

PEOPLE CONNECTIONS, PART 9: RELATED TO GLORY

Matthew 17:1-8, Colossians 1:21-23 (NASB)

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In the classic story *Lorna Doone* by R. D. Blackmore a handsome young farmer named John Ridd meets a beautiful young woman from a nearby village and falls in love with her in old England. Neither of them are aware that Lorna is not a Doone, but a kidnapped member of the royal house of Dougall. Their love blossoms with the natural power of youth. In fact, over a period of time they become soul mates.

Then the inevitable takes place. The Dougalls learn of Lorna's whereabouts and she must leave her beloved John and the rustic village life. She goes to live with her family and becomes who she really is, Lady Lorna Dougall. During this lengthy separation she writes John, but he never answers. He writes her, and she never answers. All of their mail is intercepted by Lorna's lady in waiting.

Finally, after both of their hopes for love have been dashed, John learns that Lorna goes to church with her family at a certain place and time. He goes there in his dirty rustic clothes with his unkempt hair and takes his place among the other town folk who have come to see the Dougalls turn out for church in their royal finery.

John catches sight of her through the crowd and is stunned by her beauty. She walks by in a retinue of royals, moving with natural dignity. Her red flowing gown swishes through the air as her regal bearing is framed in a brilliant red collar which extends around her head. John moves breathlessly to keep her in view, shoving the other farmer folk aside. He catches her eye and she returns his gaze without looking aside, but he is unable to interpret the expression of her face. Finally, the Dougalls move into the chapel and the doors are slammed shut.

John hangs around listlessly. Suddenly a servant brings him a note from Lorna. He jumps up and moves to the place she tells him to meet her, and there he waits. How does a farmer address royalty? Lorna runs to him, calls out "John!" and stands before him awaiting his response. He trembles. "Good day, milady Dougall," he replies with hat in hand. The gap between them seems impassible, he in his rumpled brown working clothes and she in her silk, satin, and pearls. Not only is she a beautiful woman, but now she is revealed in her full station as a woman of royal birth who has a natural royal bearing. There was no way in old England for a man of his station to marry or be related to a woman of her glory.

She replies in distress: "What? 'Milady?' No 'Lorna?'" And then they begin the process of figuring out what has happened to them.

STUNNED BY DIVINE GLORY

Picture yourself as one of Jesus' first-century disciples. You relate to your Messiah very directly because he's right there in front of you. You walk, bathe, and eat with him. You have a growing conviction that you are in the presence of the divine through his words, his miracles, and the perfect life

you see being lived out before your eyes. Then one day he says: "Come up here with me. I want to show you something." This story is recorded in Matthew 17, beginning with verse one: **"Six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light"** (Matthew 17:1-2).

Have you seen one of those films where, through the magic of computer graphics, a person literally changes in front of your eyes into something or someone completely different? The original Greek word for "transfigured" actually means that a metamorphosis took place before Peter, James, and John like when a caterpillar becomes a butterfly, only all at once. The normal-looking man Jesus, whom they thought they knew, visibly metamorphosed into Jesus Christ, God-man, with his personal holiness blazing out at them as a blinding light.

That's not all: **"And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him"** (Matthew 17:3). The extraordinary man the disciples knew was now revealed to them in glory conversing with two of the great saints of all history. Peter went with his gut-level reaction: **"Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah'"** (Matthew 17:4). He was so overwhelmed with the privilege, the blessing, and the wonderment of being in such an exalted presence that he just wanted to stay there. Every taste that I have had of the glory of God has created in me the same intense desire!

But the revealing of the true identity of Jesus had not yet been completed: **"While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, 'This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!'"** (Matthew 17:5). As if to remove any remaining confusion, a cloud with the same brilliant glory radiating from behind it moved over them and the voice of God the Father boomed out the sonship of Jesus. He went beyond that to give one of the great statements of intratrinitarian love: "I am thoroughly pleased with him!" And then the command: **"Listen to him!"**

Now the whole scene became too much for the disciples: **"When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified"** (Matthew 17:6). Their limits were exceeded, their fuses blown. Of course! God himself had spoken to them, had covered his Son with affirmation, and the sheer glory of it had scared the sandals right off them.

I am guessing that at this moment Jesus underwent a reverse metamorphosis back to his normal appearance for the sake of his friends: **"And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, 'Get up, and do not be afraid.' And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus Himself alone"** (Matthew 17:7-8).

I think they felt a great sense of relief at this moment. The closeness of the holiness of God incited dread in their hearts, but Jesus spoke to them comfortingly. They would not have been able to function if Jesus remained in this partly-glorified state accompanied by glorified saints, shining clouds, and thundering voices from heaven. But think of the wonderful effect this experience must have had upon their relationship with Jesus in his normal appearance. As they lived out their people connection to Jesus in his humanity they now knew they were connected to the unspeakable glory they had seen. They had become personally related to this divine glory as he came to call them brothers and friends.

THE STORY OF OUR CONNECTION TO CHRIST

The privilege of all who repent of sin and trust in Christ for salvation is that they, too, gain a people connection to glory. Paul the apostle described the story of this people connection in Colossians chapter one, beginning with verse twenty-one: "**And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds...**" (Colossians 1:21). Whenever I read this verse I think: "Wow, those Colossians must have been some bad folks, like some kind of ancient Hell's Angels! It's a good thing they got saved. Glad I'm not like that."

One of the advantages of being able to read the Bible in the ancient languages in which it was written is that it becomes more precise and more vivid. Here there is no wiggle room for my desire not be branded as a spiritual Hell's Angel along with the Colossians. The word for "you" is plural. That means that Paul's letter was being read to a room full of nice people, all of whom were being told of their lostness. That means that as we read it, we also are being told in no uncertain terms of our own spiritual bankruptcy apart from Christ. If you want to be related to Christ's glory then accepting these terms as applying to you personally is the first step.

The first term that is true of us with respect to God is that we are "**alienated.**" We are absolutely disconnected from heaven, God, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Many people want to relate to Jesus without facing this, as if it could just be wished away. They try to be "Christian" by their own standards, even to the point of doing things in Jesus' name. God will say to them: "**Depart from me, I never knew you.**" And that is how we all begin, as strangers to God.

The second term which describes how we all start in our people connection to God through Christ is that we are "**hostile in mind.**" That's God's evaluation of us. Sorry. We all begin by considering God as our enemy, and the power of the minds God gave us is harnessed to fight against him. What happens when God gives a person an extremely high intelligence? Do they automatically move toward God? No, apart from Christ they just have more brain power applied to anti-God thoughts. Whatever our IQ, we are all God's enemies to start.

The third term is that we are "**engaged in evil deeds.**" We love to assign this status to a limited class of people like pirates or those in prison. We would love to exempt our babies from this judgment but we are born with a propensity to do evil things from God's perspective. What is the first evil deed of a baby? How about that cry which is not about food, not about being changed, and not about being held, but is simply an expression of infantile selfishness?

And God holds us accountable for things we did not do but should have done. If you have the cure for AIDS but do not give it to anyone, that is an evil deed of omission. And if there is a being in the universe who deserves our devotion and we do not give it, then we are criminally neglectful. There is such a being, and without some intervention, the Bible says we are hopelessly estranged from him.

Fortunately, Paul went on to explain the second step of becoming related to glory through Christ. In spite of that seemingly hopeless separation from God, "**yet He [Christ] has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach...**" (Colossians 1:22). The first part of the remedy for alienation is that Christ took

the initiative to repair the hopeless breach. Through faith we are reconciled. The connection God wants to have with us is reforged, and when his work is done there is no power in the universe which can break our fellowship with him.

How did he do this? Paul wrote: "**...In His fleshly body through death...**" Christ took on human form to forge a connection with us as the God-man, fully divine and fully human. The Son had connect with humanity so that when the time came for his crucifixion, the Father might lay the punishment for all human sin upon him. I regret to say that this doctrine of the substitutionary atonement is under attack today by post-modern theology. Brian McLaren, a leading light in the emergent church movement, has called the Father's sacrifice of his Son "cosmic child abuse." Of course we are all appalled! But our feelings do not determine reality or sound doctrine. There was simply no other way. The Father did the appalling thing out of love to reunite us with himself, as Peter explained on the day of Pentecost, that Jesus was "**...delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God...nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put...to death**" (Acts 2:23).

The third musical note in this three-part harmony of redemption is God's purpose for this breath-stealing act: "**in order to present you before Him [the Father] holy and blameless and beyond reproach...**" Only the holy and blameless can be in the presence of our holy and blameless heavenly Father. Removing the stain of sin was the only way to reforge the people connection he lost with us when our first parents, Adam and Eve, chose evil knowledge and sin over him.

The next verse explains our responsibility to move into relationship with our glorious Lord. Paul has assumed here that he is talking to people in Colossae who have already reforged their people connection to God through faith in Christ. Every one must start there. But simply choosing to believe an intellectual concept of redemption is not enough. We must live in it. Thus Paul warns that our connection to glory through Christ is real only "**... if indeed [we] continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast...**" (Colossians 1:23a). As hard as it is to accept about our friends and loved ones, no promise of eternal relationship is given to those who do not value their connection to glory. Is a friend really a friend if he or she does not return our calls or answer our letters? We would not think so, and neither does God. God has called and written us all by sending his Son, and we answer as we listen to him in his word, pray, worship, and obey.

Further evidence that we are walking in relationship to God in Christ is that we are "**...not moved away from the hope of the gospel that [we] have heard which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister**" (Colossians 1:23b). There are many ways to move away from Christ, the most insidious of which is to think Christian thoughts, do religious things, and yet live without personal devotion to our Lord.

I am struck also by the universal nature of the good news of Jesus Christ. Although the work of spreading the good news to every nation is not yet done, even in Paul's time he could say that it had been directed to "**all creation under heaven.**" Many today are saying that the meaning of the gospel cannot be objectively known but must be worked out locally with different results. While different cultures will have nuances in understanding and different modes of worship, this passage proves that the gospel is supracultural. That is, it supersedes and floats above every culture's philosophies and thought, overshadowing them all.

Do you want to move into and live in relationship with the glorious Lord Jesus Christ? We must agree before God in brokenhearted humility that we are against him by nature and do evil on purpose and by neglect. Then we receive by faith the reconciliation with our heavenly Father purchased for us by the sacrifice of the Son on the cross. Then our Father places upon us the responsibility to stand firm in the faith, following our Lord closely.

What becomes of John Ridd ? Is the barrier to Lorna in her glory uncrossable? In fact, it is not, and you will have to read the book or see the movie to discover the unexpected way in which the impossible becomes possible: John Ridd, farmer's son, is himself elevated and becomes married to his sweet Lorna in her royal glory.

Have you accepted the invitation from the Lord Jesus Christ? If you have not yet believed you must start there. If you have believed, he has already come to you and beckoned with his nail-scarred hand: "Come up here. I want to show you something." His message was insistent: "**The kingdom of heaven has come near!**" Have you drawn near? The taste of glory awaits you, and you won't want to leave.

In practical terms, how do we go to the mountain with Jesus? The saints of the ages have called it retreat. Jesus did it repeatedly throughout his ministry. We must shut out the demands of life, even those within our own heads. And the ones which we cannot silence simply by going to a private place of prayer we must choose by faith to rank below our devotion to our Lord.

Dr. John Nash, winner of a Nobel prize for his theory of economics and professor at Princeton University, had a lifelong delusion. He saw people who were not there who appeared totally real to him. They talked to him and he lived with them, including a fantasy college roommate and a government official. All medical attempts to cure him of the disease failed. How did he eventually win the Nobel prize and become a beloved professor? First, he had a wife who refused to stop loving him. But the daily battle was won with a simple and seemingly impossible tactic, namely, he just stopped answering the fantasy people. They never stopped talking to him, but he stopped responding.

So we must do with the distractions of this life if we wish to see the glory of God. They will never stop talking to us. Jesus Christ has invited us to the mountain, but the ascent requires the demotion of every other earthly thing to a level below our devotion to him. Seek the sweetness of God's glory every day. And set aside special times where you are with him alone—even if they must be shorter than you want, or less private than you want. Susannah Wesley, mother of Charles and John and nineteen more, gave her children strict instructions to leave her alone and then pulled a blanket over her head for prayer. If she could climb the mountain to be with Jesus in his glory by doing that, we can find our way up as well.

If we don't we will miss the most satisfying part of the birthright of God's people on earth and the primary characteristic of heaven. We will miss genuine freedom in Christ, because once we taste his glory we will not need or want anything else. We will also miss the central motivation for growing as a disciple, the all encompassing desire to know more of him. Peter was right when he exclaimed: "Lord, it is good for us to be here!" Now go climb the mountain.

[*Lorna Doone*, A&E/BBC production, 2000, DVD 1:57:00 (inside ch. 12) to 2:00:36]