

# “Help My Unbelief!”

(The Gospel According to Mark, Chapter 9)

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Today, in our ongoing study of the Gospel According to Mark, we reach chapter 9.

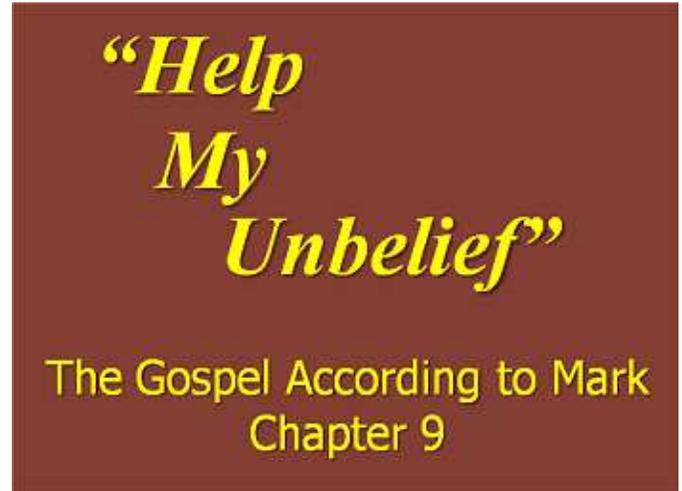
And he said to them, "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power."

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters--one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what "rising from the dead" meant.

And they asked him, "Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?" Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him" (9:1-13).



This strange event, taking place on a high mountain, is traditionally called the “Transfiguration.” Jesus appears to his disciples transformed into a shining figure — at least, his clothing appears in blinding white. Not only that, but two figures from the history of Israel appear with him: Moses the lawgiver, and the prophet Elijah. They’re conversing with Jesus; Mark doesn’t tell us what they were talking about, but Luke tells us they “spoke of his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31). That’s a reference to Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, by which Jesus will accomplish his “exodus” (that’s the Greek word in Luke) — the events that will free God’s people from the slavery under which they now labor, corresponding to the Israelites’ departure from Egypt recorded in the Book of Exodus.

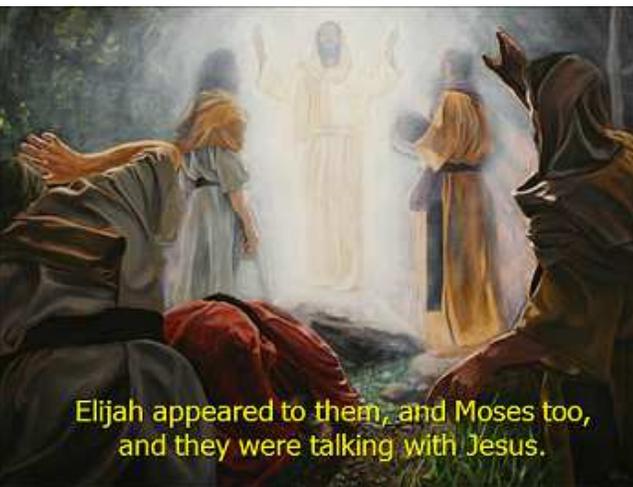
The Transfiguration therefore points ahead to the completion of Mark’s Gospel story, and this is made explicit as Jesus and his disciples come down the mountain. Then he refers to the Son of man rising from the

dead — a concept the disciples can't grasp at this point. For that matter, they couldn't grasp it when it happened, either, but we're getting ahead of our story.

We can't fit the Transfiguration into our typical worldview of Western civilization (just as we can't fit the resurrection into it, either.) The Gospel narrative of the Transfiguration takes us out of our narrow perspective on life which, since the eighteenth century, has been restricted by the philosophy of "scientific materialism." That philosophy, or worldview, says that the only "real" or substantial things are what can be measured or detected by instruments. The Transfiguration carries us into another dimension where things don't behave the way we expect them to. We don't expect a person to suddenly appear in a kind of brilliant white light. Moreover, we don't expect figures from the past, like Moses and Elijah, to reappear and carry on a conversation.

Those kinds of things sound like fantasy to us — or they've sounded like fantasy, up to now. But when cosmologists are asserting that gravitational effects suggest that some 95 percent of the universe is invisible — they call it "dark matter" and "dark energy"; or when physicists claim that at the subatomic level particles of matter behave in an indeterminate way, and in trying to locate them we can only speak of probabilities; or when an Einstein posits that time "slows down" for an object as it approaches the speed of light — then we have to realize that this universe is a far more mysterious, unexplainable place than we've thought it was for the past three centuries. In view of such findings the Transfiguration might not seem so fantastic, after all. So the real question isn't, "Did it really happen, and how did it happen?" The real question is, "What does it mean?"

And, quite obviously, for Mark this event is telling us something about Jesus. It looks ahead to his resurrection from the dead, through which God will establish the first beachhead in the renewal of his creation, the "new heavens and the new earth." The Transfiguration reveals the dynamic, or power, through which God is establishing his righteous kingdom in a troubled, wayward earth. Just a week earlier Jesus had spoken of people present at that moment who would live to "see God's kingdom come in power." And for Jesus to appear with Moses and Elijah is a way of saying that what Jesus is doing is what the Lord had in mind all along in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Law and the Prophets.



Elijah appeared to them, and Moses too, and they were talking with Jesus.

If you look at your Bibles you'll note that the first five books, the Torah, are the Books of Moses, and at the very end of what we call the Old Testament you'll find that the last two verses of the Book of Malachi are speaking of Elijah: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes" (Malachi 4:5). The Gospel story of Jesus isn't a *break* with the story of Israel; it's a *fulfillment and enlargement* of it, which is what the Scriptures were always leading up to. Jesus' comment about John the Baptist (though Mark doesn't mention his name here) drives home that point.



Jewish teachers held, reading the end of Malachi, that Elijah must come before Messiah appears. "Elijah has already come," Jesus declared. The implication is clear: Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

Based on all of this, we might be asking ourselves two questions. First, **Can I break through our culture's limited, materialistic worldview and be aware of God's action in a wider dimension?** To put it another way, are we able to *look through* our world of ordinary physical sensation into that larger world of God's presence and activity that constantly surrounds us? You see, for several centuries in Western culture God has been relegated to a "spiritual" area that doesn't really touch the world we think is really important, the world of material "stuff" that science deals with. But the Transfiguration reveals that the realm in which God operates is much larger — like that 95 percent of the universe, the "dark matter" and "dark energy" we can't observe with instruments — and that realm does affect the world of our "ordinary" experience.

The second question is this: **As Christians, and as a church, can we see ourselves in wider perspective — not just focusing on our individual relation to the Lord right now, but learning to operate within the larger scope of God's plan through the ages?** For the Bible story extends from creation all the way through to the "new heavens and the new earth." We're not the first ones who've been part of that story, and we need to take seriously those who've come before us— like Moses and Elijah — because their witness illuminates the path we're walking on. The Transfiguration sets the appearance of Jesus into that time line, and helps us understand what the coming of Messiah is all about. Jesus didn't come just so you and I could go to heaven; he came in anticipation of the prayer he taught us, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done *on earth as it is in heaven.*"

When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

"What are you arguing with them about?" he asked. A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

"O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me." So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

"If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer" (9:14-29)

Once again, that holy, mysterious virtue that's in Jesus is the only power that can deliver someone whose life has been taken over by the powers of evil. Jesus' disciples had been



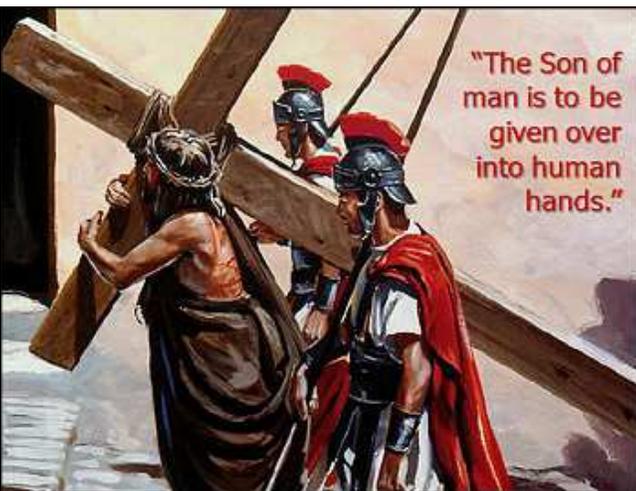
trying unsuccessfully to cast the demon out of the boy. Earlier in Mark's narrative, when Jesus sent the disciples out two by two to preach and to heal, they were able in some instances to overcome the unclean spirits. But in this case they can't do it, and Jesus is pretty disgusted with them: "How long do I have to put up with your lack of faith?"

What's notable is that Jesus puts the matter in the hands of the boy's father. The father had pleaded with him: "If you can, please help us." Jesus tells him, in effect, "Take the *if* out of it. Do *you* have enough faith that I can do this?" The father doesn't hesitate; he makes a faith-commitment: "I do have faith — but help me in my lack of faith!" With that, Jesus commands the spirit to leave and the boy is healed.

Reflecting on this event, we might want to ask ourselves: **Is Jesus *disgusted with us* because of our lack of faith? Is he greatly disappointed that we can't seem to act upon what we claim to believe: that Jesus has "all authority in heaven and earth" and is able to meet us at our point of need in answer to believing prayer?** Whenever we pray, we need to pray believing that God's answer will come. We can't just say, "We hope you'll answer our prayer." Especially when we pray for healing, we can't just pray, "If it be thy will." It's *never God's will* for people to be sick, or deprived, or enslaved by false ideas that keep them down, or trapped in the clutches of evil powers. When we pray we need to *commit ourselves to receiving God's answer*; we need to tell him, "By faith we receive it." We ought not to hold back because we're afraid we might be asking God for something he's reluctant to give; God will sort that out himself!

The boy's father, in this incident, answers Jesus: "I do believe — help my unbelief!" He commits himself by faith with his own mouth, even while he acknowledges that he has doubts. Of course we often have doubts, in our mind, as to whether the Lord will hear and answer our prayer. It's okay to ask the Lord to deal with our doubts and strengthen our faith. Because of the kind of world we live in, and the influences that pour into our lives from the media, or from our educational background, or from our friends and family, our life is always a mixture of faith and doubt. But *we'll never get an answer to prayer if we pray our doubts*. We need to pray our faith. We just studied the Transfiguration, which reveals to us that the realm of God's activity is far greater than the so-called "normal" world we ordinarily perceive. By faith, in prayer, we tap into that greater world and align ourselves with the universal purposes of our Creator.

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it (9:30-32)



In Mark's narrative, as we've seen, we're starting to look ahead to the events of what we call "the passion of the Christ" — the events of "Holy Week" when Jesus is to suffer, and die on the cross, and be raised again. Mark's story has been hinting at these things all along, and now Jesus is bringing them out more openly. We saw, in the previous chapter, that Peter (for one) wasn't happy with the idea that Jesus would have to suffer and die. So often the disciples don't see the "big picture" of what the Lord is doing through the whole history of Israel, and how the Messiah must bear the sins of his people so they can be set free to do what God called them to do when he made his covenant with Abraham.

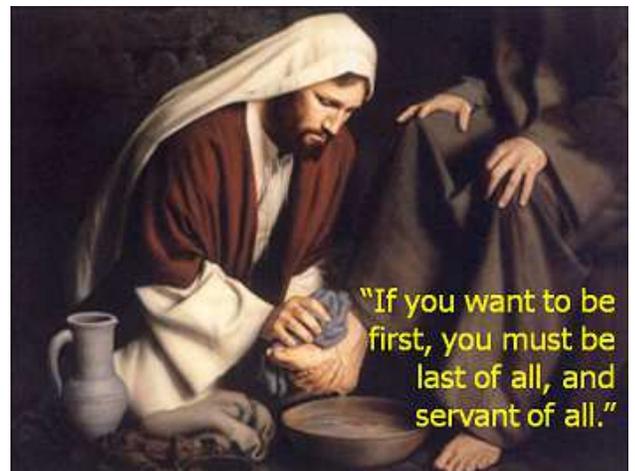
We often say that Jesus died for the sins of the world, including you and me, and that's true. But it's true because, through his resurrection, *Jesus has brought us into Israel* so the death of Messiah is our door to deliverance too. As Paul says, the gospel is the news of rescue "to the Jew first, and also to the Greek," or non-Jew. And Paul also states (Romans 4:13) that God promised Abraham, the father of the Israelites, that he would "inherit the world" — meaning you and me, and everyone else who, through Jesus, becomes part of what Paul calls "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16). For this to happen, so that we can become part of God's plan for his new creation, the Messiah has to bear in his body the sins of his people. Jesus is explaining this to his disciples; but as Mark says, "They didn't understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him" (Mark 9:33). It was something they didn't really want to hear.

The New Testament teaches that through our faith, and through our baptism, we're in Jesus and Jesus is in us. That means, as Paul states, that we've been crucified with Christ so we can also live with him. If Messiah must make the sacrifice, then so must we. So we might want to ask ourselves this: **Am I prepared to make a sacrifice along with Jesus, so that God's plan for his creation can be furthered and fulfilled?**

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me" (9:33-37)

In the history of the church it's been common for theologians to speak about "servant leadership," the idea that those who take the lead in the Christian community do so by being the servants of others. Jesus himself sets the example for serving one another when, before his arrest, he washes the feet of his disciples. That event is recorded in the Gospel of John, chapter 13, while Luke records his words at the Last Supper: "I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27). The Lord's Supper or Holy Communion, itself is supposed to be a celebration of that *koinonia*, or common life, that's characterized by each one serving the other. That's why the church leaders who serve Communion to the congregation are called *deacons*, a word derived from the New Testament word *diakonia* which means "service." This principle of leadership through humble service is so central to Christian faith that some churches, to symbolize it, practice the ceremony of washing one another's feet. Washing the dusty feet of household members or visitors isn't the job of the head of the family but the lowly task of the most menial servant. Even the Pope annually washes the feet of the Cardinals of the Catholic Church, to illustrate that he sees himself as "the servant of the servants of Christ."



But there's another dimension to what Jesus is teaching in this passage. If the purpose of the gospel isn't just to set up an organization we call the "church," but rather to herald the entrance of God's new creation that's to spread across the whole world, then Jesus is outlining what some have called the "politics of the resurrection." Because the risen Jesus has "all authority in heaven and earth," the principle of servant leadership extends to the political realm as well.

In the ancient world, especially the Roman Empire, they didn't have politics as we know it with campaigns and elections. Instead, society was organized as a *polis*, a Greek word that means "city" (and from which our

word "politics" is derived). The head of the whole Empire, viewed as a kind of super city, was Caesar, and his top-down kind of leadership was reflected at the level of the local city or *polis* by a system of patronage. That is, the common people attached themselves as clients to a wealthy, powerful patron who took care of them in return for their loyalty and support.

Jesus has overheard his disciples on the road, discussing which of them will be the "greatest" in the new order that's coming — which one of them will be the "patron" and which will be the clients. Jesus is cutting directly across that pattern when he teaches his disciples a different sort of politics: you're all to *serve one another*, and the "greatest" — if we could use that word — is the one who most humbles himself to serve the rest.

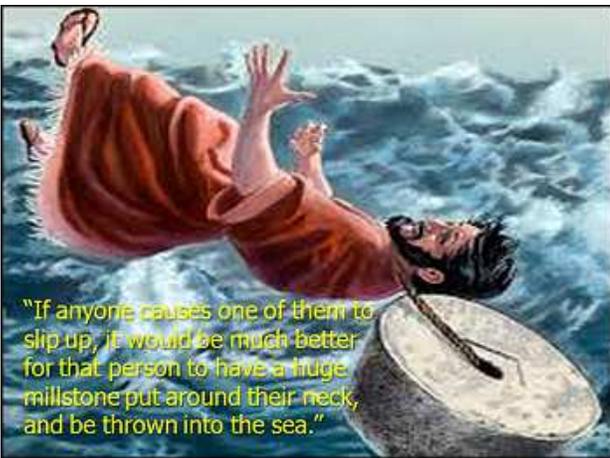
We can translate that contrast into our current political scene, where those who control governments set themselves up as the patrons who take care of their clients, the common people, and in return expect their vote in the next election. As an example, with 46 million people in this country now on food stamps it's easy to see the patronage system at work. But, as Christians, we believe in the "politics of the resurrection" in which those elected to office are the servants of others. And those "public servants" aren't to make the rest of us dependent clients, but rather to encourage us to become competent and effective servants in our own right. When election time rolls around, then, we could ask ourselves this: **Which candidate sees himself (or herself) as *the servant* who enables others to serve, and which candidate just wants to be the lofty patron dispensing goodies to dependent clients?**

"Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

"Do not stop him," Jesus said. "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward."

"And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'

"Everyone will be salted with fire. "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other" (9:38-49)



Here we have another of Mark's "catenas," or chains of sayings of Jesus that might have been uttered on different occasions but which he has collected here. There isn't time to comment at length on all these pointed sayings, but we can observe that they have a common theme: they relate to how *extreme* the gospel of the kingdom is. The message is so extreme that it doesn't matter if somebody besides Jesus' own disciples is demonstrating it by casting out demons. The message is so extreme that it would be better to die in the depths of the sea than to cause someone to

"slip up" and miss the kingdom. And, by the way, the "little ones" Jesus mentions aren't children, but people who are "little ones" in the sense that they're just beginners or novices in the faith. It's so important, as we deal with family and friends and others we meet in the community, that we conduct ourselves as believers in a

way that doesn't give them any reason to reject the Word of God. Being generous, gentle, understanding, open — all these things are vital in our Christian witness. That's something I, and others here, have to watch whenever we deal with people in the community who're asking for help through the Love Fund, the Food Pantry, or whatever.

And then the gospel of the kingdom is so extreme that Jesus uses some graphic language to describe it: cut off your hand or your foot, or take out your eye, if they're getting in the way of your mission to serve God. We all know what Jesus means with this kind of hyperbole; if something in our life is seriously interfering with our ability to get in sync with God's plan for his world, *get rid of it*. It could be an interest or hobby that absorbs our time (like sports, or *trains?*), or a habit that weakens us, or an obsession that diverts our attention, or a dysfunctional relationship that depresses us. It's better, Jesus says, to get rid of that hindrance than to burn in the continual fires of Gehenna. And, by the way, that doesn't



**"It's better for you to go into life maimed than to have two hands and go into Gehenna, into the fire that never goes out."**

mean *hell*. Gehenna was the *gai hinnom*, the valley of the brook called Hinnom which was the location of the Jerusalem city dump. Jesus isn't saying we'll burn in hell if we don't take the extreme step, but he is saying that we'll just wind up on the burning scrap heap, looking back with sadness and regret over a life that could have counted for the kingdom of God but didn't because of the wrong choices we made. **Is there something in my life right now that requires me to take extreme measures in order to get with God's program, and be the person Jesus wants me to be?** That's our final question from Mark, chapter 9.

Let's review and rephrase all the questions this chapter has raised for us:

- Can I see through the materialistic worldview into God's action in a wider dimension?
- Can I understand my faith not just as something between me and the Lord, but a faith that connects me with the "big picture" of God's plan through history?
- Is Jesus disgusted with our lack of faith? Are we truly convinced he's ready to respond to believing prayer?
- Am I prepared to make a sacrifice together with Jesus, in order to further God's plan for his creation?
- When I vote, will I choose the candidate who best demonstrates the "politics of the resurrection," leading by serving and enabling others?
- What extreme measures do I need to take, or what do I have to get rid of, in order to get with God's program for the renewal of all things?

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