

It is fascinating to see that Peter, James and John learned a lesson from all this. Jesus told them strictly not to tell anyone about this until after the resurrection (9:9). In this way, Mark told people in the early church why it was that this story was not known by some (it is not in John's Gospel, for example). Although few people had been obedient to Jesus when He asked them to keep quiet about something in the past (7:36 etc.), this time, the disciples respected those wishes. They only began to speak about it after Jesus had died and been raised.

The very last paragraph in our reading follows on from this. Mark tells us that the disciples were talking to Jesus about the role of John the Baptist and the Lord's 'Anointed'. It is difficult to see quite what Mark is writing when you read these verses (9:11-13), and it would certainly be clearer if Jesus had accepted the title Messiah, but He did not. The gist of the matter is this. The disciples had been told by Jesus that he would have to suffer. Now there are plenty of places in Scripture which did indeed talk about this (the most famous being Isaiah 53), but nowhere in Scripture did it talk about the 'forerunner' suffering and being beheaded, as had happened to John (also identified as Elijah – who they had just seen!). The disciples did not understand why. Jesus' reply was that Scripture was right about Himself but said nothing about John's suffering, so they 'did to him whatever they pleased ...'. You may find the translation (above) of this last paragraph different from your Bible, but it has been done to try and simplify what is a very difficult passage to translate and understand.

Application

God gives His people sample experiences of what they can expect later, even in heaven. This is surely what the Transfiguration was for Peter, James and John. In particular, as Peter saw something of the glory of Jesus, he learned to be obedient to Him and not doubt Him. In my experience, some Christian churches today frequently encourage people to question every aspect of their faith without the balance of encouraging them to trust God and what He has revealed through Jesus. It is possible, within the training establishments where many clergy and pastors are trained, to find books which question every feature of the Christian faith including the death and resurrection of our Lord. People will always do this, of course, and we should expect it and know about it; but our path as disciples is to follow the example of Peter. He had to go beyond his natural questioning and denial of Jesus' path of suffering (8:32) to see the spiritual truth of what Jesus had said. Peter still had more questions for Jesus as they walked away from Transfiguration (8:11f.) but this time he was ready to follow and accept Jesus' words rather than presuming that his own understanding was superior.

The Transfiguration was an incredible revelation of the glory of God resting on and with Jesus. Sometimes, people talk about experiencing similar things today. But the consequence of all our experiences of God must surely be faith in His anointed son Jesus, and His work of salvation.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group whether you have ever had any experiences of faith which are so wonderful it is difficult to explain them?
2. Imagine yourself as Peter. How would you feel after this experience?
3. How important are the 'Law and the Prophets' to the church today? How may we best use them or learn from them?

Discipleship

Much of this passage of Scripture is about the amazing ways in which God reveals Himself to people. You may or may not have had a great 'experience' of faith like Peter and the disciples did on this occasion, but it is likely that you will have had precious moments in your life when your faith has been confirmed and you have felt blessed in all you try to do for the church. It can be very helpful to keep a small diary, not of everyday events, but a record of those special occasions when God has blessed you and affirmed your faith.

Final Prayer

Dear Jesus, please take the sorrows and troubles of our day, and turn them into joy and love again. Where we have failed to do what we would have wanted or what was right, forgive us and speak words of reassurance which show us Your faithfulness. Give rest to our burdened souls, and give us the courage to start each day afresh by the power of Your Holy Spirit: AMEN

Prayer

All glory and power is Yours, Lord God. You who have made all things well, and have promised to bring all creation back to Yourself one day in Glory. In Your wisdom, You are great and awesome beyond our understanding, and yet you are present with us in Jesus Christ Your Son, who has saved us by His Love and Grace. You have saved us! Alleluia!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Elections

Pray today for the political parties in your own country. Pray for people at the heart of these parties, especially those who work unseen to the public eye, affecting policy and the way things are done. Pray for godly people to enter the world of politics in your country so that the Christian voice is strengthened, and that Christians in politics may indeed 'make a difference'.

Meditation

Open our eyes to see something of You this day O Lord
We cannot be sure how or what we may see,
So keep us ever alert, looking for that moment,
That event, that insight, that glimpse,
Which reveals to us Your heart, O Lord.

Where will we find such inspiration?
We will not know until we find it,
And then the Spirit of God will flow
With wonder, praise and glory;
And our eyes will see,
Our emotions respond,
Our minds think,
And our hearts decide
To grasp the truth of Your Word for us today.

Bible Study - Mark 9:1-13

¹ He said to them, 'Amen, I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.'

² And after six days Jesus took Peter and James and John with him, and led them up a high mountain to be by themselves. He was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became an intense, dazzling white, far whiter than anyone on earth could possibly bleach them. ⁴ Then Elijah appeared to them with Moses, conversing with Jesus. ⁵ Peter then spoke 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 He did not know what to say because they were so terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud came over them and a voice came out of the cloud; 'This is my beloved Son; listen to him.'

⁸ Suddenly, whilst looking around, they could not see anyone with them except Jesus alone. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he gave them strict instructions not to tell anyone about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. ¹⁰ So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what might be meant by 'rising from the dead'.

¹¹ They asked him, 'Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' ¹² And he explained to them, 'Elijah, coming first, does indeed restore everything. Now what has been written about the Son of Man? It says that He should endure a great deal of suffering and be despised. ¹³ Now I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.'

Review

This is an awe-inspiring reading rises out of the pages of Mark's Gospel to give us a glimpse of the power and glory of God in the life and ministry of Jesus. The amazing 'Transfiguration' of Jesus (9:3,4) was God's way of confirming the truth of all Jesus had just taught the disciples,

which hinged on their understanding of the Messiah and who He was. Previously, the whole of Jesus' ministry in Mark's Gospel was one of healing, deliverance, and teaching in parables (1:1-8:26), but the purpose of this ministry was to get the disciples and other people to consider whether Jesus might be the Messiah.

This, of course, was the subject of our previous study of Mark 8:27-38, in which Jesus had obtained this confession from Peter and His disciples - 'You are the Messiah' (8:29). The teaching Jesus then gave about suffering and the path of salvation caused Peter some difficulty (8:31-33), so although Jesus went on to teach with great authority (8:34-38), it is not surprising that God should subsequently take Jesus aside, and demonstrate His power and glory through Jesus in an unmistakable way (9:3,4). The 'transfiguration' was an unforgettable experience.

Certainly, recent passages of Mark's Gospel have been like a tale of intrigue in which Jesus continually tried to help the disciples understand firstly that He was the Messiah, and secondly, that He utterly rejected the potentially devastating popular misconceptions attached to that name. If Jesus had allowed anyone to refer to Him in as Messiah, then His path to follow God's will would have been compromised by desperate misunderstanding. He needed His disciples to understand the difference between the truth and popular misconceptions about the Messiah, and yet recognise that He was indeed the One chosen by God for the salvation of the world. Today we call Jesus 'Christ', and not 'Messiah', because although they mean the same thing, coming from the Greek and Hebrew words for 'one who is anointed', the early disciples honoured Jesus' rejection of the Jewish title 'Messiah' by using the Greek word 'Christ'.

All the way through the wonderful story of the transfiguration, Mark reports what happened without mentioning the word 'Messiah'. Jewish people would have understood the transfiguration itself as something closely related to the role of the Messiah, especially, God's affirmation 'This is my beloved Son' (9:7). In those days, the glory of God was thought of as like a 'clothing' of God's presence, sometimes called the 'Shekinah' glory, and the story relates how this was seen Peter, James and John to come and rest on Jesus Himself. Within this glory, Elijah and Moses were seen, being the foremost prophets of the Old Testament, representing the Prophets and the Law. Lastly, God Himself spoke out from within His Shekinah glory and affirmed the anointing of Jesus using the words given at His baptism (1:11). Peter still did not know how to respond properly to what he saw and heard (9:5), but he could not talk to God as he had done to Jesus! Though what he did was inappropriate, he could do nothing but accept what happened.

Jesus and the disciples came down the hillside, talking about what had happened, and Jesus, typically, called on the disciples not to divulge what they had seen. He was insistent; He did not want the disciples to compromise His ministry by creating confusion between the truth and popular notions about the Messiah (9:8-10).

The very last part of our reading is awkward to understand and does not translate very easily. However, it is yet another example of how difficult it was for Mark to report what was said without referring to Jesus as the 'Messiah'. Once we understand this, we will find that what Jesus says is quite straightforward, and the last three verses are Jesus' explanation of the difference between His ministry and that of John the Baptist.

Going Deeper

The astonishing sight of 'the Transfiguration' which Peter and James and John saw on this occasion was not something that we might have expected if we did not know the Gospels reasonably well. It is full of symbolic significance, as well as revealing the true nature of Jesus and His mission. Events such as these are unique in history, and there is no end to what we might discover from them as we seek to learn about Jesus and His mission.

A saying of Jesus

Right at the beginning of this passage comes a verse (9:1) which, in some Bible editions, is tacked on to the end of chapter 8 rather than the story of the Transfiguration in chapter 9. In reality, it is a verse which connects the teaching of Jesus at the end of chapter 8 with the transfiguration, and helps us understand both. The words; 'there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power' were the cause of great dispute in the early church, because some people believed that Jesus said this to indicate that the end of the world would happen, and Jesus would come again in glory, before some of those present with Jesus when He taught had died. You can imagine the consternation when they did all die and the Second Coming had not happened. We find echoes of this unhappy debate in John's Gospel as well (John 21:20-23).

What did Jesus mean by this? The most obvious answer to this must be found in Mark's Gospel itself, in which Jesus had already declared 'the Kingdom of God is at hand, come near, repent, and believe' (1:15). So, for Jesus, the coming of God's Kingdom was something which was happening in the present, rather than the future. Jesus' job was to bring 'the Kingdom of God in power', and in the light of what Jesus had just said about the fact that He would have to suffer and die and rise again in order to do this, the most obvious conclusion is that Jesus meant by this that His own death and resurrection would happen in the lifetime of those present; which indeed it did. This was, perhaps, a much needed reminder of both the spiritual and earthly reality of what was happening in the lives of those present.

The Transfiguration

As a foretaste of the coming Kingdom and its power, God granted Jesus and three of the disciples a moment of pure heavenly blessing. On the one hand, the Transfiguration was a glimpse of the glory of God and His Kingdom which was helpful to the disciples on their spiritual journey with Jesus. On the other hand, it provided divine proof to the disciples of Jesus' authority in speaking about His own death and resurrection (8:31-33); something Peter had not accepted first time round (8:32), despite his faith (8:29). We should not forget however that although Jesus was the 'Son of God', He was also the 'Son of Man' (Mark's favoured title) and as such was someone who just like us, would have appreciated the affirmation of His father at this critical point in the Gospel and His own spiritual journey.

The experience itself has only one real precedent in Scripture, and that is the coming of one like 'a Son of Man' in Daniel 7:13. This is a very difficult passage from the Old Testament with many different and genuinely interesting explanations. However, the features of the 'Son of Man', appearing in 'dazzling white' and being given 'glory' are all present in Daniel 7:13 and 14. If you read this passage in Daniel, you will find that it also says more than this, and indeed, the extra that is said is found in various parts of the book of Revelation, describing the victory of God over all evil and the final coming of Christ in Glory (see, for example, Rev 14:7; 18:1; 19:1; 21:11f. and elsewhere). It seems fairly conclusive that we may see in the Transfiguration a foretaste of the final coming of Christ in Glory at the end of time.

However, the one thing missing in this vision of God was the defeat of all evil. Yes it was a vision of the God's glory, but the reality of it was that Jesus still had to undergo His own death and resurrection in order to win that ultimate and absolute victory. The Transfiguration was therefore a temporary experience; glorious, yet showing us something of the future. Both the word pictures used by Mark of the dazzling white and the cloud are used in the Old Testament to describe God and His presence (Exodus 13:21,22; 40:34f., Daniel 7:13,14 and many more). God's presence and glory are always impenetrable, like a cloud, and the image of the cloud was thought of as like God's 'clothing'. As Jesus became dazzling white, this was a vision of His being united with the very being of God in the cloud, for by seeing Jesus, the disciples saw more of God than anyone else before.

It was after this vision that Elijah and Moses appeared, with Elijah, strangely, appearing before Moses (9:4f.). It was commonly believed that when the Messiah came in glory, the great figures of Israel's past would also appear and herald the Messiah. The work of John the Baptist (representing Elijah) was to announce the Messiah's coming on earth, and the prophets and holy figures such as Moses and others (Enoch, Noah, Abraham etc) would come when the 'Shekinah' Glory of God appeared. This may explain why Elijah's name came before that of Moses. The conversation reported between Jesus, Moses and Elijah symbolised not just the reality of the figures involved, but also the discussion between the Law, the Prophets and God's 'Anointed' (the 'Messiah') which was essential for the completion of God's work on earth.

The climax of this extraordinary event came when the voice from the clouds confirmed God's anointing of Jesus at His baptism (1:11). Jesus could not be called the 'Messiah', but His anointing was verified not by the use of names but by signs which accompanied His ministry. Here, the sign was given not just for the benefit of Peter and James and John, but also for us as well. Jesus' teaching was hard to understand and accept, but it was the truth revealed as from God Himself. Peter had earlier made the unhelpful suggestion that he make three tents for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Such tents or 'booths' were built at what was called 'the festival of booths' which concluded the harvest festival celebrations of Israel. They were a visible reminder of Israel's great past and in particular the wandering in the wilderness. What Peter proposed was a way of celebrating and remembering this great event. This was not the point; the focus was to be on Jesus; as God said from the cloud: 'Listen to Him' (9:7).

After the Transfiguration