

THE NEW EXODUS

MARK 9:2-50

As we continue to read through Mark's account, Jesus is radically revealing himself and reinterpreting the popular expectations concerning the Christ (the Promised Savior-King of Israel) who would bring deliverance for the nation of Israel and establish his reign on earth as King. He is revealing the way in which the Christ must suffer rejection and even death in order to bring about the ultimate deliverance that God has promised to provide for his people. This scene on the mountain continues this revelation for the disciples.

Now if we are to try and understand the meaning of Jesus' transfiguration in the presence of his disciples on the mountain, then we must first come to understand that this is not the first instance in which we see men experiencing a glimpse of God's glory, a cloud of God's presence and a voice of God's Word in a powerful mountaintop experience. Undoubtedly, the transfiguration of Jesus serves to be some sort of parallel from what was experienced centuries before when God came down on Mount Sinai and confirmed his covenant relationship with his people.

God had appeared to the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt and on their way to the Promised Land. Here, Jesus is confirming his covenant relationship with his new people of God in the midst of their ultimate exodus and on their way to the ultimate promised land.

A Greater Glory

After their deliverance from Egypt and before they set out on their journey to the Promised Land, God confirmed his covenant relationship with Israel at Mount Sinai. He came down upon Mount Sinai in a thick cloud of smoke that covered the mountain in the sight of all the people (Exodus 19). The voice of God spoke to the people out of the cloud, and his people were so terrified that they said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die" (Exodus 20).

In the midst of this scene and in his preparation to lead the people toward the Promised Land, Moses wanted a sign of assurance that God's presence and power would in fact remain with them on their way. So Moses asks God, "Please show me your glory" (Exodus 33). And although Moses was not permitted to see the fullness of God's glory, even a glimpse of God was enough to make Moses' face shine brightly before the people of Israel (Exodus 34). Moses reflected the glory of God which served as a reminder and confirmation to the people that he was in fact the specially chosen servant of the Lord (Exodus 14:31) who had delivered God's people from their bondage in Egypt and who would lead God's people to their inheritance of the Promised Land.

Now on top of this new mountain, there's a glimpse of God's glory again as Jesus' clothes "became radiant and intensely white as no one on earth could bleach them" (9:3). We can assume this is the best explanation that Peter could give of something that was utterly unexplainable. There's also a cloud that covers the mountain and the voice of God speaking out of the cloud in the presence of the disciples. And so what seems to be the Mount Sinai experience all over again is actually something entirely greater. Because while Moses had reflected the glory of God; Jesus is radiating the glory of God from within himself!

Jesus is "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature" (Hebrews 1:3). Whoever has seen the Son has seen the Father (John 14:9). While Moses was the highly honorable and specially chosen servant of God, Jesus is the ultimate Servant and Son of God worthy of the highest honor. And as a glimpse of God's glory helped assure his people to follow Moses to the Promised Land, here a glimpse of Christ's glory helps assure the disciples to follow Jesus on the way to what he has promised lies ahead for them.

A Greater Mediator

At Mount Sinai, the glory of God's presence covered the mountain in a cloud of smoke and fire that caused the mountain to tremble and therefore terrified the people who were present. Although the glory of God at the transfiguration was also terrifying for the disciples who were present (9:6), there is a striking observation that can be made in comparing these two mountaintop experiences.

At Sinai, God strictly orders Moses to tell the people that they are in no way whatsoever to approach the mountain or to even reach out and touch the edge of it. Whoever touched the mountain would immediately be put to death (Exodus 19:12).

This was a very serious reminder of how a holy and perfect God cannot be approached by sinful man. Man's sinfulness had separated him from God and the boundary was not to be crossed.

And so, in his grace, God calls Moses (and only Moses) to come to the top of the mountain, and he would serve as the chosen mediator between the people and God in order to protect the people from the presence of God that would inevitably destroy them if they came too close. God chose to speak to his people through Moses the chosen mediator.

However, something happens on the mountain with Jesus and his disciples that never happened with the Israelites at Sinai. The disciples are on the mountain when the glory of God illumines it, the presence of God surrounds it, and the voice of God speaks out of it. The disciples are right in the midst of the very presence of God, and it does not kill them!

What's going on here?

Suddenly the disciples look around, and they no longer see anyone with them except Jesus only (9:8). Here, we see the way in which Jesus is the Greater Mediator who gives his people what no mediator before him could ever give. He and he alone is able to bridge the infinite gap between sinful man and our holy God. Our sinfulness has cut us off, but in Christ we can once again come near. God has now chosen to speak to his people through his Son Jesus, the Chosen Mediator and the Messiah (Christ) of God's people. It is further confirmation of God's new covenant with his new chosen people. Moses is now gone, and God now speaks through his own Son. Jesus is the very Word of God; we are to listen to him now!

As the author of Hebrews puts it:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. (Hebrews 1:1-2)

A Greater Exodus

The transfiguration of Jesus records the second time in Mark's account in which the voice from heaven has been heard. Initially, at the baptism of Jesus, God's declaration introduces Jesus as the Chosen Servant who "will bring forth justice" for God's people and who will "open the eyes of the blind" and "bring out the prisoners from the dungeon of darkness."¹

Here upon the mountain, God's declaration identifies Jesus as the Lord's Anointed who will inherit the earth as a possession and "break the nations with a rod of iron."² In linking the baptism and the mountain with the voice of God from heaven, Mark is masterfully revealing the 'new exodus' of the true people of God that is to be carried out by the True Prophet of God who is greater than Moses. Just as Israel came out of the water and to the mountain at Sinai on their way to the Promised Land, Jesus has come out of the water and is here seen on the mountain before he continues on the way to what God has promised through him for his people.

The appearance of Moses and Elijah on top of the mountain adds further confirmation of what is culminating in the life and work of Jesus. Interestingly enough, our Old Testament concludes with a reference to Moses and Elijah in preparation of the "great and awesome day of the Lord."

The prophet Malachi writes:

Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Sinai for all Israel. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. (Malachi 4:4-5)

The presence of Moses and Elijah on the mountain would have undoubtedly heightened the disciples expectations that Jesus was the Promised Savior-King who was bringing Israel's end-time salvation and restoration (notice their question in v. 11).

¹ compare Mark 1:11 with Isaiah 42:1

² compare Mark 9:7 with Psalm 2:7

But also, in a general sense, we might observe the way in which these two men represent the entire expanse of Old Testament revelation (from the Law to the Prophets), and that they were the only two men in history who had ever spoken with God on Mount Sinai. However, here on this new mountain, we see them now speaking with Jesus.

Therefore, the appearance of Moses and Elijah likely recalls their prophetic roles as the ones who were simply preparers of the ultimate Prophet who was to come some time after them. Seeing them talking with Jesus reveals how all that has gone before now bears witness to him who is here now. In Christ, the Day of the Lord has come, and the prophet greater than Moses is here (Deuteronomy 18:15). Jesus is Israel's long-awaited Christ who will "suddenly come to His temple" (Malachi 3:1) and who will now lead his people out of exile.

Christ himself is the Temple to end all temples, and the Tabernacle to end all tabernacles. In Christ, the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us (John 1:14). In Christ, the Stone that the builders rejected has become the Cornerstone of the New Temple – Christ and his church.³

James Edwards writes:

"Moses' deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt and formation of them into a nation are prototypes of Jesus' passion, through which he would deliver people from the power of sin and form a new people in the church."⁴

The transfiguration of Jesus strategically and spectacularly serves as the powerful transition between Jesus' ministry thus far in Mark's account, and Jesus' mission that is about to be fulfilled through his death in Jerusalem. Jesus has identified himself as the Christ and has commissioned his disciples to take up their cross. The transfiguration serves to provide great assurance and encouragement for the disciples to truly believe him and to follow him on the way to what their commitment to him will inevitably cost them.

³ see Psalm 118:22; 1 Corinthians 3:16

⁴ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 265

Jesus is radiating a greater glory, proving himself to be a greater mediator and revealing the way of a new exodus for the New People of God. And so, his people are to obey the voice of God and “Listen to him... lest he come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction” (Malachi 4:6). The disciples must stop concentrating on their preconceived ideas about the Christ. They must stop projecting on him their expectations of what the Christ ought to be like. And they must learn to listen to him and let Christ alone define himself and direct the destination to which he is leading his people.

The disciples’ experience of Christ’s glory was meant to equip them for what was expected of them on the way to fulfilling the ultimate exodus – deliverance from the curse of death and the inheritance of eternal life for all God’s people through the Christ and his cross.