

## Mark 9

### An Outline

- I. The Transfiguration (9:1-13)
- II. Jesus Heals a Boy Possessed by an Impure Spirit (9:14-29)
- III. Jesus Predicts His Death a Second Time (9:30-32)
- IV. Whoever is Not Against Us is For Us (9:33-41)
- V. Causing to Stumble (9:42-50)

### Issues for Discussion

1. **“This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” (Mark 9:7).** The parallel passages are in Matthew 17 and Luke 9. The Transfiguration almost immediately (about eight days according to Luke 9:28) followed Jesus’s prediction that some of the disciples would not die before seeing “that the kingdom of God has come with power” (Mark 9:1). The Transfiguration event would be the sequential and immediate fulfillment of this prediction, as attested by Peter in His epistle (2 Peter 1:16-18). This event would be like the witness of John the Baptist, where at Jesus’s baptism the Father bore witness to Jesus as the Son of God (Mark 1:9-13). Rather than in the waters of the Jordan, these three disciples got to be eye-witnesses on the “sacred mountain.”

Luke’s account tells us that Jesus went up the mountain to pray (Luke 9:28). He brought along His inner three disciples, Peter, James and John. As He prayed, Jesus’s appearance transformed into a glorious brightness, and His clothes became a dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appeared with Him having a similar glorious splendor (Luke 9:30). The disciples received a glimpse of the glory of the coming Kingdom of God.

This event appropriately followed (1) Peter’s confession that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God (Mark 8:29) and (2) Jesus’s call to a discipleship that would involve inevitable sacrifice (Mark 8:34-35). As Jesus set His face toward the cross and in view of the suffering and death awaiting the disciples in their future, the disciples would remember this event as a divine confirmation that their faith was not in vain.

Luke’s account also tells us that the disciples were sleepy (Luke 9:32). If this was like other occasions when Jesus prayed, it probably followed a busy day of ministry. And they were tired. The next time the disciples would accompany Jesus in prayer would be in the Garden of Gethsemane, and there too they would be tired and sleepy.

Luke’s account also tell us that Moses and Elijah spoke to Jesus “about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment in Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31). In other words, they likely spoke to Him about His coming death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. This was not going to be a surprise event. It was planned all along, where God used wicked human agents to accomplish His perfect work of redemption (Acts 4:27-28).

When he saw Moses and Elijah leaving, Peter thoughtlessly and impetuously offered to build shelters for the three, perhaps to allow them to spend some more time talking together (Luke

9:33). God the Father interrupted Peter, surrounding him with a dense cloud, and commanding, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!" (Mark 9:7). It was the final word. The focus must be Jesus!

Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone about this event until after His resurrection. The Jewish people were wrongfully intent on making Jesus their earthly king (John 6:15), and they would not yet understand Jesus's purpose in redeeming people through His death on the cross. Even the disciples did not understand, especially the part about the Son of Man being raised from the dead (cf. Mark 9:10). The disciples may have thought Jesus was referring to Elijah. They asked Him about Elijah, whom the teachers of the law taught must come first. Elijah did not die but was translated to heaven. Was Jesus referring to Elijah's coming? Jesus answered that Elijah, who comes to restore all things, had already come, and they had "done to him everything they wished." The disciples understood that Jesus spoke to them about John the Baptist (Matthew 17:13). As spirit of Elijah came as John the Baptist and was rejected and murdered, so would the Son of Man incarnated as Jesus Christ be rejected and murdered (Matthew 17:12).

2. **"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief" (Mark 9:14-29)** - After this event, a man came to Jesus with his demon-possessed son (had a "deaf and mute spirit" Mark 9:25). While he had first approached the disciples, they could not heal the boy. Jesus declared, "You unbelieving and perverse generation" (Matthew 17:17). Who was Jesus rebuking? Was it the teachers of the law, who were arguing with His other disciples (not Peter, James or John - Mark 9:14)? Was it the father, who revealed his weak faith when he said, "But if you can do anything..." and "help me overcome my unbelief?" (Mark 9:22-24) Was it the disciples, whom Jesus said failed to drive out the demon "because you have so little faith" (Matthew 17:20)? I believe it was all of them. None of them had faith, not even that of a mustard seed (Matthew 17:20). Jesus had given the disciples authority, but their lack of faith made that authority powerless.

In Mark's Gospel Jesus also said, "This kind can come out only by prayer" (Mark 9:29). Was this because it was a deaf and mute spirit? Or could it be that the prayer was not so much for the demon but for the disciples, who lacked faith. In the Garden, Jesus told the disciples to watch and pray so that they would not fall into temptation (Matthew 26:41). Perhaps the disciples too needed to pray the father's prayer: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). The problem may not have been the quantity of faith (they only needed a mustard seed worth) but the quality of faith. We know that even the demons *believe* and shudder (James 2:19), but their belief fails because it is absent a relationship with Christ. Our faith prevails because we have a relationship with Christ, so that when, like the disciples, we have the commission and authority to act, we can be sure that God will empower and fulfill whatever He has commissioned us to do.

3. **Jesus Predicts His Death a Second Time (Mark 9:30-32)**. – We are at a point in Jesus's ministry, where He has set His sight toward the cross. We are told that the disciples were filled with grief, even though they did not fully understand yet what Jesus would do (Mark 9:32). If they only understood that He had to die without understanding that He would be raised after three days (cf. Mark 9:10), we can see why they would be sad. From Luke's Gospel we learn that the reason they did not understand was that "it was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it" (Luke

9:45). Therefore, we ought not to be too hard on the disciples, whether for their lack of faith or for their lack of understanding; for it appears that it was God's will that they should not understand at this point. After the resurrection, Jesus would open their minds to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45). When the Spirit would come upon them, then they would receive power and be witnesses for Christ (Acts 1:8). All would be in God's time and God's way. This should be a sobering reminder for us to always "trust in the Lord with all our hearts and lean not on our own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5-6).

4. **“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me” (Mark 9:33-41)** – Jesus exposed the pride and selfish ambition of the disciples. When He asked them what they were arguing about, they were silent because they were discussing who was greatest in the kingdom of God. While we may be outraged by what the disciples did, Jesus did not rebuke them as much as He encouraged them to have a proper view of greatness. Greatness in the kingdom of God would require great service toward one another in this kingdom of man. God's assessment of greatness was different than man's assessment. To be first in heaven, the disciples would need to be the last on earth. To be greatest in heaven, they would need to be the servant of all on earth.

Then Jesus used a small child to illustrate His point. Matthew gives greater detail. Jesus said to His disciples, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3-4). Here the point seems to be the “lowly position” of children, who were like slaves and without any rights, completely dependent on their parents or guardians (cf. Galatians 4:1-2). It was the relationship of humble dependence upon God that characterized the greatest in the kingdom.

Then, as if to change the focus, Matthew records Jesus saying, “And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (Matthew 18:5). These last words seem to be Mark's interest, as he provides the added detail: “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me” (Mark 9:37). So, first, Jesus told the disciples to be like a lowly and dependent child. Then, He taught that when people welcomed such disciples, it would be the same as if there were welcoming Jesus Himself. With Mark's addition, such a welcome would not be just of the disciples and Jesus but of God the Father Himself. Jesus would reiterate this a few verses later, saying, “Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward” (Mark 9:11). Jesus would develop this further in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, given in Matthew 25:31-46, teaching “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did to me” (Matthew 25:40; cf. John 15:20). How people received the disciples and their message would determine how they would be judged.

Mark and Luke adds Jesus's words, “Whoever is not against us is for us” (Mark 9:40), which Jesus spoke when the disciples noted certain people casting out demons in Jesus's name without being a part of their group (Mark 9:38). Jesus was laser-focused on His mission and would not be bothered by the sideshows of those that would seek to mimic His ministry success. This reminds me of what Paul wrote to the Philippians about those who preached the Gospel

out of wrong motives: “It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of good-will... But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice...” (Philippians 1:15-18). This should remind us not to lose our focus through inter-faith quarrels and rivalries. We must be laser-focused on the great work God has called us to do in making disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19-20).

5. **“If anyone causes one of these little ones... to stumble...” (Mark 9:42-50)** – This section needs two clarifying observations: (1) “Little ones” are not just kids but all “those who believe in” Jesus, that is, all Christians. “To stumble” means not simply to sin, for the penalty does not seem to fit the crime. The picture of an awful sea death stands in parallel to eternal hell (Mark 9:45-48). Jesus is not saying that simply causing someone to sin or sinning yourself will get you thrown into hell. The Greek word for “stumble” is translated elsewhere as “fall away” (e.g. Matthew 24:10; Mark 14:29), meaning “to cause a person to begin to distrust and desert one whom he ought to trust and obey” (from *Strong’s NT 4624*). It appears to me that this is more consistent with the message of Scripture, namely, unbelief or causing unbelief is the capital or eternal crime. Whether it is a person (a worldly friend, family or stranger), your hand (perhaps a metonymy for what you do, your occupation, your interest), or your foot (perhaps a metonymy for places you go to) that causes you to fall away, Jesus says to remove that person or thing from your life, because it is better to lose that friend, hand, or foot than to have them and go to hell. This language is similar to Jesus’s call to discipleship in the previous chapter: “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?” (Mark 8:35-38).
6. **“Everyone will be salted with fire” (Mark 9:49-50)** – In this context, Jesus was speaking of final judgment leading to heaven, the kingdom of God, or to hell, “where the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:47-48). Salt, therefore, signifies judgment. Everyone would be judged. Jesus continued: “Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again?” This is the language of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:13). There as here salt appears to signify not simply the process of judgment but also the litmus or standard for judgment. Salt is good because it is a good standard, a God-given litmus for what is right and wrong. But how can such a standard lose its saltiness? I contend this can happen when God’s standard is changed, ignored or not revered, so that it cannot serve its purpose to provide discernment and right judgment. It would be like a compass that has lost its magnetism or is un-calibrated. It would be useless. If the Bible is changed to suit man’s teachings, ignored as irrelevant or relegated to just one of the many books on religion, it would be worthless.

Jesus further taught, “Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.” This somewhat puzzling expression may capture the sentiment of the Sermon on the Mount teaching, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged... You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Matthew 7:1-5). In other words, “to have salt among [perhaps better “in” from the Gk. *en*] yourselves” means to examine yourselves, even to examine yourselves first before passing judgment on others. So the “be at peace with each other” suggests that self-examination will promote peace-making rather than selfish judgments and accusations and hypocrisy (cf. Gal 5:13-15)