

“The Look of Glory”

6/23/19; Mark 10: 32-45

by Rev. Steve Hammond for FBC of Newport, NH

(read the whole text 32-45)

//35 *Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”*

36 *“What do you want me to do for you?” he asked.*

37 *They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.”*

38 *“You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said.//*

—Mark 10:35-38a (NIV)

What does glory look like? Victory in battle is a big one. Honor and distinction for a great deed, such as victory in battle. And then there’s beauty and resplendence in the sheer appearance of something. Not too many chapters ago Jesus was transfigured before the eyes of Peter, James and John. They could see with their eyes the whiteness of glory emanating from him. As overwhelming as that experience was, it was pretty much what one might expect when it comes to the glory of God’s Son.

But then Jesus set off for Jerusalem. This surprised his disciples and terrified the casual followers. Because that’s where the Jewish authorities were concentrated and where they could best carry out their opposition to Jesus—to the point of having him arrested and executed for blasphemy. This is what his followers feared. And this is exactly what Jesus predicted, along with the word that he would rise again on the third day. Still, everyone must have been wondering why Jesus would deliberately aim for going to Jerusalem? Why not just stay away from there in the first place. No need for any rising if you’re not killed in the first place.

This is the third time Jesus has singled out the Twelve for hearing this disturbing news. The first time was just *prior* to the Transfiguration. You remember, right? Peter got in an argument with Jesus about this talk of being beaten and killed. That didn’t go over very well with Jesus. The second time was just *after* the Transfiguration and the argument that followed at the base of the mountain. The argument was between the Apostles as to which one of them was the greatest. That’s where Jesus picked up a little child and taught them about the greatness of God being able to come through even a little one like that child. The greatness isn’t in the child, though, so much as it’s in the one he represents, which in this case would be Christ. And the greatness in Christ would be in the One who sent him.

Now they’re headed for Jerusalem and the disciples get this third word predicting Jesus’ death and resurrection. Do you think maybe Jesus is trying to tell them something? Do you think they’ll get it this time? Third time’s the charm, so they say. But not in this case.

Some time after this third prediction comes James and John looking to ask Jesus for a favor. They know it's an awkward request so they want him to agree to it before they've told him what it is. Jesus side-steps that ploy and simply asks them what they want. The two brothers want the privileged position of sitting on the left and the right of Jesus when he comes into his glory. They want to be a part of his glory, which they sense is very near to coming. Keep in mind there were only three disciples who saw Jesus transfigured on the mountain. And James and John were two of the three. They must think they've got Jesus' glory all figured out. But do they? Does this mean they finally get it? Do they see the dark side of God's glory in the cross? Not at all.

They are pretty much ignoring what Jesus said twice before about the cross. They are looking right past it and going straight to the grandeur of Jesus sitting on the throne of David in the kingdom of God. You can hear the irony of this as Jesus tells them they don't know what they're asking. They're asking to be on the right and left of him in his glory. However, that glory is first the crown of thorns and the crucifixion. That shadowy, dark way is actually the way to the Kingdom's throne.

You can also hear the embarrassing nature of the brothers' request by the indignation in the voice of the other disciples as they caught wind of what James and John had tried to do. The others may well have been upset, not only with it being a political ploy, but with the fact that none of the others thought of it first.

What's amazing, though, is how gentle Jesus is here with all of them. It's easy to imagine Jesus being quite upset with the fact that his disciples have such worldly ambitions in relation to himself and his kingdom. But instead of chastising them, he teaches them. He knows their hearts are in the right place (the "right place" being with Jesus). He knows their whole world has taught them to think of glory only in terms of raw power and impressive appearances. He surely knows that no amount of his present teaching about the cross and resurrection is going to open their eyes to the truth of it beforehand. They are simply going to have to endure this dark glory from the edges of it as they will soon scatter in fear. Then they will enjoy the bright glory on the third day as Jesus proves himself risen. But even then, there will be more teaching from Jesus, and ultimately it will be the presence of the Holy Spirit who leads them into the depth of the full gospel truth—the truth of both the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ!

So then, what are we to make of this dark side of God's glory in the cross?

We are to make of it the same exact thing as did the Twelve. We need to hear about it and not ignore it. We need to see it and not run away from it. And if we do run away from it, we need to be gathered back so we can see it in the faithful light of Jesus Christ. As we follow Jesus, he will not let us skip over the cross. The resurrection itself points us to the cross. They're a package deal. You simply can't skip the cross and try to go directly to the resurrection. Whoever heard of a resurrection without first there be a dying?

Do you ever fail to see the dark side of God's glory? Sure you do. We all do. We see things relating to God which we don't understand, things we don't think should even be possible given the presence of God. "If there's a God, how come there is so much evil in the world?" is one expression of people not seeing it. Not seeing it as glory anyway. Other expressions are all around us. "How could God allow so much suffering in my life?" "Why is there slavery in the world and in the Bible?" "How could God bring judgment down on entire populations of people? Men, women and children in the great flood; in the cities of Sodom & Gomorrah; in Jerusalem?" "Why did God command Abraham to sacrifice his own promised son?" "How could God forgive David for his sins of adultery and murder?" "Why was there a holocaust?"

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Hard questions. Trying situations. Life as seen from the dark side, where God doesn't seem to fit, where even Jesus doesn't seem to belong. Yet this is where he is headed and where he did the central work of his entire ministry—the cross. This was his ultimate work of service for humanity. This was his ultimate sacrifice for God. This was, and still is, God's answer to all the dark questions and impossible situations in which we find ourselves throughout life. This cross is our salvation. And this cross is God's glory, a dark glory involving God's suffering and shame before the world, his shed blood and last breath, and a darkness covering the land. But it's a glory none the less. Redemption, atonement, salvation itself—it's all there in the cross.

And we would be wise to fix our eyes upon it. Look at it. Look at it until we see it for what it is. And give God all the glory due his name.

I had an unpleasant experience the other day. No, I'll not be talking about having my tooth pulled last Thursday. That was nothing compared to this experience. I was practicing on some chess puzzles online and losing badly. I'd been fairly good at those things up to this point. They show you a setup and ask you to determine what the next best move would be for white or black. There's no clock ticking away, like in most games, so I can stare at that board for as long as I want until I come up with the best move given that situation.

One thing though, they don't give credit for anything but the best move. Pretty good moves don't cut it. They are treated just like bad moves. If you don't make the best move the screen will instantly say: "Failure!" in big red letters. Sometimes, even when you come up with a best move, it tells you to keep going (just to make sure you know what you're doing). If that next move isn't also the best continuation then the screen will say: "Failure!" for the whole puzzle.

So, last Tuesday night I was seeing a lot of failure. Puzzle after puzzle, I would think I saw the best move, only to find out I was blind. I lost about 16 puzzles in a row, or nearly in a row. And I lost over 100 points on my puzzle rating, which bruised my ego something terrible. But in the upcoming days I was studying for this message and I was struck by two lessons from the cross, among many, that would even carry over into my world of chess.

The first was to not be afraid of death, dying or looking like a loser. I mean, you can be afraid of those things, but don't let them petrify you. Don't let them have the last word. In fact, losing can be one of the best moves for you in that it can reveal your unseen weaknesses. And once revealed, they can be dealt with. In terms of chess this is relatively easy. It's just a game. Though chess players need to be reminded of that once in a while. In real life situations it's not a game at all. There's real suffering, real loss, and death certainly towers over us as if it has the last word no matter what.

But the cross has already answered the worst of life, including death. Even before the resurrection, Jesus defeated death with his being God's "best move." He was sinless. He was perfectly righteous. He died but he couldn't be held, for he was in the right with God and all that is true. It's as if the word "Failure!" had come on the screen of Christ's life, except upon closer examination it was proved the verdict itself was wrong. Jesus was himself the best move and the verdict had to be reversed. And God raised Jesus from the dead.

Now he promises to raise all who would put their hope in him. We can still make bad moves, but now we can have them revealed in the light of Christ and in the confidence of God's best move being our best move in the end.

The second lesson had to do with faith and vision. In terms of chess, I had to have more faith in the best move. I had to be careful not to pretend I see the best move. Nor should I simply guess at it. In faith I had to keep looking at the board until I actually saw what was really going on there. There's a difference between thinking the fuzzy move you're looking at is the best move and actually seeing the best move, especially with that "ah hah" experience of discovering it for yourself.

Equipped with my newfound attitude, I went back and played more puzzles. I gained back nearly all the points I'd lost. Better yet, I gained a whole new attitude that is greater than whether I lost or won at all. For this was a lesson on far more than chess.

In terms of real life it would be overwhelming for us to try to see the absolute best move in all the puzzling situations we come across, especially in those darkest of situations. But the Gospel is about the best move in but one situation—the cross of Christ. It's not even our move; it's God's move. All we have to do is agree with him. All we have to do is have faith in him that the move he made with Jesus at that cross was the best move, that there's a glory in there, even though it looks quite dark and losing on the surface. If you believe that, then you are free to look at that cross for as long as you want. In doing so it will reveal all your faults, forgive them, and invite you to learn from them.

As you keep looking you will see for yourself the glory and rightness and love in what God has done for you in Christ. Your eyes will be opened like never before, like a blind man seeing for the first time. Which, by the way, is the very next episode in Mark's chapter ten. It's as if Jesus, Mark and God are trying to tell us something. (And later on Paul: see II Corinthians 4:6)

Can you see it? Do you know the look of glory, even when it's dark?