

48 Mark 9:2-13

The Descent & Discussion

Text

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, 3 and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. 4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. 5 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.” 6 For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7 And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” 8 And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.

9 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. 10 So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean. 11 And they asked him, “Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” 12 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? 13 But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.”

His Inner Circle

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,

Jesus took James and John and Peter with him. These are the inner group of Christ's disciples.

Mark 5:37 And he allowed no one to follow him except Peter and James and John the brother of James.

Mark 14:33 And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled.

These are the few that Jesus wants with him. This is his inner circle. It is natural to have people with whom you have a closer relationship. You cannot be all things to all people. Not everyone can be your best friend. These three disciples seem to be the closest to Jesus. These three also become the pillars of the church. Paul, in Galatians 2 describes them as the pillars of the church. But these men had no more authority than the other apostles. Yet they were clearly the leaders. Herein is a principle of what the Romans called *primus inter pares* - first among equals. Among these three, Peter is clearly the leader. He is the spokesperson. In all four gospels, Peter is the dominant disciple. Even in Acts, Peter is the focus of the first half and Paul of the second half. Peter was the undisputed leader of the apostles to the Jews. But he had no more authority than any of the others.

Paul too was the undisputed leader among the apostles to the Gentiles. Paul had no more authority than Barnabas or Silas, but he was clearly the leader. They were equals. They cooperated with each other to spread the gospel, but Paul was the first among equals. This principle carries over into the church with regard to the plurality of elders. There will usually be one man who takes the lead or speaks for the group, or guides the discussions. He has no more authority than the others. They all have equal weight when deciding on a matter, but typically one person will usually rise as the leader among equals. Alexander Strauch states that this principle "allows for functional, gift-based diversity within the eldership team without creating an official, superior office over fellow elders."¹ Jesus entrusted these special times of revelation to these three men. He trusted that when the time was right they would share this with the others. This was a ministry of multiplication. Paul was the leader among the apostles to the Gentiles, but he too had some that were closer to him than others, like Timothy. And what he entrusted to Timothy he encouraged Timothy to entrust it to others, and these other to more yet. But what is everyone to proclaim?

The Things They Saw

Notice further the kinds of events in which Jesus includes these three men. First was the raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead. In that event he gave demonstration of his power over even death itself. He could speak life into a person. As potent of an enemy as the grave is, it holds no power like the power of Christ. Ben Franklin's poem reflects the relentless grasp of death:

Death is a fisherman, the world we see
His fish-pond is, and we the fishes be;
His net some general sickness; howe'er he
Is not so kind as other fishers be;
For if they take one of the smaller fry,
They throw him in again, he shall not die:
But death is sure to kill all he can get,
And all is fish with him that comes to net. - Ben Franklin

And yet Jesus in that instance demonstrated that he could command death to release its captives. The second time in Mark that we see the inner circle is in today's passage. Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ, and then Jesus starts talking about his suffering and death. Then there is the transfiguration. Then on the descent Jesus starts talking again about his death and resurrection. The transfiguration is framed by the Jesus speaking of his death and resurrection. The third time in Mark that we see Peter, James, and John alone with Christ is in the Garden of Gethsemane. On the eve of his death, when the moment of his betrayal was at hand, Jesus had these three men with him.

This inner circle is there when Jesus shows his power over death, in the transfiguration framed by discussions of his death and resurrection, and on the eve of his actual death. We will return to this in just a little bit.

1. Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 48.

The Transfiguration in Particular

3 and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. 4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus.

Mark's comment that no one on earth could bleach them so white is probably meant to communicate that there was no natural explanation for this.² There are many reasons that Moses and Elijah may have appeared. Both men were deathless or of mysterious death and have therefore been seen as candidates for an eventual return. Both men were rejected by the people but ultimately vindicated by God. Both men had Sinai experiences with God.³ It is difficult to know how many, if any of these are in view. Perhaps most significant was their eschatological significance. There was the expectation that one day there would arise a prophet like Moses who would lead the people of God. Elijah also, as we have seen, had a major role to play in the end times. Their presence therefore affirms that Jesus is not merely God's next new thing, rather he is the culmination of all that was previously set in motion.⁴

5 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." 6 For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7 And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him."

8 And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.

Jesus is the focus of this story. It is not about Moses; it is not about Elijah. They only bear witness to him. After the cloud envelops the mountain and Moses and Elijah appear as a sign of the end, all of that fades away and only Jesus is left. He is it. He is what they have been pointing to.

It will not be Jesus and Moses. It will not be Jesus and Elijah. There is only one who can tread this path. There is only one who can act as the mediator between God and man. There is only one who can fulfill the law. Only one can lay down his life as the spotless lamb for the many. I mentioned that Jesus culminates all that has gone before, but this must not be understood in the sense of Jesus running the anchor leg of a relay. It is not like Abraham ran the first leg, Moses the second leg, David the third leg, and now Jesus finishes it. No! He did it all.

Jesus is the prophet greater than Moses. He is Abraham's promised Seed through whom the nations will be blessed. Jesus is David's greater Son, and he is the One whose way Elijah was to prepare. Jesus is all there is. He is the Son of God and the Son of Man. He is leading a new exodus. He is the Word of God, he is Emanuel. There is no one else. They all disappear, but he remains! One of my favorite quotes from Muggeridge is this:

We look back on history and what do we see? Empires rising and empires falling, revolutions and counter-revolutions, wealth accumulating and wealth dispersed, one nation dominant and then another. Shakespeare speaks of 'the rise and fall of great ones that ebb and flow with the moon.'

2. France, 351.

3. France, 352.

4. Edwards, 266.

In one lifetime I have seen my own fellow countrymen ruling over a quarter of the world, the great majority of them convinced, in the words of what is still a favorite song, that, 'God who's made the mighty would make them mightier yet.'

I've heard a crazed, cracked Austrian proclaim to the world the establishment of a German Reich that would last a thousand years; an Italian clown announce that he would restart the calendar to begin his own assumption of power.

I've heard a murderous Georgian brigand in the Kremlin acclaimed by the intellectual elite of the world as a wiser than Solomon, more enlightened than Ashoka, more humane than Marcus Aurelius.

I've seen America wealthier and in terms of weaponry, more powerful than the rest of the world put together, so that Americans, had they so wished, could have outdone an Alexander or a Julius Caesar in the range-scale of their conquests.

All in one little lifetime. All gone with the wind.

England part of a tiny island off the coast of Europe, threatened with dismemberment and even bankruptcy.

Hitler and Mussolini dead, remembered only in infamy.

Stalin a forbidden name in the regime he helped found and dominate for some three decades.

America haunted by fears of running out of those precious fluids that keep her motorways roaring, and the smog settling, with troubled memories of a disastrous campaign in Vietnam, and the victories of the Don Quixotes of the media as they charged the windmills of Watergate.

Behind the debris of our self-styled, sullen supermen, there stands the gigantic figure of one person, because of whom, by whom, in whom, and through whom alone mankind might still have hope.

The person of Jesus Christ.

Paul said it this way, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." (Col 1:15-20) "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen." (Rom 11:36)

The Linchpin of Their Proclamation

9 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.

This is the final charge to silence in the Gospel of Mark. It is also the only command to silence with a time-frame attached. This injunction to silence is not forever. Keep silent only until the resurrection. Once that happens, proclaim what you have seen. And in keeping with this, Peter says in 1 Pet 1:16-19

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. 17 For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," 18 we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. 19 And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts,

But for now, they were to keep silent on the matter. Jesus cannot be rightly understood apart from the cross. James Edwards notes:

Once again Mark reminds readers that disciples are not in fellowship with Jesus because of their knowledge, virtue or abilities. They are in fellowship solely because of Jesus' sovereign call, and they remain in fellowship only because of his faithfulness to them.

10 So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean.

11 And they asked him, "Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?"

The disciples are often criticized here for being so obviously dense. There may be some warrant for that condemnation since Jesus did speak pretty plainly to them. Their misunderstanding seems even more absurd when we consider that the concept of the resurrection from the dead was not uncommon in Jewish thought. But that is probably exactly where they are stumbling. However, the resurrection that was common in Jewish minds was corporate one. Thus, while it is possible that they considered his resurrection in the figurative sense, they may well have taken Jesus literally but misunderstood his resurrection speech to refer to the resurrection on the last day. "What is he talking about? Is this the resurrection at the last day?"

They may have also toyed around with an individual resurrection. But, "Why would he die just to rise again? What could this mean?" But if he is talking about his personal resurrection, why is it taught that Elijah must first come? So you see there may have taken him literally and been struggling with whether it was corporate or individual and how that could fit in with other prophecies etc.

The fact that they ask Jesus about Elijah indicates that they were taking him literally. "I thought that Elijah was going to come and restore all things. And if that is the case, and all is restored, how can the Messiah die?"

12 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? 13 But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him."

Jesus basically affirms the scribal understanding regarding Elijah. But he challenges his disciples thinking. They were struggling with thinking that this is it. The Messiah has come, that's it right. If that were it, Jesus prods, then why was it written that the Son of Man must suffer? Don't just read the triumphal passages, take all of them into consideration.

Now regarding Elijah, he has come and they did to him whatever they pleased as it is written of him. Elijah also had a suffering role.

Ahab --> Herod

Jezzebel --> Herodias

John the Baptist, coming the the spirit and power of Elijah, also experiences the pain of opposition. Ultimately this prophetic forerunner was beheaded. "Understand therefore that the way all of this is going to come about is through my suffering. The glory of the kingdom comes

through suffering. The second exodus comes through my suffering. The reconciliation of man to God comes through my suffering."

It is because of all of this that Paul proclaimed to know nothing except Christ and him crucified. The cross was central to Paul and his preaching. It was central to the preaching of Peter. And the cross must remain central in our proclamations as well.