

## Prayers

### **To God**

Our hearts cry out to You, Lord Jesus Christ, for in the midst of our ordinary and everyday lives, You provide the zest and excitement that bring smiles to our faces. We rejoice because You have saved us, we rejoice because You are our healer, we rejoice because Your love is forever with us, and we rejoice because You are always giving us cause to be happy, even in the darkest of times. Praise be to You, Lord Jesus Christ; all thanks to You, Holy Spirit; and all glory be to You, Almighty God and Father; **AMEN.**

### **For myself**

Pray for your home, especially any who live with you or who are a regular and important part of your life. Ask the Lord to cover your home with His love, so that all who enter might feel and know His presence.

### **For others**

Pray for those who are suffering in war and conflict, whether in the news or not. Pray for people in Syria who are experiencing civil war. Pray for people in various parts of Africa who experience national and tribal conflicts not reported in our news.

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## Meditation

Where is the hope, my friend?  
Where is the desire in this world  
To work for all that is loving and true?  
And to turn away from division and conflict?

Where is the desire, my friend?  
Where is the sense of urgency  
That might make people face all truth  
And turn again to the God of proven salvation?

Where is the integrity, my friend?  
Where can we find an honest assessment  
Of what has gone wrong, so that God's people  
Can once again affect the affairs of nations?

Where is the faith, my friend?  
Where is the godly intent of Christians  
To bear witness to the living Word  
And present the Gospel of love and hope to all?

Where is our destiny, my friend?  
Where will we go if we do not accept Him,  
Receive His infinite grace and mercy,

And find the alternative to eternal destruction?

So will you turn, my friend?  
Will you surrender all to Christ's embrace  
And walk away from worldly ignorance  
To take Your place within God's Kingdom?

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## Bible Passage

### **Luke 9:28-36**

<sup>28</sup> Now about eight days after Jesus said these things, Jesus took Peter, John and James with him, and climbed up the mountain to pray. <sup>29</sup> And while he was praying, His face changed in appearance and his clothes became dazzling white.

<sup>30</sup> Suddenly they saw two men talking to Him, who were Moses and Elijah! <sup>31</sup> They too had the appearance of glory, and were talking about His departure, which was about to take place in Jerusalem.

<sup>32</sup> Now Peter and those who were with him were full of sleep, but having kept themselves awake, they saw both His glory, and that of the two men who stood with Him. <sup>33</sup> Then, as they were leaving Jesus, Peter said to Him, without really knowing what he said,

*"Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three shrines, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"*

<sup>34</sup> As Jesus was speaking, a cloud appeared and overshadowed them, and as they were enveloped by the cloud they were terrified. <sup>35</sup> Then a voice came from the cloud, which said,

***"This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!"***

<sup>36</sup> When the voice had spoken, they found Jesus alone. They kept quiet about this, and at the time, they told no one anything of what they had seen.

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## Review

The transfiguration of Jesus is a remarkable story of heaven breaking through into the visible world to reveal the truth about God and His purposes. It happened at this time in Jesus' ministry because at this critical moment, His disciples were beginning to confess openly their faith that Jesus was indeed God's anointed, the 'Messiah'. They had replaced their cultural expectations of a Jewish Messiah with faith in Jesus, the man they knew, and the One chosen by God for the salvation of the world. Then, as if in delight, heaven broke into earth in 'glory', and God added His blessing to the affirmations of faith made by the disciples on earth (9:20,35).

But there is so much more to this passage, and we shall explore some of its riches. Especially, this passage is a wonderful record of when heaven and earth 'combine', and the glory of God overflows; it happened in Scriptural times and it still happens today.

Here in our text, Luke records that yet again, Jesus was praying (9:28). Remember, the disciples seem to have interrupted Jesus' private prayers only a few days earlier (9:18), but Jesus graciously responded to them and took the opportunity to draw faith out of Peter (9:20). Prayer connected Jesus to His Father, and prayer has always been the interface between earth and heaven, the place where incredibly important things happen!

Of course, we only have the disciples' report of what happened next. They were determined to stay with Jesus, and it seems that they were tired out after a full day, but resolute in their intent to keep awake; perhaps they, too, were aware of the important things that were happening. While in this state, the disciples suddenly saw something extraordinary. Two men appeared, talking with Jesus, and they recognised them as Moses and Elijah! Moreover, they appeared to be wrapped in what they called 'glory', and the report they gave was that Jesus' clothes were dazzling white, and then a cloud came on them!

Some have dismissed this report as the result of the fading senses of men who were virtually asleep! This is more than a little scurrilous, for a vision such as this would be a massive shock to anyone, and it clearly was for the disciples. Moreover, shocks tend to wake people up very abruptly, making them keenly aware of their surroundings!

One other less than helpful suggestion is that the disciples could surely not have recognised Elijah and Moses, for how would they have known what they looked like? But it does not take much for us to understand how Peter, James and John may have recognised the two. Facial clues are not the only ones by which we instantly recognise people, and first century Jews would have had mental pictures of Moses and Elijah from their history. If they did not recognise them from these non-facial clues or from the speech they heard, then surely Jesus helped to identify them, after the event. This matter is not a mystery or a reason to question the truth of the report!

What did Peter, James and John actually see when they reported that they saw 'the appearance of glory (9:31) on Jesus, Moses and Elijah? We do not have to look further than Scripture for the answers to this. God's glory is represented more than once as dazzling brightness (see also Exodus 34:29f., Ezekiel 1:4f.), and this is what the disciples saw on Jesus (9:29), it is what first alerted them to the enormity of what was happening, and the story line hints that Moses and Elijah shared this brightness (9:30). The other description of the glory of God in the Old Testament likens it to a 'cloud' (Exodus 13:21f. Leviticus 16:13f., Deuteronomy 1:33f.). It is not surprising therefore that the disciples were fearful when the enveloping cloud on the mountain covered them. Jewish people generally believed they would die if they saw God!

Now in the middle of this awesome event, Peter launched in and made what may seem an astonishing suggestion. He proposed to make three shrines for those he saw who were wrapped in God's glory. We should not look down on Peter, for he was attempting to respond with faith to the situation. Although we would not think of making shrines, this was a part of Peter's Jewish culture. His proposals were a declaration of faith in Jesus and the glory of God he had seen in Moses and Elijah as well. For him, it was an extension of his earlier confession of Christ, '*You are God's Messiah*' (9:20), but as he would soon realise his ideas were inappropriate. Jesus stood above these two greats of Jewish history. The three of them were not merely comparing notes, they were focussed on Jesus' 'departure', meaning the events of Jesus' death and resurrection by which God's salvation would be made known to the world (9:31).

This time, it was not Jesus who corrected Peter, but God Himself. He spoke from the midst of the cloud to set the record straight, and provide not just Peter, but all Christians with a powerful affirmation of Christ and His ministry. For the second time in Jesus' life, God spoke to Him directly in the hearing of others; '*this is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to Him!*' (9:35). These words echo the words spoken at Jesus' baptism, '*this is my Son, in whom I am well pleased*' (3:22), which were heard by John the Baptist and others present.

The words God spoke on the mountain top of what has become known as the 'transfiguration', confirms Jesus not just in His role as God's Messiah, but in His role as Saviour of the world. After speaking to the disciples for the first time about his coming death and resurrection (9:22), Peter and the other disciples needed to know that what lay ahead was truth and God approved. These events provide this affirmation both for the disciples and for us.

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## Going Deeper

### ***Notes on the text and translation***

**V32** *'they saw both his glory and that of the two men who stood with Him'*

Other translations:

*'they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him'* (NIV)

*'they saw His glory and the two men who stood with Him'* (NRSV)

There is no difficulty here in the translation, but it should be clear that the disciples saw the glory of both Jesus and also the two men. The Greek grammar of the reference to the two men is a little vague, but verse 31 makes it clear that Moses and Elijah appeared in glory as well as Jesus.

**V33** *'let us make three shrines'*

Other translations:

*'let us put up three shelters'* (NIV)

*'let us make three dwellings'* (NRSV)

There is an important issue here. The Greek word used means a religious sanctuary or shrine, and it was used in the New Testament to refer to the Old Testament 'tabernacle', built by Moses to be a focus for worshipping God. I find it hard to imagine that the disciples thought of the O.T. tabernacle at this point, because they knew this to be a huge and complex undertaking. They were probably thinking more about the tents erected by Jews in fields at traditional harvest times, which were places people would gather to praise God. The English word 'shrine' fits this idea best, though it is a word in scripture that is not straightforward and needs to be explained. Why the disciples did this is studied in the study notes.

### ***Further Comments***

#### ***Jesus' morning and evening prayer***

It is only a small point, but this passage describes an event that took place late in the day, and is evidence of Jesus' prayer in the evening rather than early in the morning. Indeed, there is only one famous mention of Jesus' morning prayer in Scripture (Mark 1:35, ) and there are yet more that record Jesus' evening or night prayer (Luke 6:12, Mark 6:45, Matt 14:23)! Moreover, just as the famous passage in Mark (1:35) records Jesus' general habit of prayer, Luke also records Jesus' habit of night time prayer (Luke 6:12), especially when times were critical. It is also worth noting that Jesus spent the whole night in prayer on one occasion (Luke 6:12).

## ***The Law and the Prophets***

Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets, the most significant and holy parts of the Hebrew Bible. Some wonder why Jesus did not meet Abraham or perhaps David on the mountain of transfiguration, two other great figures of Israel's past. Abraham was one of the 'fathers of the nation' and David was the ancestor of Jesus who alone ruled a truly united Israel. Despite this, Moses stands tall as the man who was responsible for giving the people the Ten Commandments, and the holy Law by which they lived, and Elijah stands tall as the first prophet who broke away from the sins of Israel's kings to show that Israel's hope in God was more than human manoeuvring and politics.

But more than this, these two represent the most holy parts of Scripture, according to the Jewish people, 'the Law and the Prophets'. The Law comes first, and then the Prophets (including the books of the 'former prophets', that is, Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah). The Hebrew view of the other writings of the Old Testament (such as Psalms and Job) was that they were of lesser revelation than the Law and the Prophets. Of course, Christians do not grade Scripture in this way today, but it helps to know that Jews in Jesus day did. It would be typical of them to speak about Scripture as 'the Law and the Prophets'.

## ***Shrines, tents and tabernacles***

As we have seen in the translation notes, there is some confusion about what Peter was saying when he mistakenly offered to build some shrines (tents or tabernacles) for the three figures, Christ, Moses and Elijah, on the mountain of transfiguration. The word used by Luke is indeed the one used in Scripture for the tabernacle (Hebrews 8:2f.), but it is also used for the booths put up by Jews at their 'in-gathering' festival services (John 7:2). There is no easy route to knowing what Peter thought he was saying here.

One reason why I have translated the passage 'shrine' is because in Jesus' day, there were many roadside 'shrines', purporting to be the burial places of the great prophets. Of course, little was known about the real burial places of most of the great figures of Israel's past, but that did not stop people erecting such shrines as an expression of faith. To this day, people erect shrines for various religious reasons by the sides of roads. It may simply be that Peter felt the event warranted shrines for Jesus Moses and Elijah. It may even have crossed his mind that Jesus had, in glory, ascended to the Father, and He would not therefore be seen again. A shrine would then be a fitting memorial to what He had done on earth.

The fact that Scripture gives such short shrift to Peter's ideas should ensure that we do not lay much store by trying to explore all this much further.

## ***The glory of God***

It is worth remembering that in the Old Testament, the glory of God was not just a cloud or the shining light surrounding Moses (for quotes, see above). The glory of God was said to 'abide' in the Temple. That is, it was supposed to remain or dwell in the Temple, according to the vision of Ezekiel (9:3f. etc.), except that the Temple itself and the inner shrine in which God's glory dwelt had been destroyed several times since it was built by Solomon.

One of the important cultural shifts that took place when Jesus came is that He helped His disciples and the early church perceive that God's glory did not dwell exclusively in a building, but was alive and active in the world, as God was alive and active in the world. After Jesus died, rose and ascended, Christians were able to see that God's glory dwelt in Jesus, the 'Word', as John reports at the beginning of his Gospel (John 1:14f.). They also realised that the glory of God was available to them in the infilling of the Holy Spirit, who 'sanctified' them and made them holy. They did not claim to be perfect, but they did know that God's glory dwelt in people who did God's work and followed Jesus. Paul writes, '*we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness*

*with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.'* (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Our story today is an important milestone on the journey of people realising that God's glory was not hidden away in a temple, it was within them and active, by the Holy Spirit.

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## **Discipleship**

### ***Application***

#### ***Mountain top experiences***

Some of the greatest events in the Bible happened on mountain tops, but should this mean that we seek 'mountain top experiences'? In the history of the Christian church, some have done precisely this, and monks and hermits have lived their lives on mountains as a consequence of wanting to be near to God. While it may be true that God does indeed speak to Jesus at the transfiguration from a mountain top (9:28), this was not exactly a planned experience for the disciples. Their sight of Jesus' glory came not through climbing mountains but through following Jesus closely and keeping awake (9:32). It would perhaps be best if we kept to the same starting point for our expectations of God's glory.

#### ***Honouring Jesus***

The transfiguration is sometimes left uncelebrated by the Christian church, but we lose out if we forget the significance of this amazing event. When we look at what the Gospel writers say about Jesus' transfiguration, we are confronted by several things, at least (and you could add more),

- a mystery,
- the glory of God,
- the honouring of Jesus,
- and the frailty and misunderstanding of the disciples.

Above all, the transfiguration celebrates heaven breaking through into earth, and the glory of God being seen by people. We need more of this today, and it happens when Jesus Christ is worshipped and praised as the Saviour of the world.

#### ***Listening to God***

People often ask about whether it is possible to hear God's voice. In this passage, the disciples heard God speaking loud and clear, at a crucial time in Jesus' ministry, but do people hear God's voice today? The answer is undoubtedly 'Yes', but we must be careful to recognise that any human experience must be tested against the facts of life and eternal truth. We know that this was indeed God's voice speaking because Jesus proved Himself to be God's Son by His deeds and words, notably, by His death on the Cross and His resurrection (as discussed by Moses and Elijah). If we believe we have heard God's voice speaking to us, whatever the circumstances, we should test this out against what we know of the revealed truth of God and what we know of our faith from the Bible. God is always consistent.

### ***Ideas for what to do***

- Think through what you know of God's glory. How has God's glory been revealed to you, and what do you think it means? Would you recognise God's glory if you saw it?

After thinking about this, make an effort to speak to another Christian about what you believe.

- Look at your own discipline of prayer. Is there a place for spending a larger period of time in prayer than you do at the moment, and if so, when and how can this be achieved within your routine and lifestyle? God delights to use our prayer time for some of His greatest revelations.

### **Questions (for use in groups)**

1. When you think of God's 'glory', what do you see? Do you see a picture of any sort, or are you confined to words? Share your thoughts on this.
2. What do you think was the meaning of the presence of Elijah and Moses on the mountain of transfiguration?
3. What does God mean when He says '*listen to Him*'?

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## **Final Prayer**

Thank You, Heavenly Father, for the glory You have revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Thank you also for the many ways in which You show yourself to us today, and demonstrate that you are alive to our needs and our circumstances. Open our eyes to see Your glory at work within your world and also within our daily lives, so that we can testify to Your greatness each day of our lives: **AMEN**

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