

Series: Mark – Summer 2020 Series
Title: “Transformed by the Transfiguration”
Text: Mark 9:1-13
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Verse 1

In Mark 9:1, we read, “Then he said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God come in power.’” Many translations relegate the verse to the previous passage (Mark 8:34-38). It seems best, however, to assign it to the narrative that follows (Mark 9:2-13). The Transfiguration provides an explanation of the meaning of Jesus’ words in verse 1.

Grouping Mark 9:1 with Mark 9:2-13 solves a common misunderstanding. Some misinterpret Jesus’ pronouncement in the current verse, supposing He promised that He would return to earth a second time within His disciples’ lifetime. As a result, they see His announcement as an instance of unfulfilled prophecy. If such a line of thinking is followed, Jesus made a false promise and our Bible contains an error.

There is no need to arrive at such a conclusion. The fact that Mark would include the promise in his gospel proves that it shouldn’t be regarded as erroneous prophecy. If the Lord indeed misspoke, wouldn’t the gospel writers attempt to cover His mistake? One has commented, “The very difficulty of the saying argues strongly for its authenticity, for the early church would scarcely have attributed what appeared to be unfulfilled prophecy to Jesus.”¹

It is best to see verse 1 as a lead-in to the Transfiguration. Jesus gave a preview of the event by saying, “There are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.” Of whom was Jesus speaking when He spoke of “some?” It seems His designation referred to Peter, James, and John. Our next verse will reveal that they were the only ones in the group of twelve who witnessed the transfiguration (verse 2). All the other apostles would eventually die without seeing the glorified Jesus.

Jesus’ inner-circle, however, would “see the kingdom of God come in power.” The Greek verb translated “come” could be rendered “already established.”² It portrays both the power and immediacy of Christ’s kingdom. Remember, the context of our passage. Jesus has been teaching about His pending death and resurrection (8:22-38). Thus, the Transfiguration can be seen as a preview of the resurrection. It also points to the spiritual kingdom that would come about because of His victory over death. The glorified state Jesus experienced at the Transfiguration served as a preview of what He would be like after His resurrection. In addition, in being transformed and glorified before His disciples, Jesus provided a preview of what will happen “when he comes in the glory of his father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38).

¹ Edwards, 259.

² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 86.

Verse 2

Verse 2 starts the Transfiguration narrative: “After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain by themselves to be alone. He was transfigured in front of them” (Mark 9:2). The detail about the timing of the event expressed by the words “after six days” links Peter’s confession in 8:29 to this event, showing that the transfiguration is intended to demonstrate Jesus’ messianic nature.³

Mark clarifies who the “some” of verse 1 were by listing out the names of “Peter, James, and John.” So far in Mark’s gospel, we have already seen Jesus do important things with these three alone (Mark 5:37). The gospels repeatedly present the three as Jesus’ closest confidants, His “inner-circle,” as some have called them.

With Peter, James, and John in tow, Jesus “led them up a high mountain.” The exact location of this mountaintop is unknown. Some think it is Mount Tabor. Others opt for Mount Hermon. The exact location isn’t what’s most important. What happens on the mountain is. It is worth noting, however, that mountains were seen as places of Divine revelation in the Bible.⁴

Interestingly, both Moses (Exodus 19:3) and Elijah (1 Kings 19:8), two characters who will later appear in our narrative, both received special revelation on a mountain. Moses spent six days on Mount Sinai. Maybe there is a slight allusion to that event in our current text.⁵ The high mountain would undoubtedly have made some of Mark’s readers think of Sinai. All of these clues were perhaps meant to portray Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets.

Jesus’ intention in taking the three up the mountain was to reveal His Divine nature. He wanted them to see His glory. The Transfiguration would give a visible demonstration of His teaching from 8:27-33. Once they reached the mountaintop, Jesus was “transfigured in front of them.” The word translated “transfigured” means “to change in a manner that is visible to others.”⁶ It is the Greek word from which we get our English word “metamorphosis.”⁷ It depicts “a radical change” or a “complete transformation.”⁸ Mark uses a theological passive verb, indicating that the transformation was performed by God Himself. This whole event, therefore, is an act of Divine disclosure.⁹

Peter spoke of the event in 2 Peter 1:16-18. Matthew’s account of it is found in Matthew 17:1-13. The event was designed to communicate two important truths. First, it was meant to show the disciples that Jesus was indeed the Son of God (8:29). Second,

³ Edwards, 262.

⁴ Brooks, 141.

⁵ Edwards, 262.

⁶ Schnabel, 209.

⁷ Edwards, 263.

⁸ Brooks, 142.

⁹ Schnabel, 209.

it gave a preview of the Second Coming of Christ. Though He would one day be rejected and killed (8:31), He would also one day be glorified and magnified upon the earth (Philippians 2:9-11).

It is important to note that our text depicts the Transfiguration as being an actual, literal event. The disciples didn't receive a vision, nor did they simply see a ghost-like rendering of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. The transfiguration was a real, objective, and tangible event. The event served as a foreshadowing of the glory Jesus would receive after He accomplished His mission on earth. One has commented, "The Transfiguration points forward to and is a foretaste of the Resurrection and of the Second Coming."¹⁰ Because of Jesus' metamorphosis, we have assurance that Jesus has carried our sins away. We also have hope that He will one day make all things new.

Verse 3

Once the group reached the mountain top, Jesus' "clothes became dazzling—extremely white as no launderer on earth could whiten them" (Mark 9:3). The word translated "dazzling" means "to cast rays of light."¹¹ Apparently, the glory of God filled Jesus in such a way that bright beams of light shot forth from His clothing.

Along with the beams emanating from His body, Jesus' robe appeared brilliantly white. It was brighter than any robe the disciples had ever seen. According to Mark, no cleaner could have possibly made a garment as clean as the one Jesus wore. In the first century, launderers used nitrous products to clean the customary wool garments.¹² Mark's description was a way of saying that there was no human comparison to the brightness of Jesus' clothing.¹³

A.T. Robertson maintains that the Transfiguration occurred on Mount Hermon. At this time of the year, the summit of the mountain was likely covered in snow.¹⁴ If Robertson's estimation is correct, the scene was surely spectacular. To see the glorified Jesus was awe-inspiring without a doubt. A white backdrop of snow probably added to the aura of the event.

The exterior appearance of Jesus in our text is seen elsewhere in the New Testament. When John was exiled on Patmos, he saw the Lord in a similar form (Revelation 1:12-16), and Matthew tells of how Jesus appeared in bright white clothing after the resurrection (Matthew 28:8). Considering the fact that both of the aforementioned visions took place after Jesus' victory over death, we can conclude that the Transfiguration was intended as a preview of His glorified state. We also know this is

¹⁰ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 86.

¹¹ Schnabel, 209.

¹² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 86.

¹³ Schnabel, 209.

¹⁴ Robertson, 339.

true because of the context in which Mark places the event within his gospel. He gives account of the Transfiguration right after Jesus' teaching on the resurrection (Mark 8:31).

The Transfiguration was meant to be a preview of Jesus' victory over death. Believers need not be overly worried about the problems and pains of life. The Lord has squashed sin, defeated Satan, and arrested death. In the midst of a fallen world, we have hope of love, life, and victory! Jesus has overcome, so we have guarantee of overcoming as well. One day He will rule and reign forever, and we will enjoy endless peace and prosperity with Him.

Verse 4

As the disciples gazed upon the illustrious appearance of the Lord, "Elijah appeared to them with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus" (Mark 9:4). Elijah has already appeared in Mark's gospel in 6:15 and 8:28. He appears again, this time with Moses in tow. Together, the two men constitute the seminal figures of Old Testament tradition. Moses was the figurehead of Old Testament law, and Elijah was the figurehead of all Old Testament prophecy.

The appearance of these two men reveals a couple important truths. First, it shows that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus Himself claimed to be the culmination of Moses and Elijah's writings in Matthew's gospel, saying, "Don't think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). The apostles preached similarly to Jesus. Paul was clear concerning his conviction that Christ fulfilled the Law (Romans 10:4). In Jesus we have the Lord's foreordained means of salvation.

Secondly, the appearance of these two religious figures is a representation of the glory believers will receive at the culmination of all things (Revelation 19:14 and Colossians 3:4). In first century Jewish thought, it was believed that both Moses and Elijah would appear at the end of time. Such belief about Moses was based on prophecy found in Deuteronomy 18:5. Elijah was thought to have eschatological significance because of Malachi 4:4-5. According to Revelation, two figures will indeed appear at the end of time who will have Elijah-like and Moses-like ministries (Revelation 11:1-14).

The appearance of Moses and Elijah with Jesus at the Transfiguration has end-times overtones. It stands as a reminder that believers will one day be transformed in a way that will be similar to Jesus' transformation on the mountain. The apostle John spoke of the way in which believers will be transformed at the end of time when they see the glory of Jesus. He said, "Dear friends, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. We know that when he appears, we will be like him because we will see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

This event is known by theologians and Bible teachers as "glorification." It is spoken of in the New Testament passages like 1 Corinthians 15:50-55, Romans 8:28-30, 1 John 3:1-3, and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. One has defined glorification as "the final dimension of Christian salvation, which includes eternal life in heaven and the eternal

glorifying of God.”¹⁵ The Transfiguration was meant to encourage the disciples. Though they were called to live lives of self denial (Mark 8:34), they would one day reign with Jesus in power and glory.

Verse 5

Seeing the famous Old Testament characters, Peter proposed a plan. He said, “Rabbi, it’s good for us to be here. Let’s set up three shelters: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” (Mark 9:5). In Luke’s gospel, we learn that Peter had been asleep during the actual transformation of Jesus (Luke 9:32). Perhaps the apostle awoke in embarrassment. Maybe he tried to cover for himself by saying something that sounded spiritual.

The title “rabbi” meant “my great one” or “my esteemed teacher.”¹⁶ By using the moniker, Peter showed a degree of reverence. However, such a term of address was not fitting for the occasion. The glorious brilliance of Jesus should have been an indicator that He was much more than a mere teacher.

It is worth noting, however, that Peter’s proposal was based on a solid understanding of Old Testament prophecy. The Transfiguration occurred during the fall. The Feast of Booths was normally celebrated at the same time of year. It was an event sanctioned by Old Testament Scripture (Leviticus 23:33-36). Through the celebration, God’s people remembered the wilderness wanderings.

The minor prophets associated the Feast of Booths with the dawning of the Messianic Age. Zechariah 14:16 said, “Then all the survivors from the nations that came against Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord of Armies, and to celebrate the Festival of Shelters.” Peter likely knew Zechariah’s prophecy and misapplied the Scripture. He knew it was the season for the Feast of Booths and he concluded he was witnessing the commencement of the Millennial Kingdom.

Peter’s proposal revealed his lack of situational awareness. The impetuous apostle put his proverbial foot in his mouth once again (Mark 8:32). He didn’t grasp what was going on and he still didn’t understand the Lord’s mission. He had already forgotten Jesus’ announcement from Mark 8:31. He knew Scripture, but he didn’t fully comprehend it. The apostle stands as a reminder of our need to humbly listen to God, to carefully study the Scriptures, and to make sure our plans are in alignment with God’s will.

Verse 6

Verse 6 explains a secondary cause for Peter’s blustering proposition. It says, “because he did not know what to say, since they were terrified” (Mark 9:6). Can you imagine waking from a nap to see Jesus donned in piercing bright light? As if that wasn’t enough

¹⁵ McKim, 114.

¹⁶ Brooks, 142.

to set Peter on edge, he saw two dead prophets standing beside Jesus! One can understand why the three disciples were terrified.¹⁷

Since Peter helped provide source material for Mark's gospel, many believe he probably added the personal detail seen in verse 6. We can't really fault the men for being scared by what they saw. We would have been terrified too! John had a similar response of fear when he saw Jesus on the island of Patmos (Revelation 1:7). Awestruck wonder and a bit of holy trepidation is the proper response to the glory of God (Isaiah 6:5).

Verse 7

To accompany the magnificent scene in front of them, the disciples were startled by a loud voice from heaven. Mark records, "A cloud appeared, overshadowing them, and a voice came from the cloud: 'This is my beloved Son; listen to him!'" (Mark 9:7). In Hebrew thought, a cloud often signified the presence of God – Yahweh's Shekinah presence.¹⁸ We see precedent for this symbol in the Old Testament. A cloud appeared when Moses went up Mount Sinai to receive revelation from God (Exodus 19:9 and 24:16).¹⁹ The cloud, the radiant garments of Jesus, and the brilliant snowy backdrop together must have created a fascinating scene.

In keeping with the cloud motif, a voice from heaven provided revelation from God. It said, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him!" A similar statement was heard from heaven in Mark 1:11 at Jesus' baptism. The declaration gave Jesus a rank that made Him superior to Moses and Elijah. While they were prophets, Jesus was more than a prophet. He was God!

Along with the announcement concerning Jesus' identity, the disciples received an instruction. The voice exhorted them to "listen to" Jesus. The command was drawn from Deuteronomy 18:15, a Messianic prophecy that told Israel to listen to God's Anointed One. Peter, James, and John needed such an admonition. They were guilty of forgetting what the Lord taught them back in Mark 8:27-33; 9:30-32; and 10:32-34. Because they were so fixated on a physical kingdom, they were unable to receive truths concerning the crucifixion and resurrection.

Our narrative underscores the importance of listening to the Lord. To be true disciples, we must constantly bend our ears to the truth that comes from His mouth. One has remarked, "The grand question that concerns us all is not so much what man says, or ministers say – what the church says, or what councils say – but what says Christ? Him let us hear. In him let us abide. On him let us lean. To him let us look."²⁰ In John's gospel, Jesus talked about how hearing His voice is integral to the discipleship process. He said, "My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27).

¹⁷ Brooks, 143.

¹⁸ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 86.

¹⁹ Schnabel, 210.

²⁰ Ryle, 140.

Hearing Jesus and heeding what He says is at the heart of discipleship. May we be “quick to listen” (James 1:19).

Verse 8

After the voice from heaven sounded, Elijah and Moses suddenly vanished. Jesus was transformed back into His pre-transfiguration state. Mark records, “Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus” (Mark 9:8). The sudden change was evidence that the Transfiguration was a supernatural event.²¹ A non-miraculous event would have likely involved a gradual change. Only God could abruptly transform the scene in such a startling way.

The climatic shift was also meant to underscore an important reality related to the ministry of Jesus. It was a stark reminder that Jesus still had work to do. He could not stay in His glorified state. The mountaintop was not the place for Him. He couldn't tarry with Moses and Elijah. He still had work before Him. He needed to descend the mountain and get back to His main mission – to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10).

Verse 9

Mark 9:9 continues the story: “As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead” (Mark 9:9). Starting with 1:25, we have seen Jesus commanding silence concerning His identity. His instruction regarding this matter has led to a fascination with what some people call the “messianic mystery.” See Mark 8:30 for another occasion in which Jesus orders people to stay silent about His identity. Our current text contains the last instance in Mark's gospel in which Jesus gives such a prohibition.

Our current text holds the key to understanding the so-called “messianic mystery.” Notice Jesus told His disciples to not mention the Transfiguration “until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.” The phrase reveals why Jesus often desired secrecy concerning His identity. He wanted it to be masked until He accomplished His divine purpose (Luke 19:10). He knew that if His cover was blown, Messianic fervor would erupt (Mark 6:45 and John 6:15). This would potentially lead to a premature death (Mark 3:6) that would prevent Him from fulfilling His main purpose in life.

Verse 10

Verse 10 describes the disciples' response to Jesus' command. It says, “They kept this word to themselves, questioning what ‘rising from the dead’ meant” (Mark 9:10). For the disciples, Jesus' teaching about the resurrection was confusing. Because they had been influenced by scribal teaching, they linked the resurrection with the culmination of all things. They had no concept of a bodily resurrection of the Messiah that would purchase the resurrection of all of humanity (1 Corinthians 15:21-22) and predate the millennial age (Revelation 20:6). The disciples would not fully understand the meaning of the resurrection until after it had occurred (Luke 24:6-7, 25-27, and 33-34).

²¹ Schnabel, 211.

Verse 11

Gripped by confusion concerning the resurrection, Peter, James, and John sought to gain clarity. They asked Jesus, “Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” The disciples didn’t understand Malachi’s prophecies (Malachi 3:1-6 and 4:4-5). They were confused, wondering why the forerunner had not yet appeared.

Part of the disciples’ problem rested in the fact that they were focused on man-made traditions. Notice their question – “Why do the scribes say...”. Like other first century Jews (Mark 7:13), the Twelve placed great weight on scribal instruction. The scribes were the official religious teachers in Israel (see Mark 3:22). Based on Malachi 4:4-5, they correctly taught that a forerunner would come before Messiah’s appearing. However, they placed political emphasis on his appearing, overlooking that Messiah would come first to die for sins (Isaiah 53 and Mark 8:31). When Jesus came to earth, some actually mistook him for the forerunner. They saw his power and his miracles, and they assumed that he was the one who was to come and prepare the way for the messianic king (6:15 and 8:28).

The disciples seemed to agree with the mistaken notions of the scribes. Their question in our current verse reveals a bias. They asked, “Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” The interrogative expressed consternation concerning Jesus’ assertion that Messiah must die. They could not conceive the Christ dying an untimely death. As a result, they questioned Jesus’ understanding of Scripture. In effect they asked, “If you are intending to die, why would the prophets prophesy about a forerunner preparing the way?” The disciples’ confusion is proof that even well intentioned Christ-followers can sometimes become misguided in their appraisals of Jesus. It is important for believers to maintain a humble faith in God’s Word, trusting the truth of Scripture over the opinions of man.

Verse 12

In response to the disciples rebuttal, Jesus said, “Elijah does come first and restores all things...“Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be treated with contempt?” (Mark 9:12). Our verse contains a rare instance in which Jesus actually affirms scribal teaching.²² He agrees, to a degree, with the scribes’ interpretation of Malachi 3:1-6 and 4:4-5. However, He attempts to sanitize their teaching by appealing to other prophecies that foretold of Messiah’s suffering.

In correcting scribal doctrine, Jesus uses popular jargon that was used to appeal to the authority of Scripture (“it is written”). As He did in Mark 7:6, He uses Holy Writings as the standard for truth. While he affirmed some of the teaching of the scribes, He knew they overlooked Scriptural teaching concerning the way in which the Messiah would suffer for sins (Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53). This was the whole point of the transfiguration – to get the disciples, as one has said, “to see Jesus from God’s

²² Brooks, 144.

perspective.”²³ Because of prophecy, and because of the Lord’s foreordained plan (Revelation 13:8 and Genesis 3:15), it was absolutely necessary for Jesus to die on behalf of sin.

Verse 13

Jesus concludes His teaching on the subject at hand by saying, “But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did whatever they pleased to him, just as it is written about him” (Mark 9:13). Jesus wanted His disciples to know that John the Baptist (Mark 1:1-8) was the forerunner. In speaking of the preacher, He didn’t use a past tense verb (aorist), as one might suppose. Instead, He used a perfect tense verb. He did so to depict Malachi’s prophecy as having ongoing results.²⁴ Though John died an unjust death at the hands of Herod, his ministry lived on through Jesus. The baptizer’s influence has continued throughout the church age, and it will carry on until the end of time when the great Elijah-like figure of the Tribulation appears upon the earth (Revelation 11:1-19). Jesus wanted His disciples to be aware of this reality. The prophecies of Malachi had been fulfilled in John. No one needed to doubt that.

Jesus, however, did want to draw special attention to the way in which John died (Mark 6:14-29). The disciples may have doubted John’s role because of the way in which he died. It was important for them to realize that when God’s forerunner appeared, people “did whatever they pleased to him.” First century Jews didn’t expect the Messiah or the forerunner to experience an untimely death. Jesus aimed to clarify matters. The disciples should have been open to such a possibility. Prophetic Scripture foretold of suffering for the Anointed One (Genesis 3:15 and Isaiah 53).

In addition, Elijah’s example set a similar precedent for the forerunner. Didn’t the prophet face hostility from the hands of a cruel, greedy, narcissistic queen (1 Kings 19:2)? If Elijah provided a foreshadowing of John, it should have been reasonable to think that John would have suffered. In an uncanny way, John suffered a similar fate to Elijah. Didn’t he face hostility from a cruel, greedy, and narcissistic king (Mark 6:19)?

The forerunner did indeed face persecution. He was even martyred because of his message. The disciples needed to understand the nature of his ministry. Jesus sought to give clarity on these matters in our current verse. Mark’s record was undoubtedly helpful for first century readers. Maybe he wanted to encourage Roman readers who were subject to the cruel persecution of the Roman Emperor Nero.²⁵

Though Jesus wanted to straighten out the eschatology of his ignorant disciples in verse 13, there is truth for us within the verse as well. We must always remember that God’s people are not immune from suffering. In fact, Jesus promised that we will face trouble in this world (John 16:33). If the forerunner and Messiah both faced hardship, how will we escape? To be spiritually strong we must be prepared for trials and

²³ Edwards, 261.

²⁴ Schnabel, 212.

²⁵ Edwards, 275.

tribulations (James 1:2 and 1 Peter 4:12). When faced correctly, the hard stuff of life can be used to grow our faith and get glory for God (Romans 3:3-5).