

“Listen to Him”

The Twenty-Seventh in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 9:2-13; Exodus 24:12-18

Most of the Jews of Jesus' day believed that the coming of the messianic kingdom was, in some sense, connected to the restoration of Israel's former greatness. This is why it was only natural for people who believed that Jesus was the Messiah to expect that Jesus would lead the nation into this long-anticipated messianic glory. To correct this false assumption and to prepare his disciples for what is yet to come, Jesus begins to teach the disciples about the true nature of the kingdom. On three occasions, Jesus will tell his disciples that he must suffer and die in order to fulfill his messianic mission. Jesus must also inform his disciples that the glory associated with his kingdom has nothing to do with a restoration of national Israel. This is why Jesus will now reveal that his messianic glory is associated with his victory over sin and death. He will now give his disciples an important lesson in biblical eschatology. In fact, three of the disciples will soon be given a glimpse of that messianic glory as a dramatic sign of what is yet to come when Jesus conquers death and the grave, and when he comes again at the end of the age.

We are continuing our series on Mark's Gospel and we are working our way through the second half of this Gospel. In order to understand the change in emphasis in Jesus' ministry, recall that in Mark 8:27-30 Peter has made dramatic confession that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah). This confession is the turning point in Jesus' mission to Israel, as well as the defining moment in the lives of the disciples. As we have seen, Peter's confession was the result of Jesus removing Peter's own spiritual blindness and deafness, even as Jesus had healed a deaf man in the Decapolis and a blind man in Bethsaida. Now that the disciples had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus must instruct them as to what his messianic mission actually entails. Jesus' messianic mission will not lead to immediate glory for Israel. No, the way to messianic glory is through the cross and the empty tomb. To make this very important point, Jesus begins speaking to his disciples plainly (not in parables). He will correct their faulty eschatology by telling them that he must suffer and die and that he will be raised from the dead three days later. Only then will the messianic glory they had been expecting will be revealed.

Not surprisingly, Jesus' words shock the disciples to their very core. So much so that Peter rebuked Jesus for even saying such a thing. While Jesus knew that Israel's Messiah was also the Suffering Servant foretold by Isaiah (52-53), like most Jews of his age Peter thought that Isaiah was referring to the suffering of the Jewish people, not that of the Messiah. Thinking that Jesus did not understand the Old Testament, Peter takes it upon himself to correct Jesus, only to have Jesus respond to his rebuke with a rebuke of his own. The irony in this is that Peter is seeking the same thing as Satan did when he offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, if only Jesus would abandon the way of the cross. Because Peter has unknowingly allied himself with Jesus' adversary, Jesus says to Peter, “get behind me, Satan.”

We have also seen that Jesus began to repeatedly speak of himself as the Son of Man. This title was Jesus' favorite self-designation and is not only tied to his impending suffering and humiliation, but this term was used in the prophecy of Daniel as a messianic title. By speaking of himself in this manner, Jesus is tying together the two themes Peter could not reconcile. Yes, Jesus is Israel's Messiah. But Jesus is also the Suffering Servant foretold by Isaiah. In order for Jesus to complete his mission and bring about the promised messianic glory, he must first suffer and die. While Peter still could not see it, Jesus knew that his way is the way of the cross and that messianic glory will not come until he has

conquered sin and death. There can be no glory without a cross and an empty tomb.

As we enter the second half of Mark's Gospel, it will become increasingly clear that things change dramatically in Jesus' ministry. In order to prepare his disciples for the inevitable journey to Jerusalem, and the final confrontation with the religious leaders of Israel which will end with Jesus crucified upon a Roman cross, Jesus begins to openly speak to the disciples about what lies ahead. At this point, Jesus addresses the matter of the cost of discipleship. While his teaching will focus primarily upon the disciples, Jesus also speaks indirectly to the crowds. Jesus does this to force all those who have been following him for the wrong reasons—based upon his reputation as a healer-exorcist—to decide once and for all if the cost of following him is truly worth it. The cost to become one of his disciples—says Jesus—is to be willing to deny yourself and take up your own cross, and follow him, wherever he may lead. This means renouncing all personal righteousness and trust in good works. It means following Jesus wherever he may lead, even if he takes us to the cross, where we must die to self. But the cost of rejecting Jesus is even greater. Jesus tells the crowd that those who are ashamed of him, will find themselves coming to shame on that day in which he returns to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new. If people want to be disciples of Jesus, they need to know what, exactly, following Jesus will cost them.

As we saw last time, in order to make the connection between his suffering and his glory, Jesus tells the disciples that they will be given a hint of this glory before the day of final judgment. In Mark 9:1, Jesus had already told the crowds that *“I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power.”* Even though Jesus was referring to his second advent in Mark 8:38, he now sets the stage for what comes next.¹

The time has now come for Jesus to follow through on these words. He will give the disciples a glimpse of what he means when he says that the kingdom of God will come with power. What the disciples witness is the guarantee of an even greater glory yet to come. Although they have trouble understanding what they are about to see, it will become clear to them that Jesus is the New Moses and that he is leading his people in a New Exodus.

What follows in Mark 9:2-13 is known as the “transfiguration” and is recounted in the two other synoptic gospels as well (Matthew 17:1-9; and Luke 9:28-36). The transfiguration is also alluded to in the Gospel of John (12:28-30). In this event, Jesus will reveal that glory which rightly belongs to him as God's one and only son. The revelation of this glory points ahead to the very thing Jesus has already promised to bring about, namely that on the last day he will return to judge the world, raise the dead, and to make all things new. This brief revelation of glory will help to prepare the disciples for those difficult days which lie ahead when Jesus' humiliation reaches its depths, and Jesus hangs helplessly upon the cross, apparently, forsaken by God.² That horrible scene must come before Jesus' glory is manifest in his resurrection from the dead. It is also not accidental that the revelation of Jesus' glory comes only after Peter has declared that Jesus is Israel's Messiah, and only after Jesus has spoken of his death and resurrection. It will soon be clear that this is all God's will.

Mark is careful to point out that this event occurs six days after Jesus declared that the kingdom of God

¹ See the discussion in; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 312-314.

² Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 315.

will come with power. That Mark recounts the exact time reference means that this event was so significant in Peter's mind that Peter—who recounted these things to Mark—remembered the exact sequence of events with great clarity. Mark tells us in verse 2 that “*After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone.*” Since Jesus told the disciples six days earlier that *some* of them would see the kingdom come in power, we should not be surprised that Jesus selects three of the disciples to witness this amazing transfiguration, in which the glory of the kingdom is made manifest in their presence.³

There is a great deal going on in this passage and we need to be careful not to overlook it. Mark's reference to the high mountain and to the glory which appears there is surely intended to recall to mind the account in Exodus 24:12-18 (our Old Testament lesson) when Moses went up the mountain at Sinai where he beheld the glory of YHWH. The actual site of the transfiguration is probably one of three peaks over 4000 feet high to the southeast of Capernaum, and not to the little hill near the Sea of Galilee which has become the tourist site of the transfiguration.⁴ As God's glory appeared on the “Mountain of the Lord” (Mount Sinai/Horeb), Moses described how clouds covered the mountain for six days before the Lord's glory was revealed to Moses and the witnesses on the seventh day. Clearly, then, Mark is making the point in that what follows in this demonstration of messianic glory, God is revealing to the disciples that Jesus is the New Moses, who is leading a New Exodus of God's people through the wilderness of this present evil age. When the disciples wait six days before God's glory is revealed on the seventh, Mark makes a direct connection between the account of the transfiguration to the account of Moses climbing Mount Sinai.⁵ Jesus is the New Moses and that a New Exodus is underway.

Peter, James, and John are clearly the leaders among the twelve and have already alone been with Jesus when he raised a little girl from the dead (Mark 5:37). Now these three are singled out to witness an amazing event, which Mark describes simply as follows. “*There he was transfigured before them.*” Therefore, it was up on this high mountain, in the presence of his three key disciples, that Jesus' appearance was radically transformed in the radiance of the glory of the age to come. Says Mark, “[Jesus'] *clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.*” The radiant brilliance of Christ's appearance directly connects Jesus to the vision Daniel is given in the 7th chapter of his prophecy— “*As I looked, `thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze.*” Jesus is not only the New Moses, his glory is identical the one whom Daniel describes as the “Ancient of Days.”

We must not miss the point that this is the same glory which Jesus already possessed, but which he had veiled with human flesh in his incarnation. It was not as though something was added to Jesus that day on the mountain which he did not already possess. Rather, his intrinsic glory which has been veiled by human flesh—Jesus' own glory as the eternal Son of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity—is now

³ Contra Cranfield, who believes the six days refers to Peter's confession in Mark 8:27-30. Given the connection to Exodus 24, more likely Peter is thinking of Jesus' statements about the kingdom coming with power, since Moses waited six days on Mount Sinai before the glory of God was revealed. Cf. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 289.

⁴ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 289.

⁵ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 348.

revealed to Peter, James, and John. This means that our Lord's transfiguration is but a foretaste of that undescrivable glory which Christ will manifest at the end of the age, when he comes to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new. Jesus has spoken of his second advent just six days before, and now he shows the three disciples, in part, what this second advent will entail. While the disciples don't yet make the connection, Jesus has just corrected their notion that messianic glory is tied to the immediate fortunes of the nation of Israel. No, the messianic glory, so far transcends their false notion, that they cannot understand it until they actually see what Jesus means with their own eyes.

But when Peter, James, and John, get a glimpse of Christ in all his messianic glory, they suddenly realize that Jesus is not alone up on the mountain. As is recounted in verse 4, "*And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.*" As one writer reminds us, it is only appropriate that at this revelation of Christ's glory, we find two of those prophets who have already testified about Jesus and his coming glory in the Old Testament. As Moses and Elijah saw the glory of God and knew that it pointed ahead to a greater prophet yet to come, they now appear on the Mountain of the Lord, with the very one whose messianic ministry their own ministries had anticipated. If Moses is key figure in the Sinaitic covenant, and if that covenant passes away with the coming of Jesus, and if Elijah was the herald of the final restoration of all things, and Jesus is the key figure in the New Covenant and that one in whom the restoration of all things occurs, then how fitting for Jesus to be seen with Moses and Elijah, conversing with them on the mountain.⁶ Jesus is showing the disciples that the entirety of the Old Testament was bearing witness to him and that he is far greater than either Moses or Elijah.

Peter, impetuous as ever, recognizes Moses and Elijah and acts without fully grasping what he was seeing. And so in verse 5, he blurts out 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.*)"

Peter is understandably terrified—who wouldn't be terrified! Peter wants John and James to help him put up three shelters (tabernacles) in an attempt duplicate the tent of meeting as described in the Exodus account. While correctly tying what he has just seen back the Exodus, Peter mistakenly assumes that what he is seeing is the final consummation (arrival) of the kingdom. What he does not understand is that the revelation of Christ's glory on the mountain is but a type and shadow of a much greater glory yet to be fully revealed. Peter need a quick lesson in biblical eschatology.

Here's the problem, put another way. Not knowing the whole story, Peter sees the transfiguration as the full revelation of the promised messianic glory. Along with John and James, Peter has correctly recognized that Jesus is the New Moses and that a New Exodus has begun. But Peter mistakenly assumes that this is the ultimate revelation of Jesus' glory. Therefore, he is quite right to see Jesus as the New Moses and to make the connection to the Exodus. But he is wrong to think this is the consummated kingdom. It will become apparent as Jesus' ministry unfolds, that the messianic glory will be revealed in stages. Both the transfiguration and Christ's post-resurrection appearances are signs which point ahead to that ultimate glory which will be revealed at the end of the age. While we can certainly understand Peter's enthusiasm and his terror, we can also sympathize with his desire to witness the final revelation of Christ' messianic glory. But it is not yet time. Peter had better enjoy the moment and take it all in, because this moment was fleeting.

That this was not the end of the age, now becomes clear to Peter. As we read in verse 7, "*Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to*

⁶ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 319.

him!” The cloud which enveloped Jesus, Moses and Elijah, serves as the veil which shields sinful humans from the glory of the Lord. It also reminds the disciples that God himself is present on the mountain for the cloud serves as God’s own tabernacle which both reveals and yet at the same time conceals the glory of the Lord. The cloud demonstrates that God’s glory was present on the mountain, while at the same time prevents the sinful disciples from being consumed by the holiness of God.⁷

The presence of the cloud sets the stage for the heavenly benediction which is now pronounced upon Jesus by the Father himself. Jesus’ public ministry began after receiving the same benediction at the time of his baptism by John (Mark 1:11). Now, in the presence of his disciples, Jesus’ messianic commission is renewed by the Father and his unique identity as the Son of God is confirmed. This is vital to do after Jesus had spoken so plainly about the fact that his messianic mission would eventually take him to the cross. The Father is confirming (in the presence of the disciples as witnesses) that Jesus is not only the Messiah, but that he is also the Suffering Servant foretold in Isaiah 53. The two images Peter could not connect together—messianic glory and the suffering servant—are both confirmed. Jesus is vindicated by the Father after he informed the disciples that his mission would eventually take him to the cross.⁸ The point is this. Jesus’ way is the way of the cross. Jesus’ suffering and death is the will of God.

Once Jesus’s person and mission is vindicated by the Father, we need to notice the exhortation which follows. Since Jesus is God’s beloved son, the disciples are to “*listen to him.*” These words dramatically echo the famous words of Deuteronomy 18:15 when Moses told the Israelites, “*The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.*” This means that Jesus is the final prophet. He will say to us all that God wants to say to us. Jesus is that one to whom Moses and Elijah had pointed. He is central figure of the Old Testament and far greater than either Moses and Elijah who had both borne witness to him. Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. He is also the Suffering Servant. His glory has been revealed in what amounts to a brief glimpse of what is yet to come. Therefore, disciples must listen to Jesus, no matter how difficult his words may be, and no matter how difficult it is for them to make sense of it all. One day, everything will become clear.

That the moment was fleeting becomes clear from verse 8. “*Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.*” Moses and Elijah were gone. The glory of the Lord had departed. Only Jesus remained present, confirmed as both Messiah and God’s beloved Son. As his ministry unfolds, it will become clearer and clearer to the disciples that Jesus was the true tabernacle in whom the glory of God was manifest. He alone spoke the truth about these things, and the disciples must take what he says to heart. No doubt, the disciples were blown away. There was so much new information. It was all so hard to understand this side of the cross and empty tomb.

What happens next in verses 9-13, is an account of the conversation which took place afterwards and which was prompted by what the disciples had just witnessed up on the mountain.

We read in verse 9 that “*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.*” It was clear that the three disciples could not have fully grasped what they had just witnessed. Jesus knew this from Peter’s desire to build three tabernacles. Since this was the case, Jesus instructs them to be quiet about what had just

⁷ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 320.

⁸ Lane, The Gospel According to Jesus, 320-321.

happened. Jesus knew that it would all make sense after the resurrection. It is important to point out that Jesus himself sets the time frame for the realization of his messianic glory at the time of the resurrection, which, of course, sets the stage for understanding the second advent. Jesus must die, be raised from the dead, and ascend into heaven, if he is to come a second time.

Meanwhile the disciples are obviously still a bit stunned. “What is the resurrection?” “What is Jesus talking about?” In verse 10, Mark describes this for us. “*They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what ‘rising from the dead’ meant.*” While they obeyed Jesus’ command not to tell others, they were confused. And so they sought out their master and asked him the following question. “*Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?*” Having just seen Elijah on the mountain, the disciples were trying to square this with what they had been taught by the Rabbis. “How could Jesus be the promised one, if Elijah had not come?” “If Jesus is the Messiah, what happened to Elijah?”

In order to relieve their anxiety, Jesus answers them in verses 12-13. “*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.’*” What the disciples had heard concerning Elijah was correct. Yes, Elijah comes before the Messiah. But, says Jesus, when the Messiah comes, he will suffer greatly (at the cross) and will be rejected by his own (not only by the people of Israel, but rejected by his heavenly Father at that awful moment when Jesus is bearing our sins on the cross). John the Baptist was Elijah and he had already been put to death by Herod. Therefore, Elijah has come (John) and it is now time for those things written about Jesus to come to pass as well (his suffering). What happened to John, will soon happen to Jesus. The disciples are probably sorry they asked, for once again, Jesus directs them to the cross and his humiliation, the very thing they did not want to consider.

What do we say by way of application?

Jesus must correct the disciples over-realized eschatology—that is, their mistaken assumption that since Jesus was the Messiah, the end was at hand and Israel would be restored to greatness right then and there. When the disciples get a glimpse of Jesus’ glory up on the mount of transfiguration, it should now be clear to them that although Jesus will suffer and die for sins the sins of his people, Jesus’ messianic glory is sure to follow. They will struggle to understand this until after Christ’s resurrection. The glory the disciples have just seen is a pledge of the ultimate glory to be revealed first at the resurrection and then at the end of the age.

And so until that day when Jesus returns and his great glory is revealed for all to see, let us not make the mistake of seeking that glory as though it were an end in itself. Let us not forget that God graciously veiled Christ’s glory when he came to earth to save us from our sins. Had Jesus come in all his glory, he would have come in judgment, not mercy. Indeed, had God fully revealed his glory in Jesus on that mountain, Peter, James and John would have been consumed. This is why we must focus on those places where God reveals his son to—in his word and sacraments—places where Jesus is revealed in such a way that sinners can freely approach and seek forgiveness and mercy, not judgment.

Sadly, there are countless Christians looking to see what Peter, James and John glimpsed up on the mountain. T. D. Jakes and Benny Hinn can stadiums with eager people looking for God’s glory to be revealed in their midst. But as Jesus himself says (in what amounts to a warning), when the kingdom comes in power and glory, it will be the day of judgment. Sadly, all those people seeking manifestations of God’s glory in this age, are really asking for the coming of judgment day. This is the very mistake that

Peter had made and why Jesus instructs him as to what this meant.

And so, while we look for God's glory in Christ's person and work (as Luther put it, in the cradle and on the cross), we also know that one day we will see the kingdom come in power. That will be the day when God raises the dead, judges the world and recreates heaven and earth. Therefore, Jesus' transfiguration is a sign of Christ's messianic glory, more importantly, it is the sign that God graciously veils his glory so that he can save his people from their sins. Yes, Jesus' exaltation is sure to come. The transfiguration is the proof to Peter, James and John, that God will fulfill his promises to his people. And so let us not forget that the revelation of Christ's messianic glory comes only because Jesus was willing to humble himself and set aside his glory and remain obedient to the father's will—obedient all the way to the cross. And because he was obedient unto death, Jesus was raised King of kings and Lord of Lords. And one day, we will see his glory, and we will need not fear. Because for all those who are Christ, this will be the day of resurrection. Amen!