his temple. Jesus doesn’t need you to build him a monument. The monument you build for Jesus is your life lived in obedience to his word.

Church buildings proliferate and congregations spend tons of money to build monuments of stone and steel. They decorate with stained glass (which I love) and soft carpets. The problem with that is that after having built our buildings and furnished them, we go to hide in them. That’s not Biblical. If you are the monument to God’s grace, if you are the temple of God, then wherever you go the light of Christ should shine and the words of Christ should be heard. *You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare ... Listen to this: that you may declare, announce, speak about, sing about ... that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light* (1 Pet 2:9).

You carry the light of Christ. Let it shine. You are the salt of Christ. Flavor your world. You are the tabernacle of Christ, the place where Christ dwells. Let the world around you see.