

Mark 9:2-9

When people live to tell about their “near-death” experiences, they usually speak of walking toward a bright light. It is widely assumed that such people were very close to the gates of heaven but that God was not yet ready for them. We should pay little attention to such stories. The mind, even in a semi-conscious state is a powerful thing. And what’s more, the Bible says that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Perhaps the bright light, therefore, was something besides the gate of heaven.

When Peter, James, and John were up on the mountain with Jesus, it must have seemed to them like a “near-death” experience. They had to shield their eyes from the bright light which was, in fact, Jesus the Son of God. There were saints there standing with Jesus. Not illusions, but Moses and Elijah in the flesh. And this experience was not just visual, it was audible. The voice of God spoke to them from the cloud. Your Lord wants you to know for a fact that His transfiguration really happened, and so He took, not one, but three disciples with Him. Three eye-witnesses were there because what happened on that mountain was not just for them, it is also for you.

That day Jesus gave these men a “foretaste of the feast to come.” He opened the door just a crack and let His disciples take a peek at the glory of heaven. But it was more than they could handle. All three men were terrified. Peter, never at a loss for words, rambled on like a babbling idiot. In this “near-death” experience, it’s not that God wasn’t ready for them; they were not ready for God.

Moses and Elijah were fine with the whole thing. They stood there conversing with Jesus and they were not terrified. But that’s because sin was no longer a part of who they were. Purged of their sinful flesh, they could stand upright in the glory of Christ. Peter, James, and John, however, had to fall down in fear. They were not ready for that glory because sin still clung to their nature.

The terror they felt that day is the same terror that filled the Israelites when God came down upon Mt. Sinai and there was darkness with the threat of death as the mountain shook, with fire and smoke coming from it. Where is that terror today? God’s Law has not changed. We are no less sinful than Peter, James, and John, or the Israelites camped out before Mt. Sinai. When we who are sinful enter the presence of the holy God, and His Law sounds forth like Mt. Sinai erupting with fire and smoke and the threat of death to anyone who crosses the barrier of that Law, is there no terror anymore? Is there no fear within us for disobeying the holy God who created us?

When we confess our sins, do we rightly fall down to our knees with Peter, James, and John recognizing the utter horror of it all--that we have offended our God by how we have lived, and that we deserve hell for our sins...or are we Pharisees who smugly speak the words of confession but give little thought to what we are saying? What does it mean when someone is in the habit of disobeying father and mother without regret? What does it mean when someone is in the habit of skipping church with little remorse at all? What does it mean when you and I set aside God’s Law, trample His commands underfoot, and there is no anguish, no fear, no terror, no remorse? It means that we are not ready for God, and that we had better repent before God is ready for us.

Pharisees who refuse to allow God’s Law to terrorize them will have little use for Jesus and His Word, but if you, like Peter, James, and John have a heart which has been prepared by God’s Law, then what I now have to say will be of great comfort to you. In the midst of their terror, God told these disciples to do one thing: “Listen to (Jesus).” He did not tell them to go out and buy a “What would Jesus do” bracelet; He said, “Listen to Him.” He did not tell them they needed to make a decision to accept Jesus into their heart; He said, “Listen to Him.”

When a person who appears healthy has just been told he is dying of cancer, that person is searching for one thing...good news; news that there is a medicine which can help; news which gives that person something to put his hope in. And that's just what God gave to Peter, James, and John, and it's what He gives to you: Listen to Jesus. Jesus does not turn away from you in your moment of fear. He has good news for you. He has, He is the medicine which saves your soul from perishing and calms your terrified heart.

“Listen to Jesus.” This is not a once-in-a-lifetime command. This is what God urges you to do every day of your life because of His love for you. Jesus is the only one who can answer the harsh and accusing Law of God, and this is because He endured what that Law demanded for you. God's Law demands that the penalty for sin must be paid, and so Jesus became the sinner in your place and He was punished for your wrongs. God's Law demands justice. “The soul that sins shall die.” And so Jesus died for you. The same Jesus who stood with all His glory on the mountain; whom angels adore; this glorious God covered Himself with our filthy sins and He died in agony for no other reason than to satisfy the demands of the Law on your behalf.

Jesus has the answer for God's Law. His suffering and death for you is that answer. And because He rose from the dead, His words to you are the good news by which you can live. “I do not condemn you; go and sin no more.” His words to the adulterous woman are for you. “I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live.” His words to Martha are for you. “Whoever comes to Me, I will never cast out.” His words to the Jews are for you. God wants you to listen to Jesus because Jesus' words “are Spirit and they are life.” They filled the ears of Peter, James, and John, and these men, living in the power and comfort of those words, became living witnesses for Christ, and today they stand upright with Moses and Elijah in the glory of heaven. And so will you, because anyone who listens to Jesus' words and believes what they say has eternal life.

The problem for us, however, is that you and I don't always listen to Jesus so well. We listen, but we're not always certain that His words are really for us, because we listen with doubts, we listen with fears, we listen with sinful ears and hearts. Friend, you need to know that the very thing God wants you to do is what He Himself did and does. God listens to His Son. On the cross Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them,” and God listened. He does forgive you...your sinful ears, your sinful hearts; everything that is wrong in you and with you He forgives because Jesus prayed as He was dying for you and God was listening. Every day Jesus prays for you. He prays to His Father: This one is My baptized child, dear Father. Forgive him his sins. Forgive her. My blood was shed for this precious child of Mine. And every day God listens to Jesus. And every day God is pardoning your sins.

Does this mean that we do not have to worry about God's accusing Law anymore? Worry, no, but we still need to hear it often. As long as sin clings to our flesh we need to hear the Law of God so that we are driven in terror to our knees with Peter, James, and John. But then and there Jesus lifts you up from your knees and stands you upright with Him. He speaks His good news to you. He gives you His body and blood in the Sacrament, and you are forgiven, your are comforted, and you are ready to stand with Moses and Elijah in the glory of heaven. Amen.