

*2Ki 2:9 When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?”*

*“Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha replied.*

*10 “You have asked a difficult thing,” Elijah said, “yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise not.”*

*11 As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. 12 Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart.*

*13 He picked up the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. 14 Then he took the cloak that had fallen from him and struck the water with it. “Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?” he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over.*

*15 The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, “The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha.” And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. 16 “Look,” they said, “we your servants have fifty able men. Let them go and look for your master. Perhaps the Spirit of the LORD has picked him up and set him down on some mountain or in some valley.”*

*“No,” Elisha replied, “do not send them.”*

*17 But they persisted until he was too ashamed to refuse. So he said, “Send them.” And they sent fifty men, who searched for three days but did not find him. 18 When they returned to Elisha, who was staying in Jericho, he said to them, “Didn’t I tell you not to go?”*

### **CLOTHED IN GLORY, BUT NOT JUST YET**

Dear Friends in Christ,

Easy success – we all dream of it. Isn’t that what a half-billion dollar lottery draw is all about? Easy success. Or so we imagine.

But is easy success good for us? I heard a story once – now mind you, this is purely fictional, but if it could happen it would – I heard a story about a singer. She was a struggling singer who had a very nice voice, but not the sort of voice that would make a fortune. Over the years, working the night clubs became depressing work for her. In her dressing room one evening, just before her routine, she was given a chance to make one wish. At just that moment she had been thinking, “If only once, I wish that I could sing perfectly.” In minutes she went on stage and she sang. Her voice resounded with the power of thunder, with the sweetness of a nightjar in a tropical African midnight. With the precision of a needle she hit every note dead on. The club owners had trouble because the patrons didn’t want to leave. People with reservations were kept waiting for hours. At points, even the instrumentalists stopped, just to hear a voice more beautiful than any sung on this earth. Just as she wished, she sang perfectly that night—and never again. And what had been an average career sank into failure, because those notes were lost to her forever. Just a story, I assure you. But it could be true.

Human history echoes with, not stories, but realities. Nations once great world beaters centuries ago, never quite reach peace with themselves and their modern mediocrity. High school state champions live for decades on those titles, and never move beyond it. Even in kind of silly ways: your family visits a place of beauty under weather conditions which can never be replicated, and every visit

after that is disappointing.

This also happens in the spiritual realm. At just the right moment, you read the right word of God, and life suddenly makes sense to you. But after a few weeks, that certainty of direction fades. A hymn you sang was truly a religious experience; the melody, the words, and your life were all in perfect harmony as God spoke spiritual truth to you. But when the music became only a faint memory, that religious experience seemed more manufactured emotion than reality. I am told that there are no atheists in foxholes. Some of you know that far better than I do, but is everyone a believer when the treaties are signed?

I would guess that all of us have had a small handful of fleeting moments where we experienced something beyond what humans usually experience. But when life returned to normal, those experiences fade, even disappear. It seems that we must have dreamed the whole thing.

How can we make sense of those moments of life? The importance is actually less about the experience than how we interpret that experience. Please give me a chance to explain that. I am not going down the road of people who say that religion is nothing other than what you feel. But what I say is that every experience God puts in our life can be used to our benefit or detriment. How are you going to take it?

Perhaps this is where Elisha had an advantage. When his superior, the gray-haired prophet Elijah, wanted to give him some final lasting blessing, Elijah asked, "***Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?***" Elisha replied, "***Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit.***" Now that sounds pretty uppity, doesn't it? "You're a great guy Elijah, but I want twice as much as what you had." Well, don't be so quick to judge Elisha. Remember, God had revealed to them both that Elisha would be a prophet in Elijah's place. So Elisha asked for what every Israelite heir to an inheritance would expect his father to do, he asks Elijah to leave him a double portion. This is how it worked: An Israelite father, if he had three sons, would divide his estate into four portions. Two sons would each get one part, but the heir would get two portions. Part of that was because he was now the father-figure in the family. In the time of familial difficulties, *he* would be called in to settle things, to offer help, to whatever. So sure, being the primary heir meant that he got twice as much of the inheritance, but he also got saddled with a lot more than twice the familial responsibility. There is a logic here. And Elisha looks at the job he is going to have to do as Israel's #1 prophet and he says, "God has given me a difficult job, Elijah. Give me a double portion of your spirit. I am going to need it." "***You have asked a difficult thing,' Elijah said, 'yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours...'***

So, on they went. "***As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, 'My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!' And Elisha saw him no more***" (10).

What do you do after an experience like that? Is it a moment of glory which you keep going back to, hoping that somehow it can be replicated—but it can't be? Is it the singer's perfect performance that leaves a lingering sense of loss – forever? Is it the championship, the trophy that an athlete never matures beyond—mere faded glory?

And what about those disciples in the Gospel reading? They saw Jesus in a glory that made the sun's noontime brightness look like moonlight. We humans want to hold on to moments like that. We hope to relive them. Those moments haunt our memory. It is totally understandable to me that Peter would say to Jesus, "***Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters.***" (Mark 9:5). This glory, let us hold onto it!

It is not a bad thing to want what God has promised us. But the problem is this: that glory takes the place of faith. That is why Peter cooked up the lean-to idea on the Mount of Transfiguration. If we had a shrine somewhere in Israel with Jesus and Moses and Elijah glowing with heavenly glory, that

would answer all the questions. Who needs faith? That is why those 50 prophets in Elisha's day wanted to go looking for Elijah. We get tired of living by faith. We get tired of always waiting for the things God has promised. Meanwhile our bodies age, the roof leaks, the car needs repair, our friends don't act like our friends. We want that moment of glory because that means that the striving and the uncertainty can end, and we can rest in what God has promised. Unfortunately that would mean that I would spiritually be sitting in the recliner, one hand buried in the potato chips (potato chips are my weakness), super-sized fruit Dr. Pepper in the other, favorite movie on the screen.

When we think moments of glory are the way things should always be, we become dysfunctional. We forget that God has called us Christians to humbly work in this world of tears. That is why some people spend so much time talking about a Millennium and a Rapture – a longing for the glory. That is why some put such emphasis on miracles and speaking in tongues in the Christian Church. That is why we sometimes can even deny Jesus or quietly walk by without uttering his name. Give us the glory, God! We get tired of apparently being on the wrong side of history, where the wicked get rich and the godly get called names. And that is where we need to understand what we are looking at when we see Elijah taken to heaven, Jesus transfigured, when we see the glorious cross and empty tomb. We are not looking at faded glory (which is the way the world sees us), but a hidden glory.

Those moments of glory do have a meaning. The message of those moments is not: Look back to a golden age of Bible history which we can never again achieve. The message of those moments of spiritual glory, whether in our own lives or in the Bible, is a reminder of what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ.

When we understand the moments of glory in that way, we realize they are not moments to be attained or repeated, but moments to be treasured. That singer could have treasured that perfect performance, rather than vainly tried to re-live it.

There was a man whom I am convinced witnessed a real-live miracle. He saw a real answer to the prayer of a fellow Christian. The X-rays proved it. What to do with such a moment of glory? That man did not then think that every prayer should be answered with a miracle. Instead he saw it as the reality that God hears all prayers offered in Jesus' name—and will answer in his wisdom. It encouraged him to pray. When we treasure those moments in our heart, rather than try to grasp them in our hands, when we allow the goose to lay the golden egg rather than butchering it hoping for a dozen, we become richer than we could expect.

Elisha could later look back at that moment when the world as he knew it was torn in two and the fiery chariots and horsemen swooped out of heaven. In that moment he was strengthened for a life of service. In the future when the very kings of Israel would rail against Elisha, Elisha knew who was on his side. Those three disciples of Jesus, when they went out to the ends of the world, they knew that the Jesus they preached was no mere man. No, they had seen his glory on that mountaintop.

When we look at those glorious moments as God's grace rather than our glory, God strengthens us. We see that the glory of God's salvation is in that inglorious cross. We become well-rounded believers. We become confident Christians, yet Christians without a tinge of arrogance; sharers of the Good News who are not obnoxious; spiritually strong, yet always kind-hearted; content, but not complacent. Believers who are humble before the world and our fellow people, yet know they are loved by God himself.

The different events in our lives, and even more so the events that God has recorded for us in the Bible are not the glory days of a time gone by. They are an indication of the hidden glory that every believer possesses in Jesus Christ. God's glory was seen briefly in Jesus on top of that mountain, so that there would be no doubt when he died a barbarous death on a cross, that that is our glory. It is not faded glory, nor stolen glory, or a fake glory, certainly not a razzle-dazzle glory, but it is the hidden glory that God has chosen as his way of saving mankind. Amen.