

## Blessed Assurance

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Matthew 17:1-6

Bunkertown COB

(Sermon begins with video – *Grieving over father's death*)

As a pastor, I am frequently asked to lead a funeral service. What's interesting is that not all of them are for someone who attends church. Sometimes I lead a service for an unchurched family in the community. And when I do, I am struck by the pain and hopelessness I see in those who are left behind.

The reality of losing someone you love or someone close to you is never easy, whether you are Christian or not. There is always grief, and there is always a sense of loss. But Christians usually do not have the immense feelings of hopelessness and finality that I see in the faces of those who have never drawn near to God.

I thought about this a few weeks ago as I sat through the funeral services for our dear sister Ethel Benner. I marveled at the assurance I saw in Barney and the rest of the family who remained. I was touched by the show of love and support by the community. But absent from the room was the feeling that it was all over; that we will never see this dear saintly woman ever again. And I began to wonder why the difference? Where do the godly find their blessed assurance?

The talk of death by many people of this world surrounds a sense of finality. And the truth is, most people are afraid of death. I suspect this has been true for quite some time. Job speaks for many of us when he said, <sup>1</sup> *"How frail is humanity! How short is life, how full of trouble! <sup>2</sup> We blossom like a flower and then wither. Like a passing shadow, we quickly disappear.*<sup>1</sup> (Job 14:1-2). Although what Job says here seems so hopeless, it is still the cry of so many. We are here for just a moment, and then gone. And we, like Job, long for some assurance, something to give us hope. He asks, *Can the dead live again? If so, this would give me hope through all my years of struggle, and I would eagerly await the release of death.*<sup>2</sup> (Job 14:14)

Boy, now there's a thought. If we had some assurance that life continues beyond the grave, most of us would not fear the great escape from this world into the next. However, every now and then, we do meet an individual who has this hope and assurance, and they face death with a strength not found very often. I saw it in my grandmother. We read about it in books that tell about those killed for their faith. In each case, I am constantly amazed at their hope and assurance.

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<sup>1</sup>Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

<sup>2</sup>Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

So where did this hope and assurance come from? How did the people of the Bible transition from Job's lament all the way to Stephen who glanced heavenward and said "*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit*" (Acts 7:59). If you'll recall, Jesus had begun to talk a lot about going to Jerusalem and about dying (see Matthew 16:21). And of course, this really bothered Peter. And why not? Like us, the thought of his friend dying was devastating. Now although Jesus kind of scolds him for suggesting He need not die, Jesus does something next that I believe is quite significant. And it gives hope and assurance to His followers.

*Six days later Jesus took Peter and the two brothers, James and John, and led them up a high mountain to be alone. <sup>2</sup> As the men watched, Jesus' appearance was transformed so that his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light. <sup>3</sup> Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared and began talking with Jesus. <sup>4</sup> Peter exclaimed, "Lord, it's wonderful for us to be here! If you want, I'll make three shelters as memorials - one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." <sup>5</sup> But even as he spoke, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy. Listen to him." <sup>6</sup> The disciples were terrified and fell face down on the ground. <sup>3</sup> (Matthew 17:1-6)*

If Jesus simply came to this mountain to find assurance and comfort for what lay ahead in Jerusalem, then why bring these three men along? I believe there is something very significant in this event that is often missed. The transfiguration was not just to strengthen Jesus, but also to give hope and assurance to those Christ would leave behind.

Think about what happened here on Mount Hermon. For a moment, God pulls back the veil and gives these three men (Peter, James, and John) a glimpse into what lay behind mere flesh and blood. They catch an image of Christ as He exists beyond what their eyes could see. They get a glimpse into the eternal soul of men like Moses and Elijah who appeared, not as ghosts or wispy clouds of transparent vapor, but as men recognizable as men (and I'm still trying to figure out how they knew who they were). And then there is the Thunder from Heaven; God's voice as it booms from the cloud above them. So powerful was this revelation that Peter, James, and John fall face down on the ground. But my, oh my, did this event have a lasting impact in their lives.

Listen to what Peter has to say much later about what happened on the Mountain. <sup>16</sup>*For we were not making up clever stories when we told you about the powerful coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We saw His majestic splendor with our*

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<sup>3</sup>Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

own eyes <sup>17</sup> when He received honor and glory from God the Father. The voice from the majestic glory of God said to Him, "This is My dearly loved Son, who brings Me great joy." <sup>18</sup> We ourselves heard that voice from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. <sup>4</sup> (2Peter 1:16-18). Do you hear that? Peter was telling others about the whole mountaintop experience. He passed on what he had seen and heard. And his assurance became the assurance of others. Perhaps he talked to Paul, because Paul says, <sup>3</sup> *I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. <sup>4</sup> He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said.* <sup>5</sup> (1 Corinthians 15:3-4) This blessed assurance was given to others.

We see this assurance throughout early church history. In people like Ignatius who was fed to the lions, Polycarp who was burned at the stake, or Irenaeus who was beheaded. These, and many others, faced their death with an assurance and calm that startled the crowds.

Because Jesus was transfigured before the eyes of His followers, we too have their testimony and witness that there is more to this world than mere flesh and blood. Now although we can draw some strength from what they have said, I believe I find more strength in the way they died. And this, I see in the blessed assurance of saints as they pass away and the blessed assurance of those they leave behind.

I pass along to you what has been passed down to me. That there is something grand and glorious that awaits those reborn by Christ. We have the testimony of those who witnessed His glory, who saw with their own eyes what lay beyond death. And their testimony is faithful and true. And if only a moments glimpse was enough to drive these three men face first to the ground, can you image how grand and how glorious it must be when that which we see only dimly is one day revealed in all its glory and splendor. What Job longed for has been granted by Christ. May we live our lives with the blessed assurance given to us by our Lord Christ Jesus.

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<sup>4</sup>Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

<sup>5</sup>Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.