

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm. But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly and to Jesus Christ, the mediator of the New Covenant.

In May of 1996, four individuals — one from Japan, one from America and two from New Zealand — decided to do something that few individuals who have ever attempted: to ascend upwards 29,000 feet to reach the summit of Mt. Everest in the Himalayas. Lead by the New Zealander Rob Hall, they began their ascent up the north face of Everest shortly after midnight on May 10, 1996. They made it to the summit successfully. When they arrived, they looked to the North, South, East, and West and basked in the realization that not very many people have ever had the privilege of seeing the glory of God's creation from their vantage point. It was their crown of highest achievement. It was their highest of all highs. It was their baseline by which to measure all other achievements that were sure to come later in life. But unfortunately, those later achievements never came. One day after their summit, May 11, 1996, a blizzard hit the south face of the mountain and left Rob Hall, Doug Hansen, Andrew Harris, and Yasuko Namba stranded on their descent. All four perished less than 300 yards south of the summit of Everest. Their crowning achievement was immediately followed by a perilous descent.

The Bible uses the metaphor of a mountain top experience to denote crowning achievement spirituality quite often. Abraham had one at Mt. Moriah after he passed the test of faith. Moses had one at Mt. Sinai when he received the Law. Elijah had one on Mt. Carmel when he called fire down from heaven on the prophets of Baal. And today we'll see that Peter had one also. It occurred when Jesus marched his disciples north from Galilee to the mountainous region of Caesarea Philippi just to ask them one question: "who do you say I am?" To which Peter responded: "you are the Messiah (the Christ; the Son of the Living God)." It was the crown of his highest spiritual achievement. It was the baseline by which to measure all other achievements that were sure to come. However, just two verses after his highest spiritual achievement came one of Peter's lowest descents. It happened when he decided his mountain top experience gave him the right to educate Jesus about what his mission in the world should be. Peter's crowning achievement was immediately followed by what was almost a perilous descent.

People of God, I want to implore you today to be thankful for the mountaintop. Be thankful for the times in your life that your ascent to the top of the mountain gave you a vantage point that those who didn't make the ascent with you didn't get to enjoy. But I also want to implore to be careful on your descent down the mountain. Because according to Mark 8:27-38, we are most at risk for a spiritual catastrophe when we descend the mountain. So today I want you share with you the lesson we must learn in our ascent. The lesson we must learn in our descent. The lesson we must learn in the middle of our journey. And the lesson we must learn afterwards when all is said and done. To see them, turn with me to Mark 8:27-38.

²⁷ Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" ²⁸ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." ²⁹ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." ³⁰ Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. ³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." ³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life^[a] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

1. The Lesson in the Ascent (27-30)

- **Rare Biology 101 Miracle:** (1) Right before Spring break my son came home grinning ear to ear because he aced an exam on the skeletal system. (2) I said "congrats, son. Now you only have the muscular, nervous, endocrine, cardiovascular, lymphatic, respiratory, digestive, urinary, and reproductive systems to go."
- **The Lesson in the Ascent:** Even when we get things right, there's always something we miss because we are not divine.
- **Peter Understood the Significance of Jesus in a Growingly Pagan World:** Caesarea Phillip was a 3 1/2-day northern walk uphill from Galilee. Jews didn't go there because the people of Caesarea Philippi worshipped a variety of pagan "g"ods, including Herod's son, Philip. But chief among them was the Greek god Pan. He's often depicted as a man with a goat head. Sound familiar?
- **Peter Understood the Reason Jesus Marched Them Up There:** He understood that just their presence there with Jesus meant that Jesus didn't want equality with these "g"ods. He wanted superiority. That's why he took them up there amidst all the false worship and asked them one simple question: who do you say I am?

- **And Peter Understood Jesus' Titles:** Messiah (the Anointed One prophesied in the Old Testament) in the Gospel of Mark. The Messiah, the Son of the Living God in Matthew.
- **But Peter Didn't Know All:** He scoffed at Jesus' foreshadowing of his death because he thought that as the Messiah, he came to overthrow the Romans. He was wrong.
- **App:** Even the Spirit reveals great things about Jesus to us, there are still things about Jesus' character that we don't know or understand. When we forget that on the mountaintop, we disconnect ourselves from the need of faith in general!

2. The Lesson in the Descent (31-33)

- **Piloting an Airplane:** (1) If you ask a pilot the hardest part of flying an airplane, most all will tell you without hesitation that it's not taking off or even climbing to ten thousand feet. (2) It's the descent and the landing that require the most exact precision and handling. (3) You can get everything right going up and maintaining altitude. But you better be sure you descend appropriately and stick the landing.
- **The Lesson in the Descent:** Getting things wrong always seems to happen on the way down from getting things right.
- **What He Got Wrong:** (1) Peter misunderstood the role of the Messiah. The Messiah's role was to give his life, not take up a sword. (2). So when Jesus foreshadowed this, Peter didn't want to hear a word of it and rebukes Jesus. In the language of the New Testament, the word "rebuke" here means to "chastise." He just chastised the Savior and tried to thwart him in his mission. (4) That's Satan's role in the Scriptures. Thus the reason Peter tells him to "get behind him." That's a way of saying, "I'm in charge here Devil, not you, so fall in line. You too, Peter."
- **Why He Got It Wrong:** (1) Why he got it wrong here is directly related to what he got right on the mountain at Caesarea Philippi. In Matthew's Gospel, we read that Jesus told him: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:17). (3) And then followed that with: "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:18). (4) Peter was proud because of what Jesus conferred upon him on the mountain. And that made him a target for the devil on the way down.
- **But What Made This Even Worse:** (1) Peter had no reason to start thinking that highly of himself. (2) Jesus told him that the Spirit is the One who revealed this to Him. Without the Spirit's work, Peter would not have recognized anything.
- **App:** Here's a phrase we must never forget: "but for the grace of God go I"

3. The Lesson in the Middle of the Journey (31; 34-35)

- **The Middle of the Mississippi River:** (1) The Mississippi River starts near the Canadian Border in Minnesota bound for the Gulf of Mexico. (2) In the Middle of the Mississippi River, something incredible happens around St. Louis, Missouri. (3) The Missouri River and the Illinois River begin to dump their waters into the Mighty Mississippi, making it roar all the way to its destination in New Orleans. (4) Here, in these verses, Mark's Gospel begins to roar to a dramatic conclusion also.
- **The Lesson in the Middle of the Journey:** As Christians, we all have a cross to bear and a resurrection to share. God orchestrates our lives in a way to lead us towards both, just like Jesus.
- **How Mark Changes His Tune Going Forward:** (1) Mark 8:31 is the middle verse of the Gospel. The miracles and ministry of Jesus (the first half of Mark) qualifies Jesus to do what he was put on this earth to do: die and rise again. The second half of Mark is the story of that. (2) Now everything in the Book of Mark is going to lead to the cross. (3) As a matter of fact, the rest of the Gospel of Mark is told as a journey. Jesus and his disciples don't leave to go back to Galilee and continue ministry. They leave Caesarea Philippi and then arrive in the region of Judea. And then arrive in Jerusalem. And then arrive at the cross. And then arrive at tomb. And then arrives in our hearts because He has risen from the dead and He is Lord.
- **App:** Regardless of how old you are, if you are still alive, there is a mission — a cross — ahead for you. That's how the Father orchestrated the Son's life. And that's how he orchestrates ours. But there is also a resurrection from the dead. For Jesus said "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even if he dies (John 11:25).

4. The Lesson in the Afterwards (36-38)

- **At the Airport in New Orleans:** (1) At the Louis Armstrong airport, there is a native song that plays softly and continuously against the backdrop of the ebb and flow of the busyness of people arriving and departing. (2) It is this: "Oh when the saints go marching in. When the saints go marching in. Oh, how I want to be in that number. When the saints go marching in." (4) Jesus tells us a little bit about what the people who are and are not in that number are like in the last part of the passage.
- **The Lesson in the Afterwards:** If we are ashamed of Jesus now, we can expect Jesus to be ashamed of us when he comes in all His glory. But if we are unashamed now, he will be unashamed of us in the future.
- **Two Rhetorical Questions and Two** (1) Notice now that Jesus' message to the crowd changes tone as well now that he is on the way to Jerusalem. (2) He asks two rhetorical questions that begin with "what good is it?" They are designed for the hearer to say "it's not." (3) And he concludes with a promise related to his 2nd coming, where he comes as a conquering king, not a suffering servant. If anyone is ashamed of me, I will be ashamed of them. But friends the reverse is also true.
- **App:** May we learn today the lesson of what will be true in the afterwards today so that we can be unashamed of the Gospel in the present.