

What Was Jesus Looking for on the Mountain?

Right in the middle of his busy ministry, Jesus comes into a time of transition, and this always makes me wonder what life was really like for him. Transitions aren't comfortable times. Change isn't easy. Things ahead are going to be different.

Up to this point Jesus has had an exciting and successful time of ministry. He set out, a little late in life, to follow his calling. He found lots of followers, the close followers who traveled with him and many listeners in the crowds that gathered wherever he went.

Yes, there were tests and arguments, but in those days the rabbis used arguments as a way to get to the truth. Looming in the future for Jesus is opposition that's far more serious and much more dangerous.

Why did Jesus go looking for help?

Jesus took his disciples up to the mountaintop right after Jesus asked them who people thought he was. The disciples reported all the rumors they'd heard to Jesus—that some thought he was John the Baptist, others thought he was Elijah. When Jesus asked the disciples directly what they thought, it's Peter who as usual speaks up for the group. It's Peter who said, "You are the Messiah."

Why do you suppose Jesus asked these questions? Do you think he was surprised by the answers? Do you think he was waiting for the time that his closest friends figured it out? Their understanding must have been growing little by little as they listened to his teaching and witnessed his miracles. But even though the understanding was growing, it took the spark of a question to bring it into focus.

Luke describes the scene when Peter makes his declaration to Jesus:

Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "The Christ of God." (Luke 9:18-20)

So Jesus asked, and Peter answered. Suddenly the fact is out in the open, at least among the disciples. Jesus is the Messiah, the one who was promised for so many years. He's the one all the prophets were speaking about. Suddenly their lives are part of the fulfillment of prophecy.

Before this time, Jesus was on the track of a successful prophet. He cured the sick, and even raised the dead, but these were things that any great prophet would be able to do. He spoke the word of God, both good news and warning, the way a prophet would speak it. But at that moment, with Peter's declaration, everything changed. He's no longer "just" a prophet, but one with a unique role.

Jesus knows, because he knows the scriptures, what's ahead for him. He knows what it means to be, as Peter has said, "the Messiah of God." Now that it's been said, Jesus must come to terms with the full implications of his destiny. Suddenly he begins to talk about his coming suffering and death. He alone really knows what being the Messiah will mean. He knows that he will be alone through all that's coming.

Once his role is out in the open, Jesus explains to the disciples about what the Messiah must do and what must happen to him. As Mark says,

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this. (Mark 8:31-32)

Jesus knows what was prophesied and what was coming next. He accepts his responsibility, painful as it is. Peter spoke for the others as he often did.

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 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 things of God, but the things of men. (Mark 8:32-33)

Jesus knows what's coming, but it's hard news indeed, for himself and for his followers. So he took a few of them and headed up the mountain to talk to his Father about it.

What happened on the mountain?

Each person's understanding of what's happening depends on his or her own perspective, on where he or she is standing when something occurs. This is especially true in the story of the transfiguration. It's a very familiar story, and we're accustomed to looking at it from a particular point of view—the point of view of the disciples who witnessed it.

This makes sense, of course, because the disciples are the ones who told the story of the transfiguration to the gospel writers. Jesus wasn't around when the gospels were written to get his point of view, so the accounts depend on those who were left who could talk about it.

What happened seems to be quite simple. Jesus invited Peter, James, and John to go up the mountain with him. While they were there, they saw a vision in which Jesus was walking and talking with two people. Then they heard a voice coming out of a cloud. The disciples saw Jesus changed, shining with light, as he is in the spiritual world and not just in his human person.

They were terrified by the holiness and power of the presence of God. They weren't allowed to talk about it right away, but later they told about encounter between Jesus and his Father, a miraculous vision and statement of approval for the Son.

What did the meeting mean to Jesus?

But my question is this: what do you suppose that this encounter meant to Jesus himself? Remember that Jesus was a truly human person. Paul says,

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Philippians 2:5-7)

When Jesus became human, he left behind the power and majesty that he'd had from the beginning. Through him all that is was created, but he left behind that power. He had all knowledge and wisdom, and he left all that behind as well, to accept human limitations. It's human not to know everything, and Jesus left behind his divine awareness.

In his human life, Jesus was like us in every way except sin. He struggled with his body and with temptation and he grieved and wept in times of loss. He went on by faith even when he didn't know exactly what was going to happen next.

Where did Jesus go to when, like us, he needed comfort or advice? We know that Jesus often went off alone by himself to pray in a quiet place. We know that he read and studied the scripture, and we know that what he learned there guided his own life.

What happened on the mountain top, however impressive it was for the disciples who saw it, didn't happen to impress those who were watching. It didn't even happen to impress those of us who'd hear the story years later. It was for Jesus himself, to give him what he really needed.

He knew that he wanted to obey, but he had no idea how he'd be able to do all that would happen. He's very, very lonely. He knows who he is and who he must be, and it's a burden that he has no one to share with. When he turns to his Father, it comes out of his own human need.

We're used to thinking of Jesus as completely in control, as always knowing the next thing that he should do. But he was truly human, and to be human also means to be unsure. We humans don't know everything and we can't predict or deduce everything. We don't always know what's going on. In this moment, Jesus experienced all of our weaknesses, and even our uncertainty.

Jesus never wavered in his faith or his trust of his Father. In this critical moment of his ministry, he receives advice directly from these two visitors on the mountain. This is one of the few places that we can see how he really did experience human helplessness. At the very time when he realizes who he really is, he's most vulnerable and most misses the power and knowledge that he set aside to become one of us.

What can he do? Where can he go for help? He's truly human, with all of our human limitations. He doesn't have the complete knowledge that God has. He's weak and vulnerable, living in a frail human body among those he knows will want to hurt him and kill him.

The disciples love him and mean well, but they can't even stay awake to keep him company as he faces his crisis. He really does need company, help, and moral support. The only place he can get what he needs is from his Father.

Luke says,

As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. (Luke 9:29- 31)

What happened for Jesus?

Of course no one could capture what that moment looked like, but some artists have tried over the centuries. I recently found one in a picture of an icon painted in a Russian Orthodox monastery in the fifteenth century. I love it because it shows so clearly the humanity of the participants.

You can see the disciples, struggling with their sleepiness and with the sudden bright lights. John and James are looking away, but Peter is looking up the side of the mountain to see what is going on. Jesus is in radiant white, glowing, but the radiance isn't all of the story.



On each side of Jesus are Moses and Elijah. They aren't angels or idealized, perfect people. They have interesting, ordinary faces and are wearing the same kind of clothes they worked in during their lifetimes. They're at the same level as the figure of Jesus. They're grouped around him, like close friends.

The two greatest figures in the history of the people of Israel are standing there with him, looking for all the world like a pair of guys who are there to help a friend. They're talking with him, give and take, questions and answers, about his future and what'll be coming next. They were talking about his coming departure from human life.

Jesus knew generally what was ahead of him when he came up this mountain. When he went down, he knew more. He received real counsel from his respected predecessors. He received comfort and moral support from those who had passed through great trials before him.

And he received the visible proof the he was all that Peter said he was. When he came down from the mountain, he was ready to set his face toward Jerusalem. This encounter was primarily for him, to give him advice, courage, and comfort. He was going to need these things desperately in the days ahead.

What is the message for us?

But the encounter also provided a message for the disciples, and through them for us. As Jesus came away from his meeting, his face shined, the same way Moses' face shined from his encounters with God in the desert. The disciples weren't included in the conversation, but they knew that Jesus had received guidance from those two prophets.

Then, at the very end, there was a message just for them.

...a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." (Luke 9:34–35)

We don't know what Joshua saw when he went up the mountain with Moses, but we do know what Peter saw and what he heard when he went up with Jesus, because he wrote about it in a letter much later. He said,

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he

received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. (2 Peter 1:16-18)

This is no rumor, but the statement of an eyewitness who was there when it happened.

We know that Peter, once he figured out what was going on, recognized what a great honor it was to be there. He wanted to be helpful, but of course he didn't have a clue what to do. The best he could think of was to put up tents, one for Jesus and one for each of the guests, so that they could stay a while in comfort.

It was a good try, but Peter missed the point. Jesus was there to talk with Moses and Elijah, not to move in with them. He had work to do, and he needed to get back to it. Even while Peter was making his suggestions, the voice from heaven spoke and they were filled with fear. Yes, they were afraid to be in the presence of God. God is also far above and beyond anything we can imagine.

Jesus, of course, is not afraid. This one, who is God, is also his own Father, whom he loves and who loves him. Jesus isn't afraid, but he understands what his friends are feeling—that the whole experience is too much for them.

But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. (Matthew 17:7-8)

These disciples have been on the mountain and heard the voice of God. They know, now, beyond the shadow of a doubt, who Jesus is. Jesus is the Son of God. He's doing the work that God had in mind for him to do, and God is pleased with how he's been doing it. The work he's been doing is God's work, and the words he's been saying are God's own words. The disciples are commanded to listen up, to pay attention to all that their friend and their teacher is saying.

The message to the disciples is clear: listen to him. Jesus knows that he's going into a time of deep darkness, and he'll tell you what you need to know to get through it. He's my Son, and in him you see me.

He's my Chosen, and in what he does, you'll see my love for all the world. Stand by him, while you can, when you can, because he's walking the path prepared for him. It won't be easy. What he'll do, he'll do for you and for all those who come after you. Listen to him, hear him, and walk with him wherever he goes.

Yes, he is the Chosen one, as you have guessed. Pay attention to him, and treasure each story that he tells you, each principle that he teaches you. Stick close to him, because he's mine, and you'll see wonders beyond your imagination. Stay with him, as best you can, and support him, with everything you are able to do or say.