

“Mountain-Top” Encounters and the Information, Perspective, and Power God Imparts

Matthew 17:1-9,22-23; Exodus 33:12-23; Deuteronomy 34:1-9; I Kings 19:1-16,19-21

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During the 40 years from 1965 (when I was 12) until 2005 (when I was 52), I often felt caught in a spiritual and religious tug-of-war. Not so much the past 12 years, I think, but, for now, I want to refer to the forty years prior to 2005. Often I heard people talking about being “born again,” or having a life-changing spiritual and religious experience and how crucial such a discernable feeling was. Then I would hear someone say, “Oh, no. One type of experience is not required for a person to realize God’s eternal, undeserved, redeeming love.” Even if people did not use the exact phrase, “born again,” they might say, “‘Saving faith’ is definitely a matter of the ‘heart’ feeling and experiencing.” Someone else would say, “No, ‘saving faith’ is a matter of understanding, as with the mind comprehending the gift of faith from God and the gift of love from God.” Some said “heart” and others’ said “mind.” Some said “experience.” Others said “comprehension” or “clarity of belief.” I started hearing such back-and-forth debates and arguments when I was 12. Ten years later, when I was about 22, I began learning something of which I would gradually learn more across the years: that this “heart and mind” / this “experience and understanding” debate and argument was not something unique to Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, and Pentecostals in the USA’s southern region during the 1900s and even the 1800s, but this debate went back to the Colonial period of the United States in the 1700s, and the debate went farther back to Scotland, and England, and Europe. And this debate went back still farther, prior to the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s, to the Roman Catholic orders of the 1200s through the 1600s. And I would learn the same sort of debates on “spiritual experience” versus “faith comprehension and understanding” or “heart-feeling versus head-faith/knowledge” was also part of Judaism and Islam. This debate was not at all unique to Christianity. It was an axis between at least 2 polarities in the each of the three religions tracing their “roots” and origins to Abraham and Sarah and Hagar. What I began hearing when I was 12 and continued to hear in expanded form until I was 52 finally gave me a sense that this argument was not unique to being Presbyterian, or Protestant, or Christian, even. It is a sort of overarching or, if you will, a basic and foundational religious-type debate and argument beyond my experience of Christianity.

In a forty year period in my life I wondered and listened, I questioned and sought what this heart-and-mind / this experience-and-comprehension debate meant and exactly what different groups were attempting to convince others to experience or believe. What I began hearing 50 years ago when I was 12, then, is essentially that “mountain-top experiences” are to be desired. They are also important enough to be compared against previous “mountain-top experiences” or compared to someone else’s “mountain-top experience.” That’s what I’ve been led to think for most of my life. This morning, however, I cannot tell you that such a conclusion is at all intended from four Scripture references about God actually encountering people on a “mountain-top.” These four communicate not that we ought to desire “mountain-top experiences” or that we ought to compare “mountain-top experiences.” These four Scriptures, rather, describe the content and influence of particular mountain-top experiences with Jesus, James, John, Peter, and earlier with Moses and Elijah.

(1) As Matthew’s Gospel story reports, one day James, John, and Peter climb a mountain with Jesus. On that mountain, they behold a vision of Moses and Elijah from their Hebrew faith tradition. In the vision, God speaks so that James, John, and Peter sense how Jesus, their teacher, absolutely belongs in the company and tradition of Moses and Elijah. Following that mountaintop experience, James, John, and Paul still struggle with their own faith and with understanding how faith comes alive in situations and relationships as God desires. So the mountaintop experience of Jesus’ transfiguration is no “high water measurement” of James’, John’s, and Peter’s spirituality. It is something else; and that “something else” might be an event informing their faith. A mountaintop experience may include less inspiration for that moment and later and more information to be considered and processed beyond the experience itself.

(2) Then there’s an experience to be remembered from a chapter of Moses’ life (more than 1200 years before Jesus). Deuteronomy 32 reports that God led Moses to the heights of Mount Nebo to show him the land ahead, which Moses would not live to enter. Moses’ late-in-life mountain-top experience

includes less inspiration and more “perspectification.” From God’s sharing time with him, Moses is given a perspective that there has been huge value in the days that now lie behind him, which bring him to this point, and there will be value in what lies ahead; but God challenges Moses and every person to live with the perspective that today is God’s gift birthed out of the past, and tomorrow will be God’s gift birthed out of today, while no day, or role, or relationship is ours to possess. All days and moments and chapters always belong to God, who brings love to life amid every challenge. Less inspiration for Moses from God on a mountaintop late in Moses’ life and more perspective about the way life is.

(3) Years before climbing Mount Nebo late in his life to encounter God, Moses had climbed Mount Sinai to the south and inquired about God revealing God’s glory to him, possibly so he (Moses) would be inspired, or fortified, or encouraged in his faith when facing hardship and adversity, including hardship and adversity in his role leading a large nomadic band of former slaves. Instead of showing him glory, though, God shows Moses God’s goodness. Moses was then empowered for life’s current and future challenges, yet not as he anticipated. God showed him not glory, but goodness. Less inspiration for Moses on that mountaintop in the middle years of his life, and more empowerment from God’s goodness moving right along where he (Moses) was.

(4) Then there’s Elijah, who – in his life 700 years before Jesus – fled to Mount Horeb for safety, convinced that he was already as good as dead, since a bounty was placed on him by the Queen and King, who had been offended by Elijah’s actions in God’s behalf. In Elijah’s encounter with God on the mountain-top, however, Elijah’s “off-the-chart” anxiety is lessened as God informs Elijah of how he can expect God to show up and walk with him shoulder-to-shoulder, as God has already been doing. God argues with Elijah to convince him that God’s outreach into the world, through even Elijah’s life, is neither over nor concluded. God empowers Elijah for a return to difficulty and adversity as soon as he (Elijah) will walk back down that mountain and re-engage with all people God leads him to encounter.

Four mountain-top experiences spanning 1200 years. None of the four are “whoosh-your-socks-off” inspiring, as such. The first gives information about Jesus and his identity and mission. The second gives perspective to Moses about his life at life’s end. The third gives Moses empowerment from the goodness of God going with him all the time. And the fourth gives Elijah all three rolled into one encounter: information, perspective, and empowerment. Not one of those is a “once-in-a-lifetime” experience of rhapsody and thrill, or ecstasy and hands-waving. Not one of them.

God meets Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, and James, John, and Peter “as they are” and “where they are in life.” It’s no different for us. This model described in the Scriptures is both “internal” and “external” for each person. The content of each story is (1) a person or group of persons, (2) what the person or persons think, say, do, and experience – and (3) how God is shaping them to think, say, and do differently, as God desires to shape them and you and me and others.

One element of my learning through this is that we do have spiritual experiences – experiences of God’s Spirit in different ways, often though not as we first desire or anticipate. And our spiritual experiences cannot helpfully be measured against some other spiritual experience earlier in my life. Nor can one of my spiritual experiences necessarily be measured for authenticity against one of yours or anyone else’s. Whether it’s on an actual mountain-top, or whether in a chapel, or a kitchen, a library, a grocery store aisle, a wilderness park, a back-porch-deck, a city sidewalk or bus station, a classroom, laboratory, or coffeeshop, (1) God seeks you and me and others to impart information about Jesus’ holy identity and mission and our own holy identity and mission; (2) God seeks you and me and others to impart perspective on the years of our lives and the value of our lives with others; and (3) God seeks you and me and others to impart power – not as glory, but – in the form of eternal goodness. Like Moses, Elijah, Jesus, James, John, and Peter, we can bet our lives – not on a “mountain-top experience” (or experiences) as such. We can bet our lives (1) on the identity and mission information, (2) on the perspective, and (3) on the empowerment imparted and bestowed, all three of which God is always giving, including today and tomorrow, to you, to me, to all others. – All honor and praise be to God.