

“Liftoff!”

Mark 8:35-36, 9:2-7 ¹

Have you heard of *Mars One*? *Mars One* is a Dutch company that is attempting to establish a human colony on Mars. They plan to send their first humans to Mars ten to fifteen years from now—on a one-way trip—and they claim that they have over 78,000 applicants so far.² Those applicants are from countries all over the world. Some of you may be in this service.

Would *you* sign up for such a one-way journey? Why or why not? There’s no doubt in my mind that going to Mars would be quite an adventure; but while that’s fun to think about, it’s not yet a real option.

Here’s another adventure that’s fun to think about without actually being a real option: having been one of Jesus’ disciples back in the first century would have been quite an adventure, wouldn’t it? And if you could travel back in time to be present for just one event in Jesus’ life on earth, what do you think you would choose?

It would certainly have been awesome to be present at that miraculous moment in Bethlehem when the eternal God chose to put on human flesh such as you and I are wearing. Or maybe you’d want to be there at that amazing moment when Jesus called Lazarus out from the tomb. Some of us might choose the day of Jesus’ first miracle, when He turned water into wine. Others might choose to be present in the Upper Room, or at the Cross, or at the Empty Tomb. What do you think you would choose?

Any of these would be wonderful, but I think I might choose something else. I think I would choose that incredible day when Jesus took Peter, James, and John up the high slopes of Mount Hermon to witness what we know as “the Transfiguration.”³

The word we translate as “transfiguration” is really the Greek word, “metamorphosis,” describing a fundamental change in form. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record this event, and they all say that Jesus’ face began to shine like the sun and His clothing became dazzling white, as brilliant as a flash of lightning.⁴

Except for this one moment, Jesus’ heavenly glory, His divine splendor and radiance, was veiled from human sight. But here, just for a little while, the disciples saw Jesus in His essence, in the fullness of His eternal glory.⁵ If I could choose just one event in Jesus’ earthly life to witness, I think I’d choose this one.

In that amazing moment, Moses and Elijah appeared and talked with Jesus, the glory of God descended in a cloud, and the Father spoke from heaven, “*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!*”⁶ In this dramatic experience, God the Father identified God the Son as divine, revealed their shared glory, and fulfilled those prophecies that told that Moses and Elijah would return before Messiah’s glory came.⁷

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Baptism International Worship Centre, Baptist House, Abelenpke, in Accra, Ghana on February 25, 2018.

² <https://www.mars-one.com/news/press-releases/78000-sign-up-for-one-way-mission-to-mars>
<https://www.mars-one.com/faq/selection-and-preparation-of-the-astronauts/what-are-the-qualifications-to-apply>

³ Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36; 2 Peter 1:16-18

⁴ Exodus 34:29-35

⁵ See Daniel 7:9-10; Matthew 16:27; Revelation 4-5

⁶ Exodus 24:13-18, 40:34-35; Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35; 2 Peter 1:16-18

⁷ Deuteronomy 18:15-19; Malachi 4:4-6; Matthew 17:11; Mark 9:13

The record of Jesus' blazing metamorphosis on the Mount of Transfiguration reminds us that the unseen world is actually quite nearby rather than being far, far away, as we may sometimes think. This unseen world is populated by angels and by redeemed humans who have experienced resurrection (it also contains the powers and principalities of Darkness). And here we see that God's True Being, when not veiled in human flesh, is radiant and dazzling beyond our all our imagining. But there's more. The amazement isn't over yet.

Each of the Gospels that records the Transfiguration records Peter's confession, "*You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God,*" as taking place in the region of Caesarea Philippi, just before the Transfiguration. While the traditional site of the Transfiguration is on Mount Tabor, Mount Hermon is more than four times higher (9,232 feet), and scholars increasingly believe the Transfiguration took place on Mount Hermon. This is significant for many reasons.

According to the Apocryphal book of 1 Enoch, Mount Hermon was the location from which the rebel angels launched their offensive against God's Law in Genesis 6:1-4. Mount Hermon is located in the region of Bashan, "the place of the serpent," and in Old Testament times, it was regarded as the gateway to the realm of the dead—as "the gates of hell." That should sound familiar.

In Matthew's account, *when Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"*

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

"But you," he asked them, "who do you say that I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

*Jesus responded, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and **on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it**" (Matthew 16:13-18).*

So here's the deal. On the basis of this confession, Jesus changed Simon's name to "Peter," which means, "Rock," and from the foundation of that confession has grown the Church, the firstfruits of the inbreaking Kingdom of God. But there was a double meaning in the word, "rock."

By the word, "rock," Jesus made reference both to Peter's accurate assessment of Jesus' identity and to Peter's faith in Jesus; but Jesus was also referring to the "rock" at whose base they stood—Mount Hermon. They were standing in that region the Jews considered to be "the gates of hell," and Jesus was putting the powers of Darkness on notice: "**The Kingdom of God is at hand. I have come to take back what is mine.**"

I suspect that we tend to think of the "gates of hell" as some force that assaults God's Kingdom, but this understanding is actually backward. Gates are defensive structures, not offensive weapons. What Jesus was really saying is that the Kingdom of God is assaulting the gates of hell, and those gates will not be able to withstand that assault.⁸

Peter's confession and Jesus' Transfiguration are "Ground Zero" in the Cosmic Battle that determines the future of the Universe. This is D-Day. And, like D-Day, although the War does

⁸ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Lexham Press, Kindle Edition), p. 287.

not end at once, its end has now been determined. Luke's account tells us that Moses and Elijah talked with Jesus "*of his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem*" (Luke 9:31). Jesus' death on Calvary's cross is going to be the unexpected move that seals the doom of Darkness.

In the New Testament, the demons clearly know Who Jesus is (e.g., Mark 1:24); but they do not know God's eternal Plan. They plan to have Jesus killed, and now that He has thrown down the gauntlet, they will do so quickly. But the forces of Darkness did not realize that it was through Jesus' death and resurrection that they would be defeated. As Paul would later write, "***None of the rulers of this age knew this wisdom, because if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory***" (1 Corinthians 2:8).

Peter, James, and John didn't know or understand any of this as it was happening. They were so dumfounded and terrified at the dazzling glory before them that their first thought was to build shelters and just to stay on the mountain indefinitely.

And it's at this point that you and I really do have something in common with them. I expect that you've had spiritual experiences that were so wonderful that your response to them was "Let's stay here." Whether on a church retreat, a personal retreat, or even normal Sunday worship, we recognize from time to time that "God showed up," and our response typically involves some effort to capture or to preserve that place or that moment.

Where I come from, we often call such moments "mountaintop" experiences, perhaps referring to the Transfiguration. But you know, not much grows way high up on a mountain. Mountains are good for inspiration, but the harvests come from the valleys. Motivation comes on the mountain, but growth comes in the valley of ordinary life.

As wonderful as mountaintop experiences are, the point of our life on earth is not to have continuously amazing spiritual experiences. The point of our present lives is that we allow God to so shape our character through all of our experiences that when heaven's chariot comes for us at the end of our earthly lives, we will be willing, ready, and eager to spend eternity with God.

The point of the trek to the mountaintop, as well as of the journey back down, is that you and I become more and more like Jesus and that we accomplish His purposes for our lives and for our time. And it's at this point, as we consider the transfiguration, the transformation, and the metamorphosis that God intends to work in your life and in mine that I want to change metaphors a bit.

In order to get to Ghana from the U.S. a week ago, we had to do quite a bit of flying. Although the airlines seem to be doing all they can to squeeze the joy out of flying, I've always enjoyed it, and I enjoyed it this time, too.

I love the splendor and grandeur of God's creation, seen from the air. I love the amazing beauty of our nation—and of yours—and I'm overwhelmed by the sheer vastness of our world, measured in human terms. But what I've always liked best is taking off and landing.

I suppose that part of the thrill I feel in such moments has to do with flirting with danger. I like roller coasters for the same reason, I guess. But while there is in fact some danger in both cases, the odds of accident in any one event are so small that I can relax into the thrill without being too worried about it.

I think what I like best is feeling the surging power of the huge engines as they propel us from one world to another—either accelerating into the sky or decelerating back to solid ground—and wondering whether or not, in this particular instance, the engines will be able to accomplish

this successfully. And I learned something about accelerating aircraft some years ago that speaks to our transfiguration theme.

There is a point in the acceleration down the runway at which the Captain says to the First Officer, “V1,” for “Velocity 1.” This velocity, based on variables such as barometric pressure, air temperature, wind speed and direction, and the weight of the aircraft, is the point at which there is no longer enough runway in front of the aircraft to stop it, and the plane is now committed to lift off. There is no aborting the takeoff now. After V1, there is no pulling back on the throttle. V1 is the point of no return.

But V1 is not the only such marker in takeoff. At V1, the aircraft can no longer be stopped, but it is not yet generating sufficient lift to take off. That liftoff speed is “V2,” after which the plane begins to leave the ground (and there are several other “V speeds,” I think). Comair flight 5191 crashed and burned in Lexington, Kentucky several years ago because the mistaken runway from which it was trying to takeoff had sufficient length for it to reach V1, but insufficient length to reach V2.

The New Testament actually talks about “V speeds” rather often, though of course not in those terms. Here are three examples, two from Jesus and one from Paul. I’ll say more about them in a moment:

1. **Jesus:** *“If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for me, you will find true life. And how do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose or forfeit your own soul in the process?”* (Luke 9:24-25).
2. **Jesus:** *“If you want to be my follower you must love me more than your own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, more than your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple. . . . But don’t begin until you count the cost. . . . No one can become my disciple without giving up everything for me”* (Luke 14:26-35).
3. **Paul:** *“For no one can lay any other foundation than the one we already have—Jesus Christ. Now anyone who builds on that foundation may use gold, silver, jewels, wood, hay, or straw. But there is going to come a time of testing at the judgment day to see what kind of work each builder has done. Everyone’s work will be put through the fire to see whether or not it keeps its value. If the work survives the fire, that builder will receive a reward. But if the work is burned up, the builder will suffer great loss. The builders themselves will be saved, but like someone escaping through a wall of flames”* (1 Corinthians 3:11-15).

In the first passage, Jesus said, in effect, “If you stay on the runway, even if you’re sitting in a very, very nice aircraft, you will lose it all in the end. That aircraft will only save you if it’s in the air.” In the second passage, Jesus added, “But don’t hit the throttle to follow me unless you’re prepared to pass V1 and continue acceleration to V2 and beyond. Half-hearted efforts to follow me will get you past V1, but they won’t get you to V2, and you’re going to crash and burn.”

In the third passage, Paul illustrated the kind of “crashing and burning” Jesus was talking about. Paul said that followers of Jesus whose discipleship is of the “wood, hay, or straw” variety—those who don’t take following Jesus very seriously—may still be saved in the end, but they will be pulled out of the burning wreckage of a life that never accelerated to V2. Christians who stop short of “giving up everything” for Jesus, who hold back on the throttle for whatever reason, never experience all that Jesus intended to give them had they become airborne.

Another way we miss what God has for us is that we may actually pass V2 and become airborne in the passionate discipleship that often characterizes youth and young adulthood, but then we decide somewhere along the way that we’d really rather be piloting a glider than a jet.

We can't make such a switch in a literal airplane, but it is possible in the life of the Spirit. So now I'm going to start getting more personal. . . .

It tends to be the case that most of us become less courageous as we grow older, and we don't really have to be "old" for this *dis*-couragement to begin. Sometimes aches and pains cause us to draw back from full engagement with life. Sometimes we feel as though our gifts and skills are no longer adequate for today's challenges. Sometimes we think we're not needed. Sometimes we come to prefer safety over adventure.

I'm a long-time fan of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and there's a scene at the beginning of *The Hobbit* that makes this point. As the story opens, Gandalf, the good wizard in the story, shows up at the home of a little creature (a "Hobbit") named Bilbo Baggins with this announcement: "I am looking for someone to share in an adventure that I am arranging, and it's very difficult to find anyone."

"I should think so—in these parts!" answered Bilbo. "We are plain, quiet folk and have no use for adventures. Nasty, disturbing, uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner! I can't think what anybody sees in them."⁹

I had an experience rather like Bilbo's encounter with Gandalf some years ago in the Denver airport. We had been visiting our son, Nathan, in Vail, Colorado, and we were on the way home.

Waiting for our plane to be called for boarding, I was meandering around a book shop in the airport when my eye fell on the best-selling book, *Who Moved My Cheese?*¹⁰ The book was both small and expensive, and since I had a little time and was reluctant to pay the asking price, I read the whole thing standing in the book shop. The transforming moment happened when I came upon a picture with the caption, "**What would you do if you weren't afraid?**"



As soon as I read that question, I knew its answer: I had been struggling with whether to return to the pastorate after some years as a church staff member and as a seminary professor, and the answer to that question was "YES. *You should return to the pastorate.*" That airport encounter with God led pretty directly to my return to the pastorate nearly twenty years ago.

One of the take-aways from the Transfiguration as we've considered it today is that Jesus didn't die on the cross to keep us "safe." Jesus conquered death and the powers of Darkness to make us *dangerous*.¹¹ No matter what you and I may look like to the unbelieving world, the fact of the matter is that we are a conquering army. We are the invasion force of the inbreaking Kingdom of God!

The greatest problem in many of our lives frequently is that we live domesticated lives in the service of a domesticated god we've created in our own image. Somewhere along the way, we become more interested in our own comfort and our own preferences than in following and

⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p. 18.

¹⁰ *Who Moved My Cheese? An A-Mazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life*, by Spencer Johnson, M.D., foreword by Kenneth Blanchard, Ph.D. (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1998, 2002).

¹¹ Mark Batterson, *Wild Goose Chase: Reclaim the Adventure of Pursuing God* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2008), p. 6.

serving a fierce and dangerous God who is rebuilding creation and establishing an eternal Kingdom right under Satan's nose. We try to stay in the relative safety of the mountaintop rather than venturing into battle with the forces of Darkness in the world at the foot of the mountain. We settle for V1 instead of V2; or we never make it to V1 at all.

Mark Batterson, a pastor in Washington, DC, has suggested that maybe the date of our death isn't really the date carved on our tombstone. Many people die long before that: "We start dying when we have nothing worth living for," Mark wrote. "And we don't really start living until we find something worth dying for. . . . Here is the mistake so many of us make: we start out pursuing a *passion* and end up settling for a *paycheck*. So instead of making a life, all we do is make a living."¹²

Such a life is a boring life, and "boredom isn't just boring," Batterson wrote. "Boring is wrong. *You cannot simultaneously live by faith and be bored. . . . **Maybe it's time to come out of the cage [of our domesticated lives] and live dangerously for the cause of Christ.***"¹³ If you're following Jesus, "You never know who you'll meet, where you'll go, or what you'll do. All bets are off." If we follow God's Spirit, that Spirit will take you to places you never could have imagined and by paths you never knew existed.¹⁴

So here's my question: As you sit here this morning, my friend, **what is God calling you to do that you're afraid to undertake?** While Bilbo Baggins didn't want any adventures, thank you very much, there comes a time when it's time to quit living as if the purpose of life is to arrive safely at death, when it's time to set God-sized goals and to pursue God-ordained passions. There comes a time when maintaining the status quo becomes disobedience, when fear can no longer determine our decisions, when we become willing to "get out of the boat" and walk on the sea toward Jesus.

So, my friend, what would YOU do if you were not afraid?

After giving us what we sometimes call "The Roll Call of Faith" in chapter 11, the author of Hebrews concludes, "*Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith*" (Hebrews 12:1-2a). "*Don't you know,*" Paul wrote, "*that the runners in a stadium all race, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way to win the prize*" (1 Corinthians 9:24).

The metaphor of a race is somewhat similar to the metaphor of getting a plane into the air. In both cases, it's essential to "strip off every weight that slows us down" and to focus on what is truly essential for the task at hand.

I don't travel overseas very often, and packing for such a trip is challenging. I had to think long and hard about everything I packed, because everything I put into the suitcase meant something else was not going to go.

The life of faith is much like that. When we're unloading "hindrances" and "weights" so we can "get our plane in the air," the first thing we need to unload is sin that we know we are tolerating in our lives.

¹² Batterson, pp. 16-17.

¹³ Batterson, p. 7.

¹⁴ Batterson, p. 2.

If there is sin in your life of which you are aware, I expect that the Holy Spirit has called it to your mind even in this moment. You know it's wrong. You know it hinders your spiritual growth. You know it's keeping your plane from taking off, but you haven't put it down. You haven't offloaded it. You're trying to hide it in the baggage compartment.

Maybe it's an addiction. Maybe it's a deceitful business practice. Maybe it's an unfaithful relationship. Maybe it's greed. Maybe it's hardheartedness toward the poor. Whatever it is, it's going to cause your life to "crash and burn" if you don't get rid of it.

But beyond our sin, we also need to offload weights that are unnecessary. There are many *good* things in our lives that crowd out the *best* things. There are many *ordinary* things that, while not wrong in themselves, keep us from *great* things. If you have children, your children know what is *truly* important to you. As one boy said to his father as his Dad walked out the door, "When is it going to be time for an important meeting *with your family?*"

My friend, **the only things that are going to cross over with you into eternity are your own character and other people whom you've led to Jesus.** Anything that slows the transformation of your character into the character of Jesus is dead weight. Anything in your life that keeps you from being a witness for Jesus is dead weight. You're never going to be airborne as long as you hold on to those things.

And if your life is going to become "airborne" for Jesus, you're going to have to keep accelerating until you reach V2 and beyond. If you pull back on the throttle, you're going to crash and burn. Perseverance is essential, all the way to the blue sky above.

Well, maybe you've already let off the throttle. Maybe you did that a long time ago. Maybe your plane has been idling on the runway so long that you're out of fuel. What now? The Risen Christ—radiant in Heaven's Glory as He was earlier on Mount Hermon, gave us some direction when He told the church in Ephesus that "*you have abandoned the love you had at first*" (Revelation 2:4).

The first clue is the word "abandoned." An older couple were reflecting on their long marriage as they drove somewhere in the car, and the wife commented wistfully, "Do you remember how we used to sit so close together in the car?" The husband, hands on the steering wheel, responded, "I haven't moved."

So it is with our relationship with God. My friend, God is just as near to you and to your life today as God has ever been. If the previous love and closeness you once had with God have diminished, it should be clear who needs to move. Remember how your love for God once was. Remember how things were when your relationship with God was central in your life. Return to the Father who loves you, and do what you used to do.

Sometimes, though, our lives have gotten pretty messy along the way, and we wonder whether God would ever want us in the shape that we're in now. Maybe you've already "crashed and burned." That might even have happened more than once. What now?

Several years ago, Jeanette George wrote about a flight she had from Tucson to Phoenix. Both cities are in Arizona, so it wasn't a long flight. Seated next to Jeanette was a young woman with a cute little baby girl. The little girl was wearing a white dress. She had a pink bow in her hair, and she kept saying "Dada, Dada," over and over.

The young mother explained, "We're going home to her daddy. We've been away for 24 hours and he's going to meet us at the airport."

Everybody was enjoying this adorable little girl as her Mama fed her juice and fruit. Once the plane was airborne, the baby's ears started hurting, and she started crying. More juice. More fruit.

Then the flight became turbulent, and more food came up than had gone down. It was a huge, awful, horrible mess. The baby's face was a mess. Her hair was a mess. Her dress was a mess. People assured the young mother that this was all okay, but they kept their distance.

When the plane landed, the little girl's ears stopped hurting and she was fine again. She started saying, "Dada, Dada" again. *Nobody else was fine*, but that little girl, she was fine. As they deplaned, there was her Daddy, wearing a white shirt and white pants, and holding white flowers. As he came near to embrace his wife, she quickly handed him their child and headed to the bathroom to clean up.

And Jeanette George said, "I thought when that young father looked at how nasty that little girl was, he would say, 'She's not *my* baby. I don't know whose baby she is'; but that's not what happened. That daddy took that little girl in his arms and he started kissing her, stroking her hair and saying over and over again, 'Daddy's baby came home.'

Jeanette wrote, "I watched him all the way to the baggage area. He never stopped kissing that baby, and I thought to myself, **Where did I ever get the idea that Father God is less loving than a young daddy in a white shirt, in white pants with white flowers who doesn't care what his little girl looks like, or what she smells like? He's just glad she's home!**"¹⁵

And that, my friend, is how your heavenly Father will respond to you, no matter what kind of mess you may have made of your life at the moment. And that's Good News. That's *really* Good News.

My friend, your Father in Heaven stands ready to embrace you and to put you back on the runway for liftoff. The proof of our faith, after all, is radically transformed, transfigured lives. Wherever there are lives that have been transformed by the grace of God, the Risen Christ is there, and the Darkness has been vanquished.

The great preacher, Phillips Brooks, when thinking about such transformation, wrote, "Do not pray for easy lives; *pray to be stronger people*. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; *pray for powers equal to your tasks*. Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle, **but you shall be a miracle**. Every day you shall wonder at the richness of life which has come to you by the grace of God."¹⁶

What God offers you, today, my friend, is actually a very great deal better than a trip to Mars. This is a journey that never ends, and from which we will never, ever wish to return. We are bound for the Promised Land!

Put on your seat belt. Put your hand on the throttle. It's time to lift off!

¹⁵ dougfields@saddleback.com

¹⁶ Phillips Brooks, *Leadership*, vol. 12, no. 2.