



## THE WAY UP THE MOUNTAIN

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Mark 9:2-13

24th Message

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Today is graduation Sunday. This is a joyous time for students, because graduation marks an arrival. But it signals a departure, too, so it is mingled with sadness. In our text from the gospel of Mark the time has come for the disciples of Jesus to graduate to a new level of understanding. As we will see, their graduation takes place on a mountain.

I love mountains. There is something magical about climbing a precipitous peak and taking in the view. When I studied in Florence as a college student, most of my group were eager to visit Rome. I wondered why anyone would want to do that when we were so close to the Alps. My friends all went south, to Rome, but I went north, to Zermatt, Switzerland, and skied on a glacier underneath the Matterhorn. The shadow of the mountain haunted me for months, and I returned to climb it later that year. Following a long ride in a gondola, we had a strenuous three-hour hike to the base of the mountain, at 12,000 feet. I remember feeling sobered upon passing a graveyard where some less fortunate climbers were buried. At 3 a.m. we arose to ascend up the ridge with our guide. It was the first clear morning in eighty-eight days. Four and half hours later we reached the summit. The view was spectacular. We could see most of the glaciers and peaks which gave Switzerland its shape.

What is it about mountains that makes us want to put our lives at risk climbing them just to take in the view? I think what we are really longing for is heaven. Deep within our souls there lies a racial memory of Eden, which was located on a mountain. There heaven's breath saturated the very blade of earth, and God's presence was everywhere, personal, intimate, and dangerous. After paradise was lost, God created a new people for himself and brought them out from Egypt to worship him on a mountain. That mountain was enveloped in a cloud, and in that place Moses was able to speak with God. Centuries later, after combating Baal worship on Mt. Carmel, Elijah fled for his life and met God on that same mountain. There in the moment of his deepest desolation he was re-commissioned with a fresh vision from the voice of God. "Abraham's strangest and darkest dealing with God took place on a mountain. David lifted his eyes to the hills, and saw in them a symbol of the presence of God."<sup>1</sup> That was where he set in place plans to build the temple on the hilltop of Jerusalem, the building which was to be the axis point between heaven and earth.

Approaching the story of Jesus, we might expect that during his journeys in the wilderness and through the sea he would also make that same journey up the mountain with his disciples. That time has finally arrived. Having been at least partially healed of their spiritual blindness, the disciples are ready to see heaven and taste the future. This important story sets the high water mark for what is possible in worship every time we gather. Are you ready for the steep and dangerous journey?

### I. The Journey Up the Mountain (9:2-8)

**And six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up 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 conversing 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 anymore, except Jesus only. (NASB)**

To better understand the background for this text we must recall the imagery in Exodus 24, when Moses met with God on Mount Sinai, following the Exodus.<sup>2</sup> There Moses took three named men, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and, together with the seventy elders, ascended to meet with God on the mountain. Upon their arrival, "They saw the God of Israel; and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself. Yet He did not stretch out His hand against the nobles of the sons of Israel; and they beheld God, and they ate and drank" (Exod 24:10-11). Then Moses and Joshua went up the mountain itself, and a cloud enveloped them,

**And the glory of the Lord dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days, and on the seventh day, He called to Moses from the midst of the cloud. And to the eyes of the sons of Israel the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a consuming fire on the mountain top. And Moses entered the midst of the cloud as he went up to the mountain; and Moses was on the mountain forty days**

**and forty nights.** (Exod 24:16-18)

So intense was the glory of God on the mountain that when Moses descended, the glory made his face radiant, so much so that the sons of Israel were fearful of coming near him (Exod 34:29-30). God instructed Moses to make a tent, a moving sanctuary, for his presence. This tent would travel with the Israelites in the wilderness to their final resting place in the promised land. Upon completion of that tabernacle, God's glory enveloped it and became their traveling signal and guide through the wilderness until the time when they would see the promised land (Exod 40:34-38).

Notice that in our text Jesus has just announced:

**“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.”** (9:1)

Here we find that “‘see the kingdom of God’ substitutes for the older story’s ‘see the land.’”<sup>3</sup> Jesus will be giving his disciples a glimpse into the second, and final, promised land. Just as Moses took three disciples up the mountain so does Jesus, perhaps, as Gundry suggests, to minimize the risk of premature publication while still providing enough witnesses (Deut 19:15) to confirm the event (2 Pet 1:16-18).<sup>4</sup>

It is unlikely that the mountain they ascended was Mount Tabor, the traditional site, since it lies quite a distance south of Caesarea Philippi. The other difficulty, Pixner explains, “lies in the fact that at that time Mount Tabor was populated (Ant. 13,396) and a Has-monean fortress stood on its summit. The fortified mountain had to be conquered by the Romans in the great Jewish War in the year A.D. 67.”<sup>5</sup> Better evidence supports Mount Hermon (Eusebius 265-345) whose slopes run down to Caesarea Philippi. Mount Hermon’s peak soars 9000 feet above sea level and remains snow capped most of the year (the run-off feeds the rushing headwaters of the Jordan river). It is probable that Jesus led Peter, James and John up on one of the peaks of the Hermon range.

On that mountain, isolated from the crowds, Jesus is suddenly transformed<sup>6</sup> before them. Not just his face, but his entire being is transformed. Even his clothes are radiant. Mark attempts to describe them, but words fail him. He can only stumble over his similes: “as no launderer on earth can whiten them.” We might ask, What is the significance of what these disciples are seeing? Is Jesus’ hidden divinity being revealed?” I think not. Tom Wright explains:

The glory which shone from Jesus’ face on the mountain is the glory of a human being, made in God’s image, and now totally open to God, totally possessed by God, totally on fire with God. Seeing this human being, we are seeing God, God in a mirror, God through the looking glass, God present as in the burning bush but now in the shining face, and even clothes, of a man amongst men.<sup>7</sup>

This is the glory of one like the “Son of man.” It was the glory for which Jesus was destined as our representative man in heaven, the same glory we all are destined for: the glory of the resurrection, a glory which we will some day possess but which we are to taste even now.

To the amazement of the disciples, Elijah and Moses appear beside Jesus. We have already discussed Moses’ significance as the founder of the nation. Elijah, who encountered God on Mount Sinai, was just as significant a figure. The prophets spoke of him as being the eschatological signal which would inaugurate the reign of the Messianic king, before the great and terrible day of the Lord (Mal 4:4-6; note how that text also links Moses with Elijah). So here on the mountain time collapses into this one moment and Moses and Elijah appear together: the founder of Israel and the prophet who cleansed Israel, the one who gave the law, the other who renewed it and whose return would signal the “restoration of all things.”

The disciples hear these men having a conversation with Jesus. Peter is overcome with fear, but he feels compelled to make a contribution to this theological discussion, so he offers to build three tabernacles commemorating the three luminaries. His suggestion isn’t all bad, since this is exactly what Moses was instructed to do following his encounter with God on Sinai. He was to construct a portable sanctuary to house God’s *shekinah* glory. (The details of that sanctuary cover five chapters in Exodus.) But Peter’s suggestion is met by a rebuke, his second within a week. Suddenly, a cloud<sup>8</sup> representing the presence of God envelops them, and a voice speaks from out of the mist. For a second time we hear the voice of the Father in Mark’s gospel. Again, the speech is carefully constructed from Old Testament texts, and again, as in the Moses story, God’s speaks on the seventh day:

**“This is my Son, the beloved one, hear him!”**

Here is the Father’s voice, so simple, yet so profound and compelling. His first words, “this is my Son,” come from Psalm 2:7, a coronation psalm for the king. Next, the phrase, “the beloved one,” comes from Gen 22:2. There Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his son, his only son, the one whom he loves, Isaac, on Mount Moriah. God carefully splices together two texts as a witness to Jesus’ identity: He is the son, and he is going to be crowned Israel’s true king. But the “way” this king will be crowned is the Isaac way: He is the beloved son, to be sacrificed on Moriah’s altar. Here we are given a glimpse of the agony of the Father’s heart over what is to come. To those two texts God adds a third, from Deut 18:15, announcing that one day he would raise up a prophet like Moses from among the people, and on that day the primary duty of the people of God would be to *listen* to him. That was when God would re-write Israel’s *shema* (Deut 6:4). Then, instead of obeying laws written on stone, God’s people would find the Spirit of the living God speaking into their very hearts (2 Cor 3:5,6,18), and he would lead them into obedience to this

Son.

This explains what was wrong with Peter's suggestion to build three tabernacles on this spot. The kingdom is moving forward, not backwards. After Jesus' death, God's temple would not be limited or confined to a particular space. It would be mobile, inhabiting people of every race. This glory cannot be captured and held; it is but a taste of what is to come. God's future temple will not house the glory of Elijah or Moses, but solely the glory of Jesus. Elijah and Moses were mere pointers to the Messiah. Everything pales in comparison to his glory. Jesus embodies the fullness of deity in bodily form. He is the true temple. Even the old shelters were but earthly copies.

When God has finished his very short speech, suddenly the curtain separating heaven and earth closes as quickly as it has opened, and the disciples find themselves mysteriously alone in the presence of Jesus. What an earthshaking event! Here in one moment time is compressed, history is telescoped, moments of the past engage the present and press against the future; heaven condescends, stoops, and kisses everything in sight. And then God himself envelops the little band with a holy fear that stills everything. When the dust settles, everything, past, present, and future, is centered around the Son. For a brief moment in time they had been standing on the edge of the horizon, then in an instant it was over and they must go back down the mountain. The painful thing about being creatures of this earth is that every time we go up the mountain we have to come down, and the experience that once filled us with glory now leaves us with a gaping ache that makes us long for more.

Before we leave the mountain top, allow me to make two points of application.

## II. Man Made for Heaven

This is what we were made for; this is what makes us fully human. It is worshipping God that draws huge worlds together. And this is what is possible every time we worship. Let us not come to church merely to sing a few hymns, put some money in the plate, open a text, listen randomly, and leave. No. If we have eyes to see, and hearts that are open, when we worship we find huge worlds racing together and compressing in a moment, so that "a drop of time will impregnate eternity."<sup>9</sup> Space, once limited to three dimensions, now breaks open to a fourth and becomes high and lofty, inhabited by infinitely more than the naked eye can see.

This is what the author of Hebrews was so adamant about: the realities of heaven have broken in on us and there is no going back. After he had spoken of the awesome terror of what Moses experienced at Mt. Sinai, the author says that we have come to something far greater:

**You have come to Mount Zion and to city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the**

**first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant...** (Heb 12:22-24a)

Secondly, this is how we are meant to be transformed while we remain on earth. We are not transformed by doing, but by seeing. And when we open the Scriptures and see Jesus in this burning glory, we, as Paul says, "with unveiled faces beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being *transformed* into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18). Tom Wright leaves us with the challenge: "There are levels and depths of spirituality that are open to all of us, but from which we hide ourselves, from fear of what the transforming presence of the burning God might do if he were truly given free rein in our hearts and lives."<sup>10</sup> Let us remove the veils and allow the transfiguration to do its work over and over again.

## III. The Journey Down the Mountain (9:9-13)

**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. And they began questioning Him, saying, "Why is it that the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" And He said to them, "Elijah does first come and restore everything." (Question:) "And yet how is it written of the Son of man?" (Answer:) "That He should suffer many things and be treated with contempt?"<sup>11</sup> But I say to you, that Elijah has indeed come, and they did to him whatever they wished, just as it is written of him."**

As the disciples make their way back down the mountain their hearts burned with awe and wonder. Whatever happened there, Jesus makes one thing clear: there was to be absolutely no publication of this event to anyone, not even the twelve, until after the Son of Man was raised from the dead. The idea of resurrection seized their imagination, especially since they had just seen Elijah. He was the one prophetic signal who would turn "the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (Mal 4:6) before the great and terrible day of the Lord. Unable to grasp the significance of what had occurred, the disciples question Jesus as to how there can be resurrection, which restores everything, before Elijah has indeed come.

Responding to their question, Jesus shifts their attention from Elijah to the Son of man, and asks, "How is it written concerning the Son of man?" Answering his own question, he says, "[It is written] that he should suffer many things." Then he helps them to properly understand the Hebrew prophets. When they spoke about the coming age, they always did so in terms of their present or past historic images. Then they placed

the images into metaphors linking Israel's past with the glorious future, so that the new is always continuous with the old, but is never merely repeated. Using the literary device of metaphor, the prophets were saying that the new is transcendently better than the old, as the glory of the sun outshines the moon.

So, explains Jesus, Elijah will come, and has indeed come, make no mistake, and they did to him whatever they wished. Mark has already given his readers a graphic account of that. John the Baptist was Elijah, and he was beheaded. Now Jesus presses his disciples to see the inference: "If that is what happened to the forerunner of the Messiah, what do you expect will happen to the Messiah?" This is why they are sworn to silence. Yes, resurrection is coming, and with it the restoration of all things, but the disciples don't yet fully understand the way to the resurrection and the restoration of all things. That will come through suffering: the cruel suffering of the cross. Jesus can't remain on the mountain; He must descend to suffer an agonizing death.

The most painful thing about climbing the Matterhorn was not the journey up the mountain, but the descent. For five hours I felt the excruciating pull of gravity pounding on my limbs. I must confess, so painful was the descent, I wished I had never made the ascent. I wonder if the disciples felt that way after Jesus shared this sobering news with them.

So why the vision of the future? Why be allowed to taste the glory only to have the vision snatched away in a bloody hell and cruel sorrow? Was God being capricious? No. The taste of glory is not a myth. It is real, it is substantial, and it is given to encourage Jesus not to avoid the suffering, but to go through it. As the author of Hebrews says, it was "for the joy set before him, [he] endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb 12:2). That taste of heaven was meant to encourage Jesus to endure the darkest night, knowing there would be a glorious future.

Paul had the same experience. He wrote that at one point in his life he was caught up into the third heavens (2 Cor 12:2), and what he heard and saw was unspeakable glory. That vision of heaven was given not to puff him up but to encourage him in the face of the many sufferings he was to endure, that he might go through his ordeals faithfully. In my own life, when heaven has

appeared most real to me, when time stood still and I could sense the hush of angels' wings, when the floodgates of love poured over our souls, I found it was preparing us to endure suffering, whether it was painful rejection, evil persecution, or even death. If we have tasted the future we can endure anything. If we know that all suffering has a limit and a destination, we can endure. Years ago, living near the Alps, I discovered that no dark tunnel in Switzerland is without an end. Once we have come through the view is breathtaking. So I encourage you, buy a ticket and get on that train today.

The drift of pinions, would we hearken,  
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.  
The angels keep their ancient places;  
Turn but a stone, and start a wing  
'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces,  
That miss the many-splendoured thing.  
-Francis Thompson

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1. N.T. Wright, *The Way of the Lord, Christian Pilgrimage Today*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 70.
2. For an excellent discussion of these themes see Williard M. Swartley, *Israel's Scripture Traditions and the Synoptic Gospels, Story Shaping Story* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994) 103 ff.
3. Swartley, 105.
4. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark, A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 462.
5. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus Through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin Publishing, 1992) 97.
6. The Greek term for transfigured is *metamorphoo*, meaning to "change form" or "transform" (this is where we get our term "metamorphosis"). In the New Testament it is used four times, twice of the transfiguration, once in Rom 12:2 of our transformation by the renewing of our minds, and in 2 Cor 3:18 of the 'transforming' power of seeing the glory of Christ with unveiled faces.
7. Wright, 71.
8. On the image of the cloud with the presence of God see Exod 16:14; 19:19; 20:21; 24:15-18; 33:1; Psa 18:12, 97:2; 1 Thess 4:17; Rev 1:7.
9. I am indebted to my good friend and fellow elder, Steve De Pangher, for this image.
10. Wright, 74.
11. This is M. D. Hooker's interpretation, *Son of Man*, 131, quoted by Gundry, 464.