

## The Transfiguration (Mark 9:1-13)

02.4.18

### **Is It Worth It?**

Last week's message focused upon some of the hardest words in the New Testament. In Mark 8:31-38, Jesus lays before His followers the demands of discipleship. If you want to be a disciple of Christ, if you want to enter into His everlasting kingdom, then you must believe in a suffering Messiah (v. 31-33), and you must become His suffering disciple (v. 34-38). Beginning in verse 27, Jesus led His disciples north of Galilee into the region of Caesarea Philippi at the foot of the majestic, snow-capped peaks of Mount Hermon. On the way, Jesus had queried His disciples regarding the prevailing opinion of His identity.

*"Who do people say that I am?" And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." (8:27-29)*

But what did Peter mean by that title, which translates the Hebrew word *meshiach*, meaning "Messiah?" As I explained last week, Peter probably had in mind the picture of a wise and powerful Davidic king who would restore the kingdom and the glory to Israel, who would banish the wicked and the Gentiles, and who would reign forever in righteousness and peace (Jer. 23:5-6). While it is likely that Peter's conception of Jesus as the Messiah included some understanding of Jesus as divine (in Matt. 16:16 Peter says, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*"), and that Jesus' arrival marked the coming of the Day of the LORD and the inauguration of the eschatological kingdom (as evidenced by his question about Elijah in Mark 9:11; cf. Mal. 4:5-6), it is certain that it did not include the Messiah's rejection, suffering, and death.

That is why Jesus strictly charged the disciples to tell no one (8:30), and then immediately began to teach them

*"that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again." (8:31)*

Jesus' suffering and death had no place in the disciples' understanding of what He had come to accomplish. So Peter took Jesus aside and attempted to correct Him, only to be severely rebuked and rebuffed:

*"Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." (8:33)*

Immediately, then, Jesus called His crowd of followers together and explained to them that His path to everlasting glory led through a cross, and that if they intended to follow Him to glory, they must first follow Him on the path of suffering.

*"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life*

*for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." (8:34-38)*

If you want to follow Jesus, you must join Him on the death march. First comes the cross, then comes the crown.

These are grim words, particularly to those familiar with the horrifying spectacle of crucifixion. It was a lot for His disciples to handle. It is a lot for anyone to handle. And it raises the question, is it worth it? Is the reward worth the cost? If I go all in with Christ, and radically transform my life according to His command, am I going to be disappointed? This is where the rubber meets the road. If I am going to follow Christ down the Calvary Road, I better believe that Jesus is who I hope He is, and that He is able to deliver on His promise.

That, I believe, is the purpose of the transfiguration. It occurred, and was recorded, in order to give us a vision of the glory of Christ, that we would know that it is all worth it – the suffering, the shame, the cross. It is like being given a peek at the final act of a play, or the last scene in a movie, or the last chapter in a book, in order to give us confidence and encouragement to see the story through to the end. Have you ever been so disturbed by a book that you have to flip to the end to make sure it all turns out okay in order to have the strength to endure the middle? I think that is what the transfiguration is all about. After the suffering, after the cross, Christ will reign in power and glory, and we will reign with Him... if we suffer with Him (Rom. 8:17; 2 Tim. 2:12). So let's look together at this glimpse of the end of story, this foretaste of glory, and let it gird us for the suffering to come. For this glimpse of glory assures us that it will all be worth it in the end.

## **You Will See Glory**

The primary evidence I find that the transfiguration is intended to be an encouragement to suffering Christians, an assurance that their sorrow and travail is all worth it, is found in the radical, 180-degree turn that Jesus takes in Mark 9:1. Even though Mark 9:1 begins a new chapter, there is no compelling textual reason to believe that it is not a part of the same discourse as 8:34-38. To those whom He has just told that their path includes a cross (whether literal or metaphorical), Jesus gives this astounding promise:

*And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power." (9:1)*

According to William Lane, "The Semitism 'taste death' [γεύσονται θανάτου] alludes to the harsh reality of violent death contemplated in Ch. 8:35b; men who are faithful to Jesus and the gospel will lose their lives."<sup>1</sup> In other words, before they taste death, before they experience the cost of discipleship laid out in the previous verses, some of Jesus' disciples will see the kingdom of God come with power. But what on earth does that mean? As I see it, there are three possibilities:

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<sup>1</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 312.

1. Jesus could be referring to His return (the *Parousia*), when His invisible and heavenly kingdom will be made visible in power and glory in a new heaven and new earth. That would seem to be the most natural sense of Jesus' statement. There is just one problem, though. It would not be true! Nearly two millennia have passed since Jesus uttered these words, and everyone who heard His statement that day have long since died, and yet Jesus has not returned. This is, however, the preferred understanding of critical scholars, who simply say that Jesus was in error.<sup>2</sup> But, I suggest we not go that route...
2. Jesus could be referring to His imminent death on the cross, where He defeated Satan and cast him down (John 12:31), disarmed the rulers and authorities (Col. 2:15), and established the new covenant in His blood (Luke 22:20), followed by His resurrection in power and His ascension to the right hand of the Father where He sat down on His glorious throne and reigns until He has put all His enemies under His feet (1 Cor. 15:25).<sup>3</sup> The one problem I see with this view is that, so far as we know, everyone standing there that day lived to see the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, yet Jesus' words seem to limit this promised privilege to a few – "*there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.*"
3. Which leaves us with a third option, which is that Jesus is referring to His transfiguration. I think that is exactly what Jesus has in mind. Having just told this crowd, along with His disciples, that following Him will cost them their lives (literally or metaphorically), He then assures them that His kingdom will come with power (it will all be worth it!), and there are some of them who will see the guarantee – the foretaste – of this kingdom. He then takes some of them (Peter, James, and John) up a high mountain and shows them His glory. They in turn relate this event to the rest of the disciples and the church after Jesus' resurrection (9:9).

I think Mark's placement of the account of the transfiguration (9:2-8) immediately following this statement (9:1) shows this third option to be the correct one (cf. Matt. 16:28-17:1-8). The transfiguration is a foretaste of the glory and power of the coming kingdom and its coming King.

### **The Foretaste of Glory**

With this introduction, let's look now at Mark's account of the transfiguration:

*And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah and Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah. For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice*

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<sup>2</sup> "This saying is often combined with sayings of similar effect in the NT, all of which are commonly understood as evidence of the expectation of the Parousia or return of Christ during the lifetime of Jesus' contemporaries. Obviously that did not happen, and many scholars consequently believe Jesus to have been in error with regard to the expectation of the imminence of the Parousia." James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 259.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Edwards, 260.

*came out of the cloud, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone but Jesus only. (9:2-8)*

There are three questions about this text that I want to answer before we try to make application of this passage.

First, what is the “high mountain” (ὄρος ὑψηλὸν) up which Jesus leads His three disciples? The high mountain is probably Mount Hermon, a majestic peak which dominates the region of Caesarea Philippi. The peak straddles the border between modern-day Lebanon and Syria, and the range of which it is a part stretches south into Israel into the region known as the Golan Heights. Mount Hermon soars to well over 9,000 ft. above sea level, and nearly 10,000 ft. above the Sea of Galilee. The snowmelt from this peak and the surrounding range converge to form the Jordan River. The traditional site for the Mount of Transfiguration is Mount Tabor, which is in far southern Galilee. But there are variety of reasons that this traditional site is unlikely, and scholarly consensus has shifted to Mount Hermon in recent generations.<sup>4</sup> In all of Palestine, Mount Hermon is quite literally the top of the world. On a clear day, it can be seen all the way from Jerusalem. The climb from Caesarea Philippi would have taken all day, so imagine Jesus and His disciples ascending to the summit amid the residual patches of snow that remain through the summer. The evening air is crisp, cool, and thin. The sun is beginning to set far into the west, descending into the Mediterranean Sea. Luke tells us that while Jesus was praying (Luke 9:32), the disciples became “heavy with sleep” (Luke 9:32), likely from the exertion of climbing combined with the high altitude and the thin air. Then, perhaps well into the night, with the dazzling starlit sky above, the peak of Mount Hermon lit up with the brilliant, effulgent glory of God.<sup>5</sup>

Second, what are we to make of Jesus’ two famous, heavenly visitors? Why do Moses and Elijah suddenly appear on the mountain to talk with Jesus? Speculation abounds, but I believe the best explanation is that they represent the old covenant, the Law and the Prophets which anticipate, foreshadow, bear witness to, and find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ (Acts 10:43; Rom. 3:21). Moses and Elijah appear now, at the climax of redemptive history, as key figures of the old covenant. All that they did, all that they spoke, all that they promised, finds its fulfillment in what Jesus is about to accomplish. And even though the content of their discussion is not recorded by Mark, Luke informs us that they “*spoke of his departure* [lit. “his exodus”] *which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem*” (Luke 9:31). They spoke with Jesus of His impending suffering and death, which is the very truth the disciples were having trouble reconciling with their conception of the Messiah (8:32). Therefore, Moses and Elijah appear as witnesses to the necessity of Christ’s death, of its place in God’s eternal redemptive plan, and of the kingdom, the power, and the glory to follow. These two men, the foremost figures of the old covenant, have appeared to bear witness to these disciples – and through them, to the church... to us – that Jesus’ death is God’s plan, and that by His death Jesus will become the mediator of a new and better covenant (Heb. 9:15), and will inaugurate the everlasting kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

Third, why does Peter offer to erect three tents (σκηνάς), one for Jesus and one for Moses and one for Elijah? I think Peter’s impetuous request reflects a misunderstanding of what

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<sup>4</sup> Edwards, 262-263.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 201-207.

<sup>6</sup> John MacArthur, *Mark 9-16*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2015), 6.

the transfiguration meant. Rather than being a foretaste of the coming glory and kingdom, I think Peter interpreted the transfiguration as the coming of the kingdom *now*. Put yourself in his sandals and think about it from his perspective:

- Jesus has just told you that some who were standing there would not taste death until they had seen the kingdom of God come with power (9:1).
- Moses and Elijah, the two most prominent figures of the old covenant, have appeared after being gone for 1,400 years (Moses) and 900 years (Elijah), respectively. Surely, that must mean that something significant is about to happen...
- Jesus, the Master, the Teacher, the Prophet, the Christ whom you have followed for over a year, now suddenly appears as if He were God – His clothes a radiant, intense white (9:3), “white as light” (Matt. 17:2), His face shining like the sun (Matt. 17:2).
- Add to this the fact that it is about the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, which commemorated the exodus from Egypt,<sup>7</sup> and all the signs seemed to confirm Peter’s hopes. The kingdom had come in power and glory along with its glorious King.

Luke’s account even gives the impression that Peter made the suggestion as Moses and Elijah began to leave, as if he saw the kingdom slipping away and he was grasping to keep it near:

*And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah” – not knowing what he said. (Luke 9:33)*

Mark simply states that Peter said this because in his state of terror, he didn’t know what else to say (9:6).

Regardless, a cloud overshadowed (ἐπισκιάζουσα – cf. Ex. 24:15; 40:31) them, and a voice from inside the cloud thundered out, “*This is my beloved Son; listen to him.*” “Peter, you don’t understand. You don’t get it. Don’t talk. Listen to what My beloved Son is telling you.” Peter still does not grasp that the kingdom will not come until the Messiah accomplishes His suffering and death for sinners. William Lane comments helpfully on this point:

“[Peter’s] comment reflects a failure to appreciate that the transfiguration was only a momentary anticipation of the glory of the consummated kingdom. The blessings of the new age, which will be shared by *all* the people of God (Ch. 13:26f), cannot be secured until Jesus has accomplished the sufferings which are integral to his appointed task, culminating in his death.”<sup>8</sup>

Once again, the kingdom will not come until the King suffers as a sacrificial Lamb for the sins of His people. First comes the cross, then comes the crown. The transfiguration is just a momentary glimpse of the coming glory.

### **The Coming King Is First the Suffering Servant**

And that is the point of the conversation which follows as Jesus and His disciples descend from the mountain. The coming King must first become the Suffering Servant:

*And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean. And*

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<sup>7</sup> MacArthur, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Lane, 319.

*they asked him, “Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” And he said to them, “Elijah does come first to restore all things. And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.” (9:9-13)*

As they were descending from the heights of Mount Hermon, Jesus commanded (διεστείλατο) them that they should tell no one what they had seen until after He was raised from the dead. This is the first time in Mark’s Gospel that Jesus imposes a limit upon His command to silence.<sup>9</sup> What they have witnessed will be an important testimony in time to come, but for now they must keep it to themselves. Why? Because others would misinterpret this revelation of Christ’s divine glory in the same way that Peter had – as evidence that the coming kingdom had already appeared, rather than as a foretaste of the glory to come.

The news of Christ’s impending resurrection continued to mystify the disciples. It was not that they did not anticipate a coming resurrection of the just and unjust on the Day of the LORD. The doctrine of resurrection on the last day had been firmly established in Jewish theology for at least two centuries (cf. Dan. 12:2), particularly in Pharisee-dominated Galilee. Rather, it was what death and resurrection had to do with Jesus.<sup>10</sup> If Jesus was to be “raised from among the dead” (ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀναστῆ), this must mean that Jesus would die. And they still had no categories for a suffering and dying Messiah.

This is what prompts their question regarding the coming of Elijah. “*Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?*” They have just seen Elijah appear on the Mount of Transfiguration. They know from their time in the synagogue that the scribes teach that before the Day of the LORD comes, Elijah must appear to restore Israel to righteousness. The text which the scribes had in mind is Malachi 4:5-6:

*“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” (Mal. 4:5-6)*

Through the prophet Malachi, God had promised to send Elijah ahead of His coming on the Day of the LORD (Mal. 3:1-2), because Israel was unprepared to meet her God. Elijah would restore Israel to a state of repentance and faithfulness to the covenant, such that for them the Day of the LORD would be a day of salvation rather than a day of judgment. So for the disciples, the coming of Elijah must mean the Day of the LORD is imminent, and therefore they have no category for the death of the Messiah. It just doesn’t fit their eschatology.

Jesus responds by referencing another Scripture, one that speaks of the necessary sufferings of the Son of Man.

*And he said to them, “Elijah does come first to restore all things. And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.” (9:12-13)*

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<sup>9</sup> Edwards, 272.

<sup>10</sup> Edwards, 273.

Jesus first affirms that their eschatology is correct. Elijah does come first to restore all things – to bring Israel to repentance ahead of the coming Day of the LORD. But there is another strain of prophecy that the scribes had missed altogether (and still do). The “and” at the beginning of the second sentence in verse 12 should be translated “but.” Jesus’ statement in verse 12 should read, “Elijah does come first to restore all things. *But* how is it written of the Son of man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt?”<sup>11</sup> In other words, Elijah must come first, but so must the Son of Man suffer many things and be treated with contempt. The Scripture that Jesus has in mind is undoubtedly the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53:

*He was despised and rejected by men;  
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;  
and as one from whom men hide their faces  
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.  
Surely he has born our griefs  
and carried our sorrows;  
yet we esteemed him stricken,  
smitten by God, and afflicted.  
But he was pierced for our transgressions;  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,  
and with his wounds we are healed. (Isa. 53:3-5)*

Jesus is telling His disciples that they should not only expect Elijah to come as the forerunner of the Day of the LORD, but they should also expect the Messiah to suffer and die for the sins of His people. Before the crown there must be a cross.

Jesus then specifies that Elijah has already come, but not the Elijah they expected. The disciples have just seen the prophet Elijah upon the Mount of Transfiguration, but that is not the Elijah of whom the LORD spoke in Malachi. The Elijah of Malachi’s prophecy, the forerunner of the Messiah, the one destined to restore Israel to repentance and prepare the way for the LORD’s coming, was John the Baptist (cf. Matt. 17:13). And, Jesus says, John suffered as well. If they do to the forerunner of the Messiah whatever they please, what will they do to the Messiah Himself?<sup>12</sup> Once again, Jesus is establishing that suffering is part of God’s plan – the suffering of the Messiah, the suffering of His forerunner, and the sufferings of His people.

### **A Glimpse of the Glory to Be Revealed**

In order to enter into the everlasting kingdom of God, you must believe in a suffering Messiah and you must become His suffering disciple. That much was clear from last week’s message. The road to glory is the path of suffering. First comes the cross, then comes the crown – for Jesus, as well as for His people. But in order to bear the cross, you must be convinced of the crown that actually awaits you. You must be convinced that He who calls you to suffer with

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<sup>11</sup> “The relationship between the two clauses is clarified by the recognition of the underlying μέν . . . δέ construction (with καὶ πῶς in 12b substituting for the δέ): on the one hand Elijah comes first to restore all things, but on the other hand the Scripture affirms that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected. It is necessary that all the Scripture be fulfilled, not only those passages concerning Elijah; Lane, 325, note 34.

<sup>12</sup> The best guess as to Scripture referenced by Jesus in v. 13, the one that foretold the sufferings of John the Baptist (the eschatological Elijah), is 1 Kings 19:2, 10. John, like Elijah, was “harassed by a wicked woman and a weak king”; Lane, 326.

Him and for Him is the sovereign and omnipotent King who is able to deliver on His promise and bring you into His kingdom. That is the point of this week's message. That is the function of the transfiguration. That is why Jesus instructed His disciples to tell what they had seen... after He had been raised from the dead. We must see what they saw, so that we will be equipped to suffer as they suffered and to persevere as they persevered.

The apostle Paul was no stranger to suffering. He knew from firsthand experience what it was to deny himself and take up his cross and follow Jesus. He knew what it was to lose his life for the sake of Christ and the gospel. He walked the Calvary Road. In 2 Corinthians, he runs down the list of his sufferings in response to charges from certain Jews who questioned his apostleship and challenged his authority:

*But whatever anyone else dares to boast of – I am speaking as a fool – I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one – I am talking like a madman – with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from the Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Cor. 11:21-28)*

Never has a man suffered as Paul did – beatings and betrayal, stoning and starvation, shipwrecks and scourging, all compounded with the emotional toil of being a father to countless churches. How did he do it? He tells us in Romans 8:18:

*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory to be revealed to us. (Rom. 8:18)*

Paul had seen the glory of Christ, just like the disciples on the mountaintop. The King had appeared to him on the Damascus Road. And the sight of His glory convinced him that all of the sufferings of this life are worth it. Come what may, Paul was going to follow this King into His everlasting kingdom.

This morning we have been shown a glimpse of Christ's divine glory – the glory which Peter, James, and John saw upon the mountain, the glory which Paul beheld on the Damascus Road, the glory which John witnessed on the Isle of Patmos, the glory that all men will see on the day of His appearing. On the Mount of Transfiguration, the glory of the divine Son of God burst forth in blinding, refulgent splendor. And that glimpse of glory is the guarantee of our inheritance, the guarantee that, yes, it is worth it. Persecution is worth it. Cancer is worth it. Poverty is worth it. Death is worth it. The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory to be revealed to us. The Jesus who calls you to follow Him, first to a cross and then to a crown, the Jesus who calls you lay down your life to follow Him on the Calvary Road, is indeed God's beloved Son. Listen to Him.