

## “Elijah Appeared”

The prophet Elijah was a powerful personality in the Old Testament. He knew all about God-given success. He had stood alone against 450 prophets of Baal and emerged victorious, with Israel’s God providing fire from heaven on his behalf. Elijah also knew about fear and despair. Not long after this showdown, Elijah fled for his life to the mountains. A wicked queen wanted him dead, so he ran, and finding refuge in a rocky cave, he began to have doubts about his calling. He was convinced he was the only faithful servant left; and what good had it done? There, on the mountain, God spoke with Elijah in a still, small voice, urging him to get back into the struggle. He was not the only faithful one; there were thousands left. And so Elijah came down the mountain and entered the fray once more. Elijah knew about teamwork, camaraderie, and encouragement; he mentored a young man named Elisha, who would inherit the prophetic work, and would arguably do greater things than he. And Elijah knew about making a dramatic departure. Elijah asked Elisha what last request he might have and Elisha asked for a double share of the spirit of Elijah. He wanted to be as bold for the Lord as Elijah had been, if not more so. As they walked along, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind straight into heaven. Now that’s an exit.

It’s no coincidence that Elijah is one of two powerful Old Testament personalities that appear with Jesus on his day of transfiguration. Moses, of course, was the other, and he was uniquely equipped to talk things over with Jesus on that mountaintop. Moses had scaled a few mountains in his day; had met with God up there on the summit on more than one occasion; and at the end of his life had been brought to another mountain peak to see the Promised Land that the entire exodus had led to. But Moses had a departure of his own to undertake, that would not include entry into the land of milk and honey. The Lord God had enlisted both these men, Moses and Elijah, to carry out His will, to do impossible things, to face great opposition, to learn a radical dependence on God. These two were Jesus’ advisors on this momentous occasion. Are you beginning to see why?

The gospel of Mark tells us that Elijah and Moses were talking with Jesus on that high mountain as He was shining with radiant light. Mark shares no details about this conversation, but Luke does, in his transfiguration account. He drops a huge hint about it when he uses the word “exodus.” Luke says “Those having appeared in glory were speaking of the exodus that Jesus was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.” *Exodus* is often translated as “departure” in English, but the word is there: exodon. What Jesus was about to accomplish in Jerusalem was a new exodus—a movement out of slavery through water and wilderness into the Promised Land. He would accomplish this by his suffering, his death on the cross, and his resurrection. It’s an amazing image, and it only makes sense that Moses was there to coach Jesus on leading an exodus, seeing as how he had led the first one. But what about Elijah? What would he have to contribute to this conversation?

Let’s go back through his life and see. Elijah knew all about God-given successes. He would be able to relate to Jesus, who would do great things; miraculous things; miracles of

healing; exerting control over the forces of nature, extracting evil spirits from people, teaching with authority, even in the face of opposition. Elijah knew all about fear and despair, so He would be able to relate to Jesus who would feel the full weight of his calling in the Garden of Gethsemane, looking into the abyss of human sin that he alone could bear. Elijah knew about teamwork, camaraderie, and encouragement, so he could relate to Jesus, who had called men and women out of old ways and created a whole new kind of community and gave them the charge of prophetic work. And, yes, Elijah knew about making a dramatic departure, so he could relate to Jesus, who, after dying, would return to life, and after returning to life, would ascend into heaven until a cloud hid him from the sight of his disciples. Elijah could've had much to say to Jesus about the amazing joys and intense challenges of working in the kingdom of God, and I just wonder if Jesus found the presence of Moses and Elijah encouraging. I mean, so much of what happened on the transfiguration mountaintop was for the disciples' benefit: to reveal something about Jesus to them. This event was for them: The voice from heaven was talking to them: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!" But I also wonder how much of this incident was also for Jesus, meant to deeply encourage Him, because when he went down the mountainside towards Jerusalem, there would be no turning back, and the way forward would be very dark indeed.

I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that you could use some encouragement today. Let's find it here on this transfiguration mountaintop. Like Elijah and Jesus, if you give yourself time to reflect, you can probably recall some God-given successes he has allowed you to enjoy—good gifts he has permitted to come to you. Our human minds can shove those into the background sometimes. Take a moment to move those to the front, And let's be candid; like Elijah and our Lord, you are probably well acquainted with fear and despair. You may feel like Elijah felt: he had done all the right things, and yet bad things were happening. He felt isolated and abandoned. Until God came to Him and turned his heart with simple words. Not some big production, not a fire or an earthquake or a whirlwind but a still small voice. The same thing is happening today. God's Words: do you hear them? "This Jesus is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him." Aren't you tired of what happens when you listen to your own self-talk? Are you still listening to the advice-givers of our era? Isn't it time to listen to Jesus—I mean really listen; really give His words an audience in your mind and heart; to listen as he steps on the scene at the beginning of his ministry saying, "Repent! For the kingdom of God is at hand." To listen as he says, "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Rest in Jesus is real and available. Are you listening?

And still, more encouragement: Like Jesus and Elijah, there is a teamwork and camaraderie that develops when God draws diverse people toward himself. The Christian codeword for this is "fellowship." It's Elijah and Elisha. It's Jesus and Peter, James, and John. It's you and the people who care and call and text and reach out not because they have to but because the love of Jesus creates a new kind of community. And finally, like Elijah and like Jesus your Savior, you can look at your departure in a whole different way. Departing to be with Christ in heaven is something to look forward to; something at which your whole life right now can be aimed. You need never fear this departure. Jesus went first, into the deepest darkness, came back alive, and has gone to prepare a place for you in the residence of his Father. Like the

apostle Paul, you can eagerly desire to depart and be with Christ which is better by far than anything the world can offer; yet in the next breath you can accept that every day you are here holds an opportunity to be useful to God. It's the 'win/win' of resurrection faith.

Be encouraged this Transfiguration Sunday. You cannot stay on this mountaintop. But by all means, remember it. Remember Jesus shining in glory. Remember the holy conversation of Moses and Elijah. Remember the words of the Father. "This is my Son whom I love. Listen to Him." Listen to Him in success and despair. Listen to Him in the fellowship of this faith family. Listen to Him at your departure. You cannot stay on this mountaintop, but by God's grace in Jesus, one day you'll be back in his brightness. Back to stay.