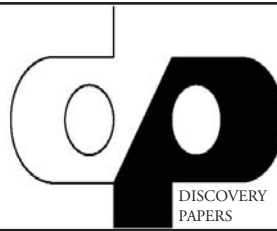


THE SPLENDOR OF THE SON

**SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING
JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK**



Catalog No. 090726
Mark 9:2-13
26th Message
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July 26, 2009

Last week I attended a reunion of my high school youth group. I hadn't seen or heard from most of those in the gathering in more than thirty years. I discovered that many of the people, including our pastor, remember our time in the youth group as I do: as a season of wonder. It was as if some magic window opened on our lives together in that time and place. Many of us tasted heaven for the first time. More than thirty years later, the taste was still in our mouths.

In Mark 9:2-13, three of Jesus' disciples climb a mountain and taste heaven. If we let Mark lead us, we may taste heaven as well.

Jesus has told his disciples that he will suffer and be killed and that his disciples must take up their crosses in order to follow him. Peter, one of his disciples, had different vision (Mark 8:22-9:1). Who's right? Beginning in Mark 9:2, God weighs in on the matter. In doing so, he helps Peter, and us, follow his Son in the way of the Lord.

Mark 9:2-13:

²Six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; ³and His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them. ⁴Elijah appeared to them along with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus. ⁵Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁶For he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified. ⁷Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!" ⁸All at once they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, except Jesus alone.

⁹As 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 rose from the dead. ¹⁰They seized upon that statement, discussing with one another what rising from the dead meant. ¹¹They asked Him, saying, "Why is it that the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" ¹²And He said to them, "Elijah does first come and restore all things. And yet how is it written of the Son of Man that He will suffer many things and be treated with contempt? ¹³But I say to you that Elijah has indeed come, and they did to him whatever they wished, just as it is written of him."¹

Up on a high mountain

After leading Israel into the wilderness, Moses ascended Mount Sinai on different occasions to meet with God. On one occasion, he took with him three associates (Exodus 24:1-2, 9). Jesus likewise ascends a mountain with three associates: Peter, James, and John. On another occasion in the wilderness, Moses' face shone because of his encounter with God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:29-30). Likewise, when Jesus ascends a mountain, his appearance changes: his garments become supernaturally radiant and white. Moses, in his day, led the exodus from Egypt and mediated the covenant, or partnership, between God and Israel. Jesus, walking in the footsteps of Moses, leads a new exodus, not from Egypt but from sin, and mediates a new covenant, not simply between God and Israel but between God and the whole world.

For the longest time, the disciples failed to grasp that Jesus was the Christ, Israel's long-expected king. They had eyes and ears, but they couldn't see or hear. Finally, Peter recognized Jesus' identity, but he failed to understand the nature of his mission. When Jesus told the disciples that he would suffer and be killed, Peter rebuked him. Peter and the rest of the disciples had come to recognize who Jesus was, but their understanding was only partial. Like the blind man who had his eyes opened but saw men as if they were trees, Peter and the rest of the disciples need a second touch (Mark 8:18, 29-34, 22-25). Jesus' description of his mission clashed with the disciples' messianic hopes. Is he really the Christ if he predicts his suffering and death and calls his followers to deny themselves and take up crosses? And if he is the Christ, does he have the right vision? Well, God seems to be saying to the three disciples, open your eyes and take a look. On this mountain, Jesus, in a supernatural way, radiates the glory of God.

But, that's not all. Two towering figures from Israel's past, Elijah and Moses, appear with Jesus. Why Elijah and Moses? God birthed Israel as a nation under Moses' leadership, and he cleansed the nation through Elijah (1 Kings 18:20-46). Both of them met with God on Mount Sinai (1 Kings 19:8-18, where Mount Sinai is called Mount Horeb). Both were connected with the coming kingdom: Elijah was expected to return before "the great and terrible day of the Lord," and God promised to send a prophet like Moses (Malachi 4:5, Deuteronomy 18:15). Both suffered rejection. Elijah and Moses, in ways they couldn't have known, foreshadowed the coming king. Jesus, having just predicted his own suffering and now reflecting the glory of God on

this mountain, comes to complete what Moses started and Elijah cleansed. He comes to bring the kingdom of God: the defeat of evil and both the restoration and reconstitution of God's people.^{2,3}

The Israelites became afraid to come near Moses when they saw his face as it reflected the glory of God. Likewise, the three disciples are terrified by Jesus' change in appearance. Other revelations concerning Jesus also troubled his disciples (Mark 4:41, 6:51). On Mount Sinai, Moses received instructions to build a tabernacle, which housed the visible presence of God (Exodus 25-31). In his fear, Peter assumed that some sort of response was necessary, so he proposes the erection of tabernacles honoring the presence of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

In Moses' day, a cloud, representing the presence of God, covered Mount Sinai for six days, and God spoke to Moses from the middle of the cloud (Exodus 24:16). A time period of six days is also recorded in Mark's account: "Six days later . . ." (verse 2). After the Israelites finished building the tabernacle, the cloud covered the structure and filled it (Exodus 40:34-38). After Peter proposes the construction of tabernacles, a cloud forms, not to fill any tabernacles but to speak. On Mount Sinai, God identified Israel as his son (Exodus 4:22). Later, he identified David and the kings that proceeded from him as his sons (Psalm 2:7). The Israelites were anticipating the advent of the Son of God, whom they sometimes called the Son of David: the Christ. When John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, God told Jesus, "You are my beloved Son" (Mark 1:11). Jesus is the fulfillment of God's purpose for Israel and the kings of Israel: he is the one through whom God establishes his healing, loving rule on earth. Now, God speaks not to Jesus, as he did by the Jordan River, but for the benefit of the three disciples: "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him."

Peter was right: Jesus is the Christ. But Peter was also wrong: the Christ would suffer and be killed. The voice from the cloud instructs Peter and the other disciples to listen to Jesus instead of rebuking Jesus. Yes, the voice is affirming, the Christ, Jesus, will suffer and be killed, and those aspiring to follow him must deny themselves and take up their crosses. If the disciples have eyes but can't see and ears but can't hear, if they are only beginning to understand who Jesus is and what he came to do, then God treats them to an audio-visual feast to authenticate both his Son and the mission of his Son.

Because Jesus is God's Son, the disciples have no business building three tabernacles, as if Jesus, Moses, and Elijah are worthy of equal honor. After the cloud lifts, Moses and Elijah are nowhere to be found. Sure, listen to Moses and Elijah, as you hear them speak in the scriptures, but you can never again listen to them as if they weren't preparing the way for the Son of God. Furthermore, the tabernacle and later the temple were part of the old covenant mediated by Moses. The new covenant mediated by Jesus does away with tabernacles and temples because Jesus himself is the presence of God. In the new covenant, God, through his Spirit, which is

also the Spirit of the Son, dwells not in tabernacles and temples but in and with his people (Ephesians 2:19-22).⁴

Gazing into the face of Jesus

Most of us, like the disciples, have entertained doubts about Jesus. We have wondered, "Is he really Lord?" and, "Must I really give my life to self-giving love?" Perhaps, at some time and in some way, God has opened your eyes in dramatic fashion, as he opened the eyes of the three disciples, to see Jesus in his glory. Perhaps now, as you turn your eyes to this story, God is opening them to see his Son. Through this story, God is affirming for us both the sovereignty of his Son and the command for us to take up our crosses in self-giving love. Open your eyes and ears.

Just as God wove Moses and Elijah into the story of Israel, he weaves people into the stories of our lives to prepare us, as he prepared the disciples, to embrace Jesus as Lord and to follow him. If your life is a story, can you detect a plot? If you can detect a plot, who have been the significant characters? What longings have they awakened? Have the longings, sweet and crushing, been met by those who awakened them? If not, then the characters and the longings they awaken point beyond themselves to something else, to Another. The characters, then, move your story forward. Whether they've known it or not, whether they've tried to or not, they've moved you toward embracing and following Jesus. Jesus comes to finish—in your life, in the world—what they started. God authenticates the sovereignty and words of his Son through your own story. Pay attention, therefore, to your own story. The Author is telling you something. He's telling you—uniquely, in a way that he tells no one else—that Jesus is Lord, and that you must follow him in the way of the Lord.

When God allows you to see his Son, it can be a terrifying experience, as it was for Peter, not least because of the shocking realization that Jesus' vision for your life cuts across your vision for your life. If he's Lord and you're not, a conclusion presses upon you: you must sublimate your vision to his. Jesus demands everything, and most of us want to give him only something, if anything at all.

So, what do we do? Many of us, in our fear, try to tame Jesus. We come up with alternative explanations for our encounters with him in order to keep him in the place we have assigned him. He's important, so we recognize his presence. We honor him by building a tabernacle, so to speak—the way we honor significant figures from our past. We elevate those figures to shrink Jesus down to size. He's important, but not so important that we're willing to trust him with everything.

Then, perhaps at some point, something comes over us, something like a cloud. And we hear something, something like a voice. The cloud represents the presence of God, and the voice tells us, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!" We suppose that God didn't like the tabernacle-building program so much. We suppose that God likes, that God loves, his Son, his beloved Son. We suppose that God wants us to listen to his Son. The figures from the past helped get us here, but none of them is God's beloved Son. The figures from the past are important, but they're not so important that they deserve an equal place with Jesus. As we look around, we realize that they have faded from view. Jesus, and Jesus only, is still with us.

Now, none of us has had precisely the experience of the three disciples, but their encounter relates to what many of us experience. The experience of the three disciples also relates to what we can experience right now. The Apostle Paul says that "we all," with the help of the Holy Spirit, are beholding "the glory of the Lord" in "the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 3:18, 4:6). The writer of Hebrews advises us to fix our eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12:2). What the disciples experienced two millennia ago on the mountain, we can experience right now. The scriptures paint a picture of his face—not a literal picture, of course, but they describe him in such a way that we understand who he is so that we can look, in a figurative sense, into his face. The scriptures invite us to use our imaginations. So, imagine that you are looking into the face of Christ. What do you see? You see a face ablaze with the glory of God, a face so full of love that you want to turn your face away, like the way you feel when you look into the sun. But, by the power of the Holy Spirit, you're able to hold your gaze. For a moment, you're overcome by gaping wonder, and you forget yourself. If using your imagination in this way doesn't help you, use the gospels to help you simply contemplate the person of Christ.

Sometimes, in trying to make life work, and in enlisting God and the Bible to help us make life work, I think we miss out on the wonder of life. Is it any wonder, then, with our information- and management-based approach to life, that we feel dead much of the time and keep asking ourselves, "Is this all there is?" Where's the joy? Where's the exuberance? Where's the sparkle? Get some art into your life, some music, some poetry. Spend some time in our art gallery in the Fireside Room. Go out to a hill and marvel at the wonder of it all. I've hung some photos in my study that serve as spiritual windows: by capturing the world I can see in a soul-touching way, they help me peer into a world I can't see. When I first step out of my house in the morning, I usually take a moment to look around, feel the air against my skin, and take a deep breath, and take in the smells. For just a moment, I sense the wonder of the ages.

St. John of the Cross, the twelfth century Spanish monk, was intoxicated by beauty and sought it in the presence of God. He longed for beauty of God, even if

beholding it would kill him. Listen to his words from *The Spiritual Canticle*:

Reveal Thy presence

And may the vision of Thy beauty be my death

For the sickness of love

Is not cured

Except by your very presence and image.

The glory of God, amply displayed in creation, humans, and artwork, is portrayed most fully in the face of Christ. All that we see, hear, touch, and smell can connect us to the glory of God, but nothing can hold a candle to the splendor of the Son. God reveals him to those who long to see him, and he makes them salivate for the day when they will see him face to face forever (Revelation 22:4).

On the mountain, we may taste heaven, if only for a moment. We can't stay on the mountain forever, though.

Down from the mountain

Earlier, Jesus told all his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ (Mark 8:30). Now, he tells the three disciples who climbed the mountain with him to remain quiet about what they've seen. At this point, Jesus wants to remain mostly incognito, because the Romans, who ruled Israel, crushed the leaders of messianic movements and because the Jews were not prepared for a suffering Christ. However, the command has a time limit: the disciples may relate their experience on the mountain after the Son of Man has risen from the dead. After the resurrection, the three disciples will be effective witnesses, for the testimony of two or three witnesses was considered valid (Deuteronomy 19:15). Although Jesus earlier told his disciples that he, the Son of Man, would rise again after three days, the disciples are still confused about the resurrection of the dead (Mark 8:31). Many Jews expected the people of God to be raised from the dead all at once in the new age. The disciples are confused because Jesus is predicting the resurrection of an individual in the middle of time.

The presence of Elijah on the mountain coupled with Jesus' comment about the resurrection of the Son of Man prompts a question from the disciples. Many Jews, in part based on the prophecy of Malachi, expected the return of Elijah before the coming of the Christ and the advent of the new age (Malachi 3:1, 4:5-6). Jesus both affirms expectations concerning Elijah and redefines them. Elijah returns not just to restore family relationships, as predicted by Malachi, but to "restore all things." The scribes, experts in the Jewish law, connected neither the return of Elijah nor the coming of the Christ with suffering. So, Jesus talks about what "is written" in the Hebrew Scriptures concerning the suf-

fering of both the Son of Man—the messianic title he preferred—and Elijah.⁵

Elijah, Jesus says, has already come, and he has already suffered: “they did to him whatever they wished.” How is it that Elijah has already come? Mark has depicted John the Baptist so as to evoke the memory of Elijah (Mark 1:6, 2 Kings 1:8).⁶ John, as the new Elijah, came to prepare the way for the Christ by suffering and being killed. If the forerunner was treated in such a way, then the Christ could expect a similar fate. The Son of Man, with the prophet John as his herald, will restore all things—both humanity and creation—though his death and resurrection.

Strengthened to walk in the way

There may be times and places where wisdom decrees that we not speak about Jesus. But now that Jesus has risen from the dead, those who believe in him are for the most part free to tell everyone in all places. And part of what we tell people is what the three disciples were free to communicate after Jesus rose from the dead. They were free to relate “what they had seen.” We too are free to tell others what we have seen. We not only tell people about the death and resurrection of Jesus, we also tell them how we personally have seen him and how we have been transformed by our encounters with him.

Our mountaintop encounters with Jesus don’t answer all our questions. Like the disciples, sometimes we descend the mountain in a daze, with more questions than we went up with. The fuller teaching of Jesus, through the apostles in the New Testament, answers many of our questions, at least in a general sense, about the necessity of his suffering and the meaning of his resurrection. He suffered, died, and rose from the dead to defeat evil and establish God’s healing, loving rule on earth.

Our concerns, though, are usually of a more immediate nature. We might want for some kind of personal restoration and, say, the restoration of our families. Jesus, too, is concerned for such matters. But he came not just for individual and familial restoration; he also came to restore all things. The scope of what God is doing through his Son is beyond anything we can comprehend. We are caught up in the cosmic work of God to make all things beautiful. The immensity, the utter incomprehensibility, of the artwork of God, though thrilling, leaves us with questions, especially questions about specific details that often go unanswered. God’s “understanding is inscrutable”—beyond finding out (Isaiah 40:28). We may ask questions of Jesus, as his disciples did. Jesus’ answers, however, didn’t clear things up for them, at least not right away. Sometimes, it’s better to stop asking and start worshiping the three-in-one God who can’t begin to make us understand all of what he is doing and why he’s doing it.

Like the disciples, we must come down from the mountain and enter the valley to walk in the way of the Lord with unanswered questions or with answers that

make no sense. Complete understanding, however, is not necessary to follow Jesus. What is necessary is worship, and that’s what you do on the mountain. Although the scriptures depict all of life as worship, we must set aside certain times to worship, which include gazing into the face of Jesus.

What happens as you gaze into the face of Jesus? According to Paul, you are “being transformed” into the image of what you are beholding: you are being transformed into the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18). The simple spiritual principle at work here is that you become like what you worship. The psalmist says that those who make idols “will become like them” (Psalm 115:8). Humans were made in the “likeness” of God and become most truly themselves, like God, conformed to the image of his Son, as they worship him (Genesis 1:27, Romans 8:29). It makes sense. If you idolize someone, you become more like that person. If you worship Jesus, to the extent that you gaze into his face, you become like him; you reflect the glory that you behold. You look into the face of love that you may reflect that love into the world.

At the commencement of my wedding ceremony, I fixed my eyes on my bride and only looked away during the ceremony at the necessary moments. Otherwise, I gazed into her face for the entire ceremony. People told me afterward that they I never stopped smiling and that they had never seen such joy in a groom. To this day, nine years later, I still hear comments about the look of exuberance that overcame my face. It made quite an impression. But, I wasn’t trying to make an impression. I wasn’t trying to smile. I wasn’t even aware that I was smiling. I simply determined to gaze into the face of my beloved.

Don’t worry about transforming yourself. Don’t worry about strengthening yourself. Gaze into the face of Jesus, the beloved Son of God, and you will be transformed. You will be strengthened to follow him in the way of the Lord, the way of the cross, the way of self-giving love.

Down in the valley, where we live most of our lives, we must remember what we experienced on the mountain. For our face-to-face encounters with Jesus put fire in our bellies and steam in our strides. They transform us and strengthen us to walk in the way of the Lord, to face the new challenges that wait just around the bend.

Some of the folks I spoke with at my youth group reunion reflected with wonder on our time together more than thirty years ago not simply for the fond memories but for what that season did to us. It transformed us. It strengthened us for the challenges, some of them immense, that we had to face in the ensuing seasons. Thirty years of life can take the wind out of your sails unless you draw strength from your encounters with Jesus and seek to continue encountering him.

The wonder of it all

Jim Elliot, a missionary, penned these words in a letter to the woman who would become his wife:

*I walked out to the hill just now. It is exalting, delicious, to stand embraced by the shadows of a friendly tree with wind tugging at your coattail and the heavens hailing your heart, to gaze and glory and give oneself again to God—what more could a man ask? Oh, the fullness, pleasure, sheer excitement of knowing God on earth!*⁷

Elliot came down from the hill to follow Jesus in the way of the Lord. As it turned out, he didn't know God on earth for very long. In the course of an effort to introduce the gospel to a South American tribe, the tribe turned on him and killed him and four of his fellow missionaries. For Elliot, following Jesus in the way of the Lord meant giving his life before the age of thirty. His famous journal entry has inspired thousands: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

Marvel at the wonder of it all. Using your imagination, gaze into the face of Jesus. Marvel at the splendor of the Son. If you do, following him in the way of the Lord may be easier than you think.

rule (Mark 15:17-20). On the mountain, two men appeared with Jesus and talked with him; conversely, on Golgotha, a hill outside Jerusalem, two men were crucified next to Jesus and insulted him (Mark 15:27, 32).

⁴ Mark may be echoing not only the book of Exodus, to portray Jesus as the new and better Moses, but also the book of Genesis, to portray Jesus as the new and better Adam. Jesus takes the disciples up the mountain after six days; on the sixth day, God created man. Peter says "it is good for us to be here"; God, after creating man, said "it was very good" (Genesis 1:31).

⁵ Jesus could have cited Isaiah 53:3, but the entire biblical story points to the suffering of the Christ, the representative of Israel. He also may have in mind 1 Kings 17-21, which reports the suffering of Elijah. The persecution of Elijah in his first advent anticipates his persecution in his second advent.

⁶ Matthew reports that the three disciples understood that Jesus, when he said that Elijah had already come, was talking about John (Matthew 17:13). Although Mark is not so explicit, he makes the connection between Elijah and John clear enough by reporting in detail the death of John at the hands of Herod (Mark 6:14-29).

⁷ Elizabeth Elliot, *Through Gates of Splendor* (Tyndale House Publishers, 1981), 253.

NOTES

¹ Literary structure:

A Jesus brought up three disciples on a high mountain; they saw him transfigured (2-4)

B Disciple literally "answered" concerning Jesus, Moses, and Elijah (5-6)

C Voice came out of the cloud: "This is My beloved Son" (7-8)

A' They came down from the mountain; Jesus told them not to say what they saw (9-10)

B' Disciples questioned Jesus about Elijah (11)

C' Jesus answered concerning Son of Man (12-13)

² Mark doesn't say what Jesus, Elijah, and Moses were talking about, but Luke says their topic was Jesus' impending "departure" in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31).

³ The transfiguration story, like so many stories in Mark, foreshadows the crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus took three disciples with him up the mountain; similarly, three female disciples came to the tomb of Jesus to anoint his body with oil (Mark 16:1). On the mountain, Jesus' garments became radiant and exceedingly white as he reflected the glory of God; conversely, in the Praetorium of Jerusalem, Roman guards dressed Jesus in purple, mocking him as the supposed king of the Jews before putting his own garments back on him to demonstrate, from their perspective, that he was just a man, subject to Roman