

Mark: Transfiguration

Mark 9:1-10

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Now turn with me once again to the Gospel of Mark, and the ninth chapter.

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine and reproof and correction, and instruction in the way of righteousness, that the man of God might be thoroughly furnished unto every good work”, but there are some passages which seem to tower above other passages of Scripture, and this one before us this evening could be compared, I think, to one of the Himalayas of the Scripture: the transfiguration of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It is with some fear and trepidation that I come to it. It is, I think, holy ground upon which we stand.

Before we read the passage together, let's look now to God for His blessing. Let's pray together.

Lord our God, we thank You for the Bible. We thank You for this precious gift. We thank You that holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. We bless You for every insight into the life and person and ministry and identity of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, our Prophet, Priest, and King. Truly the Scriptures speak of Him, and tonight we pray, Holy Spirit, come and grant us light. Help us to see, help us to understand just a little bit; for we are poor and weak and needy. And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

This is God's holy and inerrant word.

And He was saying to them, ‘Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.’ And six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them to a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; and His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them. And Elijah appeared to them along with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. And Peter answered and said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles, one for You

and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' For he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified. Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, 'This is My beloved Son, listen to Him.' And all at once they looked around and saw no one with them any more, except Jesus alone.

And as they were coming down from the mountain, He gave them orders not to relate to anyone what they had seen, until the Son of Man should rise from the dead. And they seized upon that statement, discussing with one another what rising from the dead might mean.

Amen. And may God add His blessing to the reading of this, His holy and inerrant word.

Now, some of you will remember at the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*, it occurs very early on in the first book of the trilogy, when Bilbo is going to go away, and he's held his party and he is going to bequeath this ring to his nephew. And as that scene, you remember, in that little hobbit house...and Gandalf is there, and Gandalf is urging Bilbo to part with the ring, and Bilbo is having second thoughts. And suddenly, there's something about Gandalf that is different! He grows, and begins to appear in a different form, almost, to Bilbo. He's bigger than he appears to be.

And Jesus is bigger than He appeared to be. It's one of the intriguing things about the gospels that not one of them pays the slightest interest in what Jesus looked like. What were the color of His eyes? What was the color of His hair? Or the shape of His hands? The sound of His voice? Baffling, isn't it, that none of the Gospels pay the slightest bit of attention to the physical appearance of Jesus? And it raises a not insignificant question: Would you have recognized Jesus in a crowd?

Of course, in various parts of Jesus' ministry you would have been able to pick Him out because of all the followers. You would have been able, perhaps, to identify the one that was speaking, or the one that was leading this great band of disciples going hither and yon. But imagine for a moment if Jesus were to be put in a line-up. Would you be able to pick Him out? Did He look like the Son of God? The Bible speaks in prophecy in the Old Testament and says about Jesus that He had no form or comeliness that men should desire Him. He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Outwardly, at least, He didn't look like the Son of God. Well, of course there were the attesting miracles, but even these didn't prove that He was the Son of God. After all, Moses and Elijah, the two that will appear on this mountain with Jesus, they too had performed miracles, and (if I dare say it) their miracles were a little more flashy than Jesus' miracles.

You see, at some point it becomes difficult to be certain for these disciples—is Jesus really the Son of God? Because He doesn't look like the Son of God, and

there are times when in His outward appearance and His outward gestures and in His outward movements He looks like the last thing you would imagine the Son of God to look like. His identity as the Son of God must be accepted by faith. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God, and what takes place now privately ...and isn't that fascinating? You might think that the transfiguration was worthy of cable television. You might think that a gesture of this kind ought to be seen by more than just three of the disciples. Why not all twelve? Why only three?

There's something very interesting about this event, and what takes place now is not a show, a demonstration that the world might consider it, but something altogether different, something quite extraordinary. Nothing like this had ever happened before. Oh, yes, Moses had come down from the mountain and his face had shone, but that was reflected glory: this *is* glory. This is glory as glory can only be.

On this mountain Jesus is transfigured—we get our English word *metamorphosis* from this Greek word that the Gospel writers employ. He changes. And although the description is scant, He seems to change not just in His physical appearance, but also, as the Gospel writers relate to us, His very garments seem to change. Jesus had assumed human nature in the incarnation. He was, in the words of *The Shorter Catechism*, “found in a low condition.” His glory, to employ Calvin's word, was “veiled”, but now the veil is taken away for a second or two.

Peter and James and John would never be the same after this incident. James—that's John's brother, not James the brother of our Lord, but James and John, the sons of thunder, the son of Boanerges, the first of the disciples to be martyred in Acts 12 under Herod—John and Peter would go on to write epistles of their own, and it's interesting that both of them tell of this incident. John, in his Gospel, first of all: “...we beheld His glory” John says. I think he's referring to this particular incident. “We beheld it.” John had seen the glory of Jesus.

And you remember Peter, in his final epistle: “We were,” he says, “eyewitnesses of His majesty.” They had seen something of the majesty of God, and what takes place here is something that would have an effect not only upon the disciples—James, and especially Peter and John—and not only affect them in a profoundly psychological sense, but it would also have an effect on Jesus, too. Because now, in a way that goes beyond our comprehension, the Father, through the instrumentality of Moses and Elijah, and through this glory transformation, begins to impart to the human mind of Jesus fresh glimpses of revelation as to what lies before Him and beyond that in the glory that will follow.

Let's look at this, then, from three points of view this evening. First of all, what the transfiguration meant to the disciples; and secondly, what the transfiguration meant to Jesus Himself; and thirdly, what the transfiguration means to us.

I. What the transfiguration meant to the disciples.

Let's look first of all at what the transfiguration meant to these disciples. They heard a voice that said, "This is My beloved Son." Matthew adds, "...with Whom I am well pleased." There's little doubt, I think, that this was meant in the first place to confirm Peter's great confession of a week previous in Caesarea Philippi. You remember, we've just been looking at it. Jesus asked the question, "Who do men say that I am?" and they'd given a variety of responses. And then in answer to the question, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter had answered and said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

And now in order to confirm that revelation which the Father had given to Peter, this incident on this mountain is meant to confirm the identity of Jesus to Peter. He was transfigured before them (verse 2). Elijah appeared to them (verse 4). A cloud appeared and overshadowed them (verse 7). The focus, in part at least, is on the effect it was to have upon the disciples. They're given a fresh glimpse of unsurpassable glory, of unimaginable majesty, of dignity and transcendence, and otherness; you get the impression that the Gospel writers—Mark here, especially, is straining to describe this event as he talks about the clothes of Jesus in dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. What does that mean? They'd seen nothing like this before; not in all the months of itinerant ministry and close fellowship with Jesus had they ever glimpsed anything like this before. There is a cloud that overshadows them, reminiscent of the Shekinah glory cloud of the tabernacle and temple, the very symbol in the Old Testament of the presence of God. There's a voice that speaks, which identifies itself as the voice of the Father speaking to His Son, and saying, "This is My beloved Son, and I love Him." And whatever Jesus had said a week ago in Caesarea Philippi about going to Jerusalem, and about being betrayed, and about being handed over to wicked men, and about being crucified...that must not in any way cloud their understanding of who He actually is.

Now, true, they didn't listen right away. But you know, Peter got it, in the end. When he comes to write his second epistle: "...we were eyewitnesses of His majesty", Peter says. And from that Peter goes on to draw encouragement about the second coming of Jesus on the basis of that which he had seen on the Mount of Transfiguration.

This is God the Father confirming to Peter and James and John the true identity of Jesus. It represents in part the fulfillment of those enigmatic words in verse 1 of chapter nine, about "some standing here who shall not taste death until they see the kingdom of God coming in power." This is not a depiction of the resurrection. He's not speaking there of the resurrection. That wasn't really the kingdom of God coming in power.

You remember, when Mary Magdalene in the garden saw the risen Jesus, she

thought she'd seen the gardener. When the two on the Emmaus Road, making that seven-mile journey, were accompanied by a fellow traveler, they didn't immediately recognize Him to be Jesus.

Nor is Jesus here speaking of the second coming. He's speaking of the transfiguration: that there would be some (Peter, James, John) who would still be alive when they would see the kingdom coming in power. That's what this is. It is a demonstration of the kingdom's power; the majesty, the glory. They saw something which signaled something which lay beyond not just the cross, but beyond even the resurrection: the glory that was natively and essentially Christ's, and which they too will share in one day.

Calvin makes an extraordinary comment on this passage. He's at his best here, I think.

“Christ clothed Himself with heavenly glory for a short time. His transfiguration did not altogether enable His disciples to see Christ as He now is in heaven, but gave them a taste of the boundless glory such as they were able to comprehend. This was not a complete exhibition of the heavenly glory of Christ, but under symbols which were adapted to the capacity of the flesh, He enabled them to taste in part what could not be fully comprehended.”

They're catching just a glimpse ...just a little glimpse of the glory of Christ.

Throughout Jesus' earthly ministry He didn't live like this. He lived as one, in Paul's words, who had emptied Himself. His native glory was veiled; He was poor and homeless, and hungry and thirsty, and weary; and powerless and friendless; He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and for a moment—just for a moment—heaven comes down and attests to who He is, and a voice speaks, and redemptive history in Moses and Elijah witnesses to who He is. And all the insignia of God, of Yahweh, as He appeared to Moses are here. And that's why, I think, Mark specifically mentions “six days” in verse 2, reflecting, I think, the six days that Moses had spent on the mountain.

Do you see what this is saying to the disciples? That the pathway to the Mount of Transfiguration and the glory that it signaled lay along a road that had passed through Sinai, and in symbolic fashion this glorious Mount is signaling a death that is owed to Sinai. Passion must be offered: Jerusalem must be met; death must be given. And this transfiguration is just a glimpse of what lies beyond that, not in place of it.

Peter hadn't understood it. You remember, he had taken Jesus aside and begun to rebuke Him. Imagine! Rebuking the Lord Jesus because He had spoken of His death and crucifixion! And even now on this mountain, so, so lovable Peter blurts out (because he doesn't know what to say)—he says let's build three booths, tabernacles; let's stay awhile here; this is good, I like this¹ This is wonderful! This

is the reason why I follow Jesus, for days like this! It's good for us, Peter says. And it was.

Zechariah 14, you understand, had spoken of the messianic kingdom being one big celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, and that's why Peter, I think, is saying let's build tabernacles: because the messianic kingdom has come.

Klaus Gilder has a sermon on the transfiguration. He calls the sermon "Satan on the Mount of Transfiguration." It's startling, isn't it? "Satan on the Mount of Transfiguration." Satan is here, on this holy mount, on this holy ground, manipulating Peter. Now there's something good about what Peter says; there is. There's great love in what Peter says. His willingness, his readiness to serve...he isn't immediately concerned about himself. He doesn't say, let's build six booths—you know, one for Moses and Elijah and Jesus, and one for James and John and myself. No! His vision is completely upon Moses and Elijah and Jesus. There's something good about that, his eagerness to serve.

But he's guilty of two things. He's guilty of folly, in the first place. Absolute folly. To think that incandescent glory can be contained beneath some twigs and bushes on a mountain; to go and chop down a few branches and withered leaves and to think that glory can be contained? What folly! But worse than folly, there is sin here, too. Because what Peter is pronouncing here, and what Satan is suggesting behind Peter's words, is that it would be better for Jesus to stay on this mountain and to be in this glorious state now and forever, and forget about Jerusalem and forget about the cross. It's the same insinuation that had been made back in Caesarea Philippi, and now it was coming again. And this ministry, this transfiguration was a mystery to the disciples to remind them of the true identity of Jesus in those days that would come when Jesus would make His way steadfastly toward Jerusalem, and they would perhaps begin to doubt it.

II. The transfiguration was directed not only toward the disciples, but it was also directed towards Jesus Himself

But in the second place, this transfiguration was also directed not only toward the disciples, but it was also directed towards Jesus Himself. And this is sometimes forgotten. It's difficult for the church sometimes to assert with complete conviction the full humanity of Jesus, and that He was in possession of a human mind and of a human psyche as well as being divine.

Peter reflects this when he comes to write his second epistle. He says, "He received from God the Father honor and glory." The ministry was directed toward Jesus. The Father, you see, is ministering to His Son. Jesus didn't look like the Son of God to His disciples, but more importantly He didn't look like the Son of God to Himself. To Himself. Nor did providence shine in such a way so as to confirm to Jesus along every step of His pathway His true identity. Much of what

Jesus passed through would call upon Him to question His identity. Providence was shaping Jesus' life so as to tempt Him, to doubt His relationship with His Father in heaven; to think, perhaps, that His Father did not care for Him anymore.

Perhaps the words of Asaph in Psalm 73 might have come to Jesus as He contemplated His journey towards Jerusalem: why is it that the godly seem always to be in trouble; and why is it, tell me, that the ungodly and the unrighteous always seem to be prospering? And isn't it interesting that Moses and Elijah, according to Luke's description of the transfiguration, tell us quite clearly and directly that what it is they talked about—which Mark doesn't explore, because Mark is always in too much of a hurry—that what it is they talked about was the exodus: Jesus' departure, His death and burial in Jerusalem.

It would be fascinating to know the details that Moses and Elijah, from the perspective of their glorified humanity and increased insights into the revelation of God, having spent time now in God's presence in heaven...it would be interesting to know what information was imparted to Jesus on this day. But far more significantly still, God the Father is coming now to His Son at the very threshold of His journey that will lead Him inexorably to Jerusalem. And the Father is coming to His Son and saying to His Son, 'this is the way, My Son. This is the way that You must walk. Remember the covenant that we made together. And My Son, I want You to know that along every step of that journey, I will be with You. I will never leave You nor forsake You. You will always be My Son, and I will always love You—even in those days when Providence might seem to relate an altogether different vision of our relationship.'

This is, do you see, a two-edged moment for Jesus. Simultaneously a moment of deep reassurance of His relationship with His Father, which He would need to take Him to Jerusalem; but at the same time, at the same time...it is a moment of temptation. It is a moment of temptation. The door through which Moses and Elijah had come was also a door through which Jesus now could walk. The temptation must surely have been upon Him at this moment, to, as it were, to walk, as C.S. Lewis says in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, through that back door of the cupboard and into glory. He was that close to it. He was that close to His native glory! Without having to go to Jerusalem! And it cannot begin to be understood by us tonight. We cannot begin to fathom the immensity of that temptation that must have been upon Him: that Jesus could have gone home at that point.

There is glory to come, but it is not yet. You must first walk the veil of tears, the Father is saying to Him, and fulfill that covenant, that promise that we made together to save our people.

III. What the transfiguration means to us.

But there is a sense, too, in which this is directed not only toward the disciples in terms of their discipleship at the point at which they were in redemptive history; and not only is this undoubtedly meant in some deep spiritual and psychological way to be of great help and assistance to Jesus in His identity as the Messianic Servant, but there's also a sense in which this is meant, of course, to be directed toward us.

It is solitary, I think, that if Jesus in His capacity as the Messianic Servant, if Jesus needed this divine reassurance of His Father, surely, surely we need not beat ourselves up if from time to time we feel the need of it, too: that the Father would come to us in our trials, in our difficulties, in our pains and sorrows, in the crosses and losses that are undoubtedly ahead of us (and some of which we can see, and some of which we can feel)—that the Father would come and put His arms around us and reassure us of our adopted sonship in His family. There is surely meant to be here a word not only of exhortation, but a word of comfort.

“O Jesus, I have promised to serve Thee to the end;
Be Thou forever near me, my Master and my Friend.
I shall not fear the battle if Thou art by my side,
Nor wander from the pathway
If Thou wilt be my guide.

“O Jesus, Thou hast promised to all who follow Thee
That where Thou art in glory, there shall Thy servant be.
And Jesus, I have promised to serve Thee to the end;
O give me grace to follow, my Master and my Friend.”

“Let not your hearts be troubled,” He will say. Let not your hearts be troubled. Ye believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto Myself, that where I am —where I am! In the glory! In the glory, beholding the beatific vision in all of its majesty and greatness and unfathomability—that where I am, there you will be also.”

“We shall see Him,” John says. This John, on this mountain—“We shall see Him as He is.”

Hear Him, my friends. Hear Him. “This is my beloved Son; listen to Him,” the Father is saying. “Listen to Him.” “My sheep hear My voice and they follow Me.”

Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, we dipped our toes merely in the river, and we know, O Lord, something of its depths, but we cannot see the bottom. We thank You for

this resplendent vision of the majesty of Christ. Help us with all of our might, by the strength of Your Spirit, to follow Him in the assurance that glory awaits us. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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