



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

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For the Bible Tells Me So

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Exodus: 34:29-35

Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain, the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; but whenever he Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

Luke 9:28-36

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” – not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “this is my son, my chosen; listen to him!” When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Karl Barth, a Swiss pastor and theologian, was one of the most profound religious thinkers of the 20th century. For more than 50 years, Barth stressed Scripture as the primary vehicle of God’s self-

revelation in Jesus the Christ – so much so that Barth came to be known as the “Theologian of the Word of God.”

Barth was also one of the most prolific religious writers of the 20th century, so prolific, in fact, that critics complained that “it takes so much time to read this “theologian of the Word” that no time is left to read the Word itself.” [E.L. Mascall, *quoted in* “Karl Barth” by Daniel Jenkins in *A Handbook of Christian Theologians*, Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman, eds.] So, the story goes that at a final testimonial dinner at the end of his long career, Barth was asked if he would boil his life work and scores of books down to a simple synopsis. The old man rose slowly, a twinkle in his eye, and said simply, “Everything I have learned about God’s salvation can be reduced to one single sentence.” And then, as the audience leaned forward in their chairs, Barth said, “Jesus loves me. This I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

Now, I presume you may be thinking, “Great! If that’s all you need to know for salvation, looks like I completed my kingdom coursework my very first week of Sunday School!” But I also presume you have discovered that just learning and even singing the words of this song have not quite produced the promised reward. This is not because Barth was wrong. Just singing the words doesn’t quite bring salvation, because each word is but the tip of an iceberg of meaning.

Let’s begin with the very first word of the song, “Jesus”. The letters “J” “E” “S” “U” “S” are just alphabetic shapes. Even the word “Jesus” is only a word: a symbol for some reality quite beyond our easy definition. Whether the love of Jesus heals us, or reunites us with God, or saves us depends on who we understand, deep in our hearts, Jesus really is for us.

When we ask who Jesus is for us, we join a two-thousand year old quest for faith, a question on everybody’s lips in Luke’s Gospel. When Jesus heals the paralytic by saying “Friend, your sins are forgiven you,”

the scribes and Pharisees ask, “Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” [Luke 5:21]. When Jesus wakes to calm the waves battering the disciples’ boat they ask one another, “Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?” [Luke 8:25.] Even Old King Herod gets into the act, asking, “John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?” [Luke 9:9.] Finally, Jesus asks the disciples themselves, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” and then, “But who do you say that I am?” [Luke 9:20].

The question ripples through Luke’s Gospel and down through the ages. Sooner or later, in every age and in every place, every Christian must answer for themselves, “Who do I say Jesus is for me?”

The answers range throughout Luke’s Gospel from teacher to master to prophet to John the Baptist or Moses or Elijah come back to life, until finally Peter blurts out, “You are the Messiah of God.” [Luke 9:20]. But, actually, neither teachers nor prophets nor even anointed servants of God are saviors. None of us have ever looked to Elijah for salvation, and my guess is you’ve never sung, “King David loves me this I know.”

Scholars note that the very purpose of Luke’s Transfiguration account is to hint at the answer to the great question. Who is Jesus for us? Luke’s Transfiguration account gives us a coming attraction of the good news that the disciples will not fully realize until Christ’s resurrection at the end of Luke’s Gospel. And this is the answer, this is the coming attraction, this is the good news: Jesus the Christ is nothing less than God’s love, fully realized in human form.

As Jesus prays on the mountain side, his face changes and his clothes flash with the brilliance of God’s glory. Out of the depths of mystery, out of the darkness of the cloud, the disciples hear God declare the answer for the ages, “This is my son, my Chosen.” [Luke 9:29,35].

My friends, it is this Son, this Chosen, this Jesus, this God’s love become flesh who loves you. How magnificent our little song becomes when we sing that it is God himself, the creator of heaven and

earth, the ground of all being and life, the beginning and the end of all existence who loves you, yes, even you.

Which leads us right to the question of love, the second word of the song: “Jesus **loves** me.” It would still be a wonderful song if love meant nothing more than affection or esteem or even invincible power. But again, Luke’s Transfiguration account points to so much more. As Jesus is talking with Moses and Elijah they discuss his departure, his death, his resurrection and ascension in Jerusalem - God’s way of giving the disciples, and us, another coming attraction. This is a divine love that cherishes you so completely, accepts you so unconditionally, nurtures you so unquestioningly, offers you love so eternally that he will suffer rejection, torture, even death on the cross, asking in return only that you say, “I accept.”

And this, of course, is the one thing we find hardest to do: to accept, to know that Jesus could love even us. We may sing the next phrase, “Jesus loves me, **this I know**,” but do we really “know” this?

Oh, on one level we “know” Jesus loves us all right. If I gave you a one question quiz: “True or False: Jesus loves you.” You would all get it right. But there is a difference between intellectual knowing and existential knowing - between knowing in your head and knowing in your heart, knowing deep in your soul.

Everyone in this room is here, in part, because we are fast learners, fast learners that know the cold realities of life in 21st century America. Our dilemma is that it is exactly these so-called “cold realities” that Jesus wants us to see through as mere illusions.

The world has taught us that there is a scarcity of the affirmation, honor and love we most want. The love of Jesus means there is an infinite supply of the affirmation, honor and love we most need.

The world has taught us that the race is to the swift and we are already a bit behind the pace in our quest for a successful life. The love of Jesus means that the race is to the selfless and that all that makes life eternally successful was freely offered us the day we were born.

The world has taught us that our earthly destiny teeters on the brink of calamity, one foot always precariously

placed on the banana peel of unreliable nations, or markets, or health. The love of Jesus means that our eternal destiny is assured by the very God who made the world and all that is in it.

The world has taught us that love and acceptance would vanish if anyone really knew our hidden flaws, our masked insecurities, our secret addictions. The love of Jesus means that we are already fully known and that we are fully loved, and cherished, and accepted precisely as we are.

How sweet life would be, how generous and loving we might be, if we could really know deep down that we are fully loved, fully accepted as we are. But, again, this is precisely the knowing we find it hardest to attain. As Carl Jung wrote: to accept ourselves in all our seeming wretchedness is the hardest of tasks, and one which is almost impossible to fulfil. The very thought of self-disclosure can make us sweat with fear. [C.G. Jung, "Psychotherapists and the Clergy" in Psychology and Western Religion at 208.]

All of which brings us to the climax of the song and the very point of Barth's summary: "Jesus loves me. This I know **for the Bible tells me so.**" "For **the Bible** tells me so." Now Barth isn't talking about mere information, he isn't suggesting salvation occurs by looking up John 3:16 for a quick, reassuring read. Barth's life's work suggests instead that when we engage the Bible deeply, when we let Scripture wash over us, when we prayerfully enter the world of God's self-disclosure, when we make regular Bible study a habit in our lives, it is God Godself whom we encounter. And, by God's grace, our minds, our ways of knowing, our frames of reference, our deepest attitudes, our very means of encountering and understanding life are transformed, converted, and healed until at last we can know, really know, that Jesus loves us.

This is, after all, the last instruction, the last plea, the last coming attraction of Luke's Transfiguration account: God calls from the cloud, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Listen to him as he speaks to you through Scripture.

Years later, Peter would recall his experience of the Transfiguration in a sermon. Both the preacher and his congregation were intimately aware of the dark

anxieties and uncertainties of daily life. Peter was facing execution, and his congregation was facing persecution. And yet, Peter's message brimmed with the courage of one who had come to know - really know - the absolute trustworthiness of God's promises. He began by praying, "May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the **knowledge** of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything needed for life and Godliness, through the **knowledge** of him who called us."

Recalling the Transfiguration, Peter continued, "*We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were still with him on the holy mountain. So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts.*" [2 Peter 1:18-19]

So the question is: "Do we do it?" Do we listen to Jesus? Are we as attentive to Scripture as to a lamp in a dark place? Have we learned how to get through dark times by holding onto the prophetic message "until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts"? Have we taught our children how to hold onto Scripture through the dark times that they will certainly face in their own lives? Of course the glib answer is "yes."

But what if we probed a little deeper with a few questions:

- 1) How many of us participate in regular Bible study?
- 2) How many of us read the Bible at home with our families?
- 3) How many times a month do we actually bring our children to Sunday School?
- 4) Who have you read more about this month: Jesus, Peter and Paul, or Michelle, Cindy and Todd?
- 5) How many hours do your children spend each week reading about the Son of God and how many hours do they spend each week listening to the sons of Homer Simpson or Peter Griffin?
- 6) When the economy is wobbling and livelihoods are threatened, do you place your ultimate trust in the Gods of the market who promise efficient valuation or in the God of Genesis who promises you eternal care and provision?

Just 275 years ago our forebears on this hill would have answered similar questions with a consistent, insistent

emphasis on the Word of God, and they have left us a symbolic reminder of their highest values right in the architecture of this room. In this Meeting House, as in virtually every Puritan meeting house, the center piece, the focal point, the highest platform is reserved not for the organist, not for the minister, not even for the altar – but for the Word of God.

It was by clinging to this Word of God that Israel found a way to proclaim hope even in the dark decades of captivity. It was by clinging to this Word of God that Jesus found a way to proclaim hope even in the dark hours on the Cross. It was by clinging to this Word of God that our Puritan forebears found a way to proclaim hope even in the dark storms of their migration. And it is by clinging to this Word of God that we will find a way to proclaim hope even in the dark tumult of our times.

“You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts.”

Why? Because: “Jesus loves us. This we know, for the Bible tells us so.” **Amen.**