

The Transfiguration

Mark 9:1-13

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Most of us have had experiences in life when we felt like we were on top of the world. Among them are your wedding day, the day your children are born, the day you accomplish a huge milestone in life, or a time when you experienced great success. We can look back on these times and recall them vividly. We sometimes refer to these as mountaintop experiences, regardless of where they happen.

This morning we're going to look at a literal mountaintop experience for three of Jesus' disciples. They climbed up a mountain with Jesus and had an experience they would never forget. It was unique and continued to inform and drive their decisions for years to come. Peter, James, and John got the chance to see Jesus' divine glory revealed, and their time on the mountaintop with Jesus never left their minds. This morning we're going to dig into Mark's account of that experience and see what we can learn from their time on the mountaintop.

Jesus' Declaration

Before we arrive at the mountaintop, however, Mark includes a statement that Jesus made to His disciples which has perplexed many.

Jesus went on to say, "I tell you the truth, some standing here right now will not die before they see the Kingdom of God arrive in great power!" (Mark 9:1, NLT)

Jesus made this statement shortly after explaining to the disciples that He would be executed by the Jewish leaders and Romans and that following Him would mean denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following Him. That statement may have been depressing to the disciples, but He follows it with one that should have been encouraging to them. He said that some of them standing there would get to see the Kingdom of God arrive in great power! This would have been cause for encouragement.

But what did Jesus mean by that? The disciples may have assumed this meant that they would live to see Rome conquered by the Jewish people, since that's what they believed the Messiah would do. But that's not what happened. Some of these men lived to see the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans, the opposite of what they thought the Messiah would accomplish.

Others have assumed that Jesus was making a statement about His return to the earth in power at the end of all things. But we are still awaiting Christ's second coming, so that must not be the correct way to understand this prophecy either.

There are a few different possibilities for what Jesus meant. First is that Jesus was referring to the transfiguration, which we will read about in a moment. The disciples got the chance to see Jesus in all His glory. So, it's possible this is what Jesus had in mind...though I don't think that's the most likely interpretation, because if Jesus was

describing an event that would happen a week later, it seems strange to say that some would not die before it happened—especially since they were all alive a week later.

More likely is that Jesus was speaking of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon believers, or the growth of the Christian faith, which happened in a way no one could have anticipated. Both of these events fit Jesus' description. All the disciples except for Judas were still living for both events. They got to experience the coming of God's Kingdom in power, even though it wasn't what they expected.

We still get to see the power of God's Kingdom in our world today. God continues working in and through the Church and through individual believers to change lives. Sometimes people get so fixated on the second coming that they forget God is still present and working today. The Kingdom of God has come in power—and we get to experience it!

The Transfiguration

Now we can direct our attention to the main part of the story, which is what happened up on the mountaintop. Here's what Mark tells us,

² Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up a high mountain to be alone. As the men watched, Jesus' appearance was transformed, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, far whiter than any earthly bleach could ever make them. ⁴ Then Elijah and Moses appeared and began talking with Jesus. ⁵ Peter exclaimed, "Rabbi, it's wonderful for us to be here! Let's make three shelters as memorials—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁶ He said this because he didn't really know what else to say, for they were all terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my dearly loved Son. Listen to him." ⁸ Suddenly, when they looked around, Moses and Elijah were gone, and they saw only Jesus with them. (Mark 9:2-8, NLT)

Mark tells us this event happened 6 days after Jesus told the disciples about his coming crucifixion. Matthew also says 6 days later, while Luke says "about 8 days later". Most people assume that Luke is estimating and possibly counting days differently (counting the partial first and last days counting as whole days). There is no contradiction in these descriptions.

We are told that Jesus took Peter, James, and John with Him to go up the mountain. These three were Jesus' closest disciples. While all twelve were important and valuable, these three were the ones Jesus poured into the most. So it makes sense that Jesus would take them up the mountain with Him.

There is some debate over which mountain this happened on. In some Christian traditions, they assume it was Mount Tabor. The problem is that Mount Tabor is relatively small, only about 1,000 feet up. It's also very far away from where they had been previously. More likely is that they were on top of Mount Hermon, which was 9,000 feet in height and relatively close to where the disciples had been.

So Jesus and the three disciples make the long trek up the mountain. The other gospels tell us they were going there to pray. They also tell us the disciples eventually fell asleep (which makes me feel a little better about my own times of falling asleep in prayer!), but they awoke to see Jesus transfigured before them and Moses and Elijah standing there with Him having a conversation with Jesus.

Mark describes Jesus as being transfigured into a blindingly white figure before them. What's happening here? Jesus is God, but His glory has been obscured by the fact that He is in the form of a human man. Now, for a period of time, Jesus' glory is allowed to shine through.

This is similar to the descriptions we see of God when He makes His presence known in the Old Testament. The Israelites were guided by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night after the exodus. Both Moses and Elijah had experiences where God's glory was revealed to them in some degree. God often appeared to Moses in a glowing cloud. Scholars often refer to this light as the "shekinah glory" of God. The difference here is that Jesus wasn't getting to see God's glory, He was the *source* of this glory! In other words, the disciples were getting a glimpse of Jesus as God! The Lord appeared to Elijah with a still small voice that came after a terrible wind, fire, and an earthquake. Amazingly, it was the still small voice of God that caused Elijah to cover his face in fear. Elijah's response was the same as the disciples. The presence of God results in an understanding of His power and our unworthiness. The disciples were getting to see Jesus as He truly is—God become man.

The other big question is why were Moses and Elijah there too? The short answer is, nobody really knows why it was Moses and Elijah and not some other people from Israel's history. There are lots of different ideas which have merit and may be correct. But we know these were two significant and highly revered members of Israel's history, so their presence was likely as much for the disciples' benefit as for Jesus'. The disciples probably viewed the presence of Moses and Elijah as adding to Jesus' power, but Jesus was the star of the show!

Peter then speaks up and suggests that they build three shelters as memorials, one for each of them. Mark tells us Peter said this because he didn't know what to say because they were all terrified. This lends credence to the idea that Mark's source for his gospel was Peter himself, since Peter would have known why he said what he did. He felt like somebody should do something, so he said the first thing that came to his mind. Many of us can feel a certain kinship with Peter in this moment!

We aren't told that Jesus, Moses, or Elijah said anything to Peter, James, or John, but there is one voice who does speak to them—the voice of God the Father. What He says is simple, yet profound. He says, "This is my dearly loved Son. Listen to Him." These words were similar to the words spoken at Jesus' baptism. Now they are directed at the disciples. I wonder if part of the reason the Lord says this to them is because they had been struggling to hear what Jesus said because it didn't align with their expectations.

Maybe this was meant to reassure the disciples that Jesus did, in fact, know what He was talking about, and that they should trust Him and take what He says to heart.

After the voice speaks to them, the disciples looked around and saw only Jesus. The other gospels tell us they had fallen asleep and awoke to see these things. So how do we know this wasn't just a dream? For two reasons. First, James and John saw the same thing! Second, Peter doubles down on this experience later in his ministry. Here is what Peter said about the experience later in one of his letters.

¹⁶ For we were not making up clever stories when we told you about the powerful coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We saw his majestic splendor with our own eyes ¹⁷ when he received honor and glory from God the Father. The voice from the majestic glory of God said to him, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy." ¹⁸ We ourselves heard that voice from heaven when we were with him on the holy mountain. (2 Peter 1:16-18, NLT)

He seems quite certain that he and James and John actually saw Jesus' glory. He knows Jesus is God because he saw it with his own eyes.

Coming Down the Mountain

Mark tells us about the conversation as they came back down the mountain. Personally, I wonder what happened between the transfiguration and the trip back down! I find it hard to imagine the disciples went back to sleep after that experience. Maybe they immediately decided to go back down. Whatever the case, Mark records part of their conversation.

⁹ As they went back down the mountain, he told them not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. ¹⁰ So they kept it to themselves, but they often asked each other what he meant by "rising from the dead." ¹¹ Then they asked him, "Why do the teachers of religious law insist that Elijah must return before the Messiah comes?" ¹² Jesus responded, "Elijah is indeed coming first to get everything ready. Yet why do the Scriptures say that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be treated with utter contempt? ¹³ But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they chose to abuse him, just as the Scriptures predicted." (Mark 9:9-13, NLT)

Jesus told the disciples not to speak about what they had seen until He had risen from the dead. Part of the reason for this may have been that they still didn't understand what was going on. It wasn't until after the resurrection that they began to start putting the pieces together. In fact, we are told they were still even perplexed what Jesus meant by rising from the dead. They still had trouble wrapping their minds around the fact that He would be killed. That may be why Jesus had them wait to speak about it. They weren't ready yet.

The disciples asked Jesus a question that was surely prompted by this experience. "Why do the teachers of religious law insist that Elijah must return before the Messiah comes?" It's a fair question. The final words of the Old Testament say this,

⁵“Look, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord arrives. ⁶ His preaching will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise I will come and strike the land with a curse.” (Malachi 4:5-6, NLT)

The disciples may have been wondering if they had just seen the fulfillment of this prophecy on the mountain. Jesus told them that Elijah would indeed come first to get things ready for the Son of Man. Matthew’s gospel makes clear that Jesus was telling them John the Baptist had fulfilled this role. He then tried to drive home the point that He would be killed by the religious leaders. He pointed to John the Baptist’s treatment by the religious leaders—he was imprisoned and ultimately beheaded for fulfilling his God-appointed role. Jesus said, if they did that to the “Elijah” who was promised, what made them think the same thing wouldn’t happen to Him?

This was another lesson intended to bolster the faith of the disciples in the face of what was to come. They still didn’t understand and could not conceive of Jesus being executed, yet Jesus was giving them all these clear teachings so that when it happened, they might be reminded that God was still on the throne and working. They could continue to trust, even in the darkest of days.

Conclusion

There is so much in these few verses we’ve looked at today. These verses give us a clear picture of Jesus’ divinity and serve as an encouragement and teachable moment for the disciples. The question is, what should we take away from this passage today? I’ve got several things we can learn.

First, we learn that Jesus is God. This seems like an elementary truth, but it makes a profound difference in the way we view Him. He was not just some mystic philosopher who spouted wisdom. Many today want to view Him that way, but that’s not who the scriptures reveal Jesus to be. Instead, we discover that Jesus was God come to earth in human form. This means Jesus does not give people axioms that are good advice, He speaks with the authority of God, commanding us to live differently.

Similarly, it reminds us that Jesus is in control of all things. He was in control when the crucifixion happened. He knew what He was doing. He allowed what seemed like a terrible thing to happen because He knew it would accomplish the greatest thing in all of history. This should give us confidence when we face trials in our lives. We know that Jesus is in control, He loves us, and He has a purpose for whatever we face. We can continue to trust Him even when hardships come that we don’t understand.

Jesus’ deity also shows us that He can deliver on His promises. When He promises that He can save all who trust in Him, we can believe it. These are not bluster or empty words, they are the words of God promising those who trust Him that He will take care of them. We can trust what Jesus says, because He is God.

Second, we should listen to Him. Again, this seems like a simple truth, but it was the one thing God the Father told the disciples during this experience, so it seems like an important truth to grasp. Of all the people you would think wouldn't need to be told to listen to Jesus, it would have been the disciples. They trusted Him and had seen His power. But I think the Father says this to the disciples because listening to Jesus means allowing what He says to change the way we think and act.

This was something the disciples were clearly struggling with, and something we struggle with as well. We are pretty good at being able to recall the things Jesus said most of the time, but we are not always so good about putting them into practice. We hear Jesus, but we sometimes struggle to listen to Him. The one direct instruction we see in this passage is to listen to Jesus. We must work at doing that in our lives. It means taking what Jesus says and allowing that to change the way we think and act.

Third, we should share our experience with others. There is lots of evidence for the validity of Jesus and the Bible. We've recounted much of that evidence through the years. But as you walk with the Lord, you also gain plenty of personal evidence. You can look back at many ways you have seen the Lord move in your life. You can point to many times the Lord has proven Himself to you. And you can hopefully also point to changes that have come into your life because of your faith. Often we get to see God move in the mundane things of life, simply by following Him. It is only later that we realize we were on the mountaintop with the Lord. Peter, James, and John weren't seeking a mountaintop experience. They were just going where Jesus led them. We don't need to seek mountaintop experiences—we just need to walk with Jesus. If we do, we'll get to see Him move. This passage reminds us that we should use our unique experiences to reach other people and to bolster their faith in Christ.

That's exactly what Peter, James, and John did once Jesus had risen from the dead. They began to share with others what they had seen and experienced with Jesus. They shared their firsthand encounters with other people, encouraging them to trust in Christ as well. We can and should do the same thing. We can tell our friends, our families, our children, our neighbors, even casual acquaintances about what we have experienced with Jesus. It doesn't have to be flashy—most of us don't have a testimony like Peter, James, and John—it just needs to be real. This is often the easiest way for us to bring up the gospel in conversation with others. Tell them how God has changed you. Tell them the things you are learning. Tell them how you see God working even here and now. You might be surprised how God uses your experience to reach others—and telling others opens the door for us to see Him move again.

The primary point of this passage was to serve as an encouragement to the disciples for the dark days ahead. This mountaintop experience would guide and encourage them, even as they struggled to understand. Our response should be the same. There will most assuredly be dark days ahead for us as well. We should be driven to trust Jesus fully, to listen to Him, and to share Him with others, because we know who He is. He is God, come to earth to save sinful human beings. That truth changes everything—and it's a truth worth sharing with others.

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