

MARK 9

Mark 9:2–13. The Transfiguration

Adapted from Julie M. Smith, The Gospel according to Mark (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2019), 511–525.

The “high mountain” has traditionally been identified with Mount Tabor in southern Galilee, but more recent interpreters have favored Mount Hermon or other sites. Whatever the site, the reference to a high mountain has important symbolic value as a place where heaven and earth meet and revelation is bestowed. In fact, thinking of the Transfiguration as a revelation is perhaps more accurate; Jesus is not changed (“transfigured”) as much as His underlying, preexistent glory is revealed. The appearance of Elijah and Moses (in addition to echoing Malachi 4:4–5) is fulfillment of the tradition that both prophets were taken up without experiencing death.

The text suggests that Peter’s desire to build three temples comes from a sense of awe and fear in the moment. Whether or not his suggestion was dismissed is left unstated.

The voice that comes from the cloud offers a definitive answer to the question of Jesus’s identity raised in the previous chapter (Mark 8:27–30). It also recalls the voice at Jesus’s baptism (1:11), with the significant difference that this time, the voice is directed toward the disciples, not Jesus Himself. As with the previous revelation of Jesus’s identity (8:30), Peter, James, and John are charged with keeping the matter secret until His Resurrection. Once again, the disciples are unable to make sense of the idea of a Messiah who must die and rise again.

The disciples’ question about Elijah’s coming first is understood by Jesus to be a question concerning the validity of His suffering and rejection. The disciples appear to be asking: “If Elijah is to come first and set all things right (‘restore all things’), why would the Messiah need to suffer?” Jesus counters that Elijah has already returned through the ministry of John the Baptist. Even so, the Baptist suffered, was rejected, and killed just as Jesus must be.

Mark 9:14–29. The Disciples’ Failure to Heal a Possessed Child

Adapted from Julie M. Smith, The Gospel according to Mark (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2019), 526–533.

Jesus descends the mountain to find a controversy. The scribes are questioning His disciples’ authority due to their inability to cast out a demon—which is ironic since they have recently accused Jesus of demonic possession because of His ability to cast out demons (Mark 3:22). Perhaps this explains Jesus’s exasperation in verse 19—these words are addressed not to the father but to the whole crowd (a textual variant reads “them,” not “him”).

The father’s request in verse 22 is tinged with doubt, but this is understandable given the disciples’ failure to help. Jesus’s answer is reassuring, and the father responds with faith. Like the healing of the blind man in stages or the disciples’ understanding of who Jesus is increasing by degrees, the father indicates his faith is only partial and needs Jesus’s help to grow. Unlike the disciples, Jesus has no difficulty expelling the demon. The child’s brief appearance of death and subsequent raising by Jesus may prefigure Jesus’s death and Resurrection.

The disciples are disturbed by their inability to perform the healing, so they ask Jesus about the matter. “Fasting” appears to be a later addition, but the point stands that prayer is a prerequisite for performing such miracles. Perhaps the disciples’ success in past exorcisms had led to improper self-confidence and pride in their own abilities, requiring Jesus to remind them of the source of their power.

The episode recalls Exodus 32, wherein Moses descends from a mighty spiritual experience atop Sinai to find Israel mired in controversy and idolatry. Fortunately, Jesus can resolve the contention that He finds at the base of the mountain.

Mark 9:30–37. Second Prediction of Death and Teaching on Service

Adapted from Julie M. Smith, The Gospel according to Mark (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2019), 533–539.

As the entourage is now on its way to Jerusalem, Jesus keeps their journey a secret, perhaps seeking an opportunity to provide His disciples private instruction. Jesus gives them a second clear prediction of His death, and once again, the Twelve fail to comprehend its significance. Their fear to engage with Him about this could indicate that they have some sense of His meaning but do not want to believe it or that they do not understand (as the text states) but do not want to be called out for their lack of faith or hard-heartedness preventing them from understanding.

Instead, they apparently break into a petty argument about their hierarchy as they walk along. Jesus renders this dispute moot, declaring that the one who is truly greatest would be the “servant of all.” We may not fully appreciate how shocking this statement would have been in the Greco-Roman world, where servants and enslaved people had virtually no social status. Interestingly, the word translated as “servant”

(Greek *diakonos*) underlies our English word “deacon,” suggesting that church service is to follow this pattern laid out here. Jesus’s embrace of the child in verse 36 underscores this message—it is the humble and seemingly powerless who will be great in the kingdom of God.

Mark 9:38–50. Avoid All Stumbling Blocks

Adapted from Julie M. Smith, The Gospel according to Mark (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2019), 539–548.

John’s interjection reveals a failure to understand Jesus’s motivations. John assumes that Jesus wants to jealously guard His power, but in fact, Jesus would be happy if all performed miracles in His name. This recalls the incident in Numbers 11, when Moses reproves Joshua for similar reasons. God is not stingy with His power; we must only prove worthy of it. Note also John’s concern: “he followeth not *us* [in other words, the disciples],” not “he followeth not *you*.” Jesus is the only perfect example whom we can unfailingly follow.

The word “offend” (Greek *skandalizō*, the root of the English “scandal”), used repeatedly in this section, means in more modern English “to stumble” or “to lead astray.” The punishment of drowning by millstone in verse 42 is no figurative image but an actual example of Roman punishment inflicted upon Galilean rebels. The image is appropriately terrifying, and the implication is clear: leading others astray has severe, eternal consequences.

In verse 43, Jesus turns from the possibility of leading others astray to leading oneself astray. “Hand,” “foot,” and “eye” can be viewed, by metonymy, as representing different sinful actions one might do. All must sacrifice their offending actions and desires if they are to be purified in the kingdom of God.

Credits

Authors: Jackson Abhau, John Thompson

New Testament Insights Series Editor: John W. Welch

General Editor: Taylor Halverson

Associate Editor: Morgan Tanner

Senior Editor: Sarah Whitney Johnson

Assistant Editors: Sam Lofgran, Verlanne Johnson

Content Manager: Jasmin Gimenez Rappleye

Source: *New Testament Insights: Mark*, by Jackson Abhau and John Thompson