

Transfiguration Pt.4: Did Elijah Fail?

Ignorance and Insight: Part 15
Mark 9:8-13 (Mt.17:1-6, Lk.9:28-35) 7/22/2019

John the Baptist was the fulfillment of the promised Elijah who would come and restore the people's hearts in preparation for the Messiah. But if that's the case, why was Jesus crucified? Did John fail? This message will show you where you fit in the ministry of Elijah and teach you what it means to listen to Jesus courageously.

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Mark 9:1 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."

2 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. 3 His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. 4 And there appeared before them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 5 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." 6 (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

7 Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son,¹ whom I love. Listen to him!" 8 Suddenly, when they looked round, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

9 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. 10 They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what "rising from the dead" meant. 11 And they asked him, "Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?" 12 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? 13 But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him."

Gag Order

¹ The glory is future, but the sonship is present.

Today is our fourth session on the Transfiguration account in Mark. Jesus lit up like the sun, Peter started mumbling something but that was interrupted by the arrival of the glory of God in a cloud. The glory of God had departed from the Temple hundreds of years before this, and this is the first it had been seen since. The cloud envelops them so they are inside the cloud with God. God speaks to them and, predictably, the experience wipes them out, they end up on their faces on the ground, and Jesus has to get them calmed down enough to where they can stand again (Mt.17:6-7). Once they recover, Moses and Elijah are gone, the cloud is gone, only Jesus remains, now it's time to make the descent down this high mountain.

They start working their way down. And Jesus, once again, repeats the gag order. 9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen Jesus has been doing that over and over all through the first half of Mark. But this is the last time—he never does it in the second half. So it's the last time Jesus gives it, and it's the first time he reveals when the gag order will be lifted. 9 Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen And here's the new part:

... until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

After that they have the green light. Why? Because only then will they understand the suffering and death part of the gospel. Remember, we discovered at the end of ch.8 that the reason for the gag order is that you can't get the gospel right if you don't understand the suffering part.² And for once, someone obeys the gag order.

10 They kept the matter to themselves

Can you imagine? If I see a big strike of lightning I can't wait to tell someone about it. Can you imagine seeing what may be the greatest thing that has ever happened on earth and you can't a soul? But they manage to keep it quiet, but there's a problem. How long did Jesus say to keep it quiet? Until he rose from the dead. The problem is, they don't know what he means by that.

Resurrection

10 They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what "rising from the dead" meant.

"Hey, I realize we need to keep this on the DL until after he 'rises,' but what does that mean?" Can you see why they aren't quite ready to go out and preach the gospel? They have no idea what Jesus means by "rising from the dead." If someone wants to be a preacher but he doesn't know what Jesus meant by rising from the dead, he's not ready.

Now, does that mean they didn't know what the word *resurrection* meant? Of course they knew that—they had watched Jesus raise people from the dead multiple times. These same three men were in the room when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter from the dead. They knew exactly what resurrection was. And they knew there would be a resurrection at the end of the age. The confusion came from the fact that it sounded like Jesus was talking about his own resurrection—during their lifetimes. And that makes no sense, because it would mean Jesus would have to be dead, which was something they still couldn't accept. Sometimes we miss the greatest things God tells us because we can't accept the hard things that come before them.

Listen Courageously—Don't Pick and Choose

Now remember, the Transfiguration is all about listening to Jesus—that's the purpose, to get us to do that. So what have we learned about how to listen to Jesus? We must listen to Christ in a way that is fitting given his nature—always learning more of what he's like so our ears become more fine-tuned to

² A secondary reason may be to keep them from getting puffed up with pride. When Paul was given surpassing revelations, he was never permitted to speak about it lest he become proud.

hear him. We must listen confidently, not wavering in our faith, not doubting. We must listen exclusively—to Christ alone. His truth is the only truth. Now one more: Listen courageously. Have the courage to accept whatever he says, rather than picking and choosing the things you like and ignoring the things that threaten to upset your apple cart.

Two Questions—The Importance of Which Questions You Choose to Ask

I think it's fascinating that on the way down the mountain the disciples had two questions—one about resurrection and one about Elijah. The second one they asked Jesus. The first one they didn't ask—they just discussed it among themselves. The first question was "What does mean by rising from the dead?" Why do you suppose they were willing to ask Jesus the second question, but not the first? Why ask the question about Elijah, but not the question about what resurrection means?

Can I suggest that it had something to do with the answers they thought they might get? Could it be they were afraid to ask what Jesus meant by rising from the dead because they were afraid he would say, "I meant that literally"? So instead of asking Jesus, they have a conference among themselves.

Do you remember the last time they did that? It wasn't long ago—ch.8. It was in the boat when Jesus warned them about yeast.

Mark 8:16 They discussed this with one another and said, "It is because we have no bread."

And that earned them the blistering rebuke where Jesus went off on them, "Do you still not see or understand? Are you blind and deaf ..." When you're ignorant about something, having a discussion with other ignorant people doesn't help a whole lot. All it usually does is confirm a bunch of wrong ideas. But if you have Jesus standing right there, why ask James and John instead of asking Jesus? Because you're afraid of what the answer might be.

What's the lesson for us? Listen courageously. Don't read the Bible with a posture of guarding your theological system. Listen with a wide open mind that is ready to accept anything Jesus says no matter how much it shakes up the beliefs you've been taught all your life.

Did Elijah Fail?

Okay, so now we've learned all these points about how to listen to Jesus based on who he is. Now let's look at the last few verses of this passage and we'll see how this whole account comes together—and not just the Transfiguration, but how the whole book of Mark comes together.

Verses 11-13 Elijah and Rejection

In verse 11 we see the question they did have the guts to ask.

11 And they asked him, "Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?"

That's a reference to that final paragraph of the OT, where God promised that an Elijah-type figure would come and prepare the way for the Messiah by restoring wayward hearts. And as I said back in v.4—the Elijah promise was known by everyone—all Bible-believing Jews were waiting for Elijah to come and restore the hearts of the people to God prior to the messianic age. So it could be they are just saying, "How can the Messiah already be here if Elijah hasn't shown up yet?"³ But I don't think that's the question. The disciples have accepted Jesus as the Messiah from the very beginning. That's not what they are wrestling with. Their conundrum is with the idea of Jesus suffering and dying. I think their question is this: Everybody knows that Elijah is going to come, restore the hearts of the people in preparation, so

³ This was an argument that later Jewish writers used to disprove Jesus' messiahship. Trypho in Justin's Dialogue: "The Messiah—if he has indeed been born and exists anywhere—is unknown and does not even know himself, and has no power, until Elijah comes to anoint him and make him known to all" (Dial. 8, 4; cf. 49, 1).

when the Messiah arrives, he won't have to come in judgment. He can set up his glorious, eternal kingdom and all the people will be on board. So how does that square with this idea that all the spiritual leaders of Israel will reject you and kill you? If Elijah restores people's hearts to God, wouldn't that mean everyone would welcome the Messiah with open arms? So Jesus, how do you square this whole rejection, suffering, and dying bit with the fact that Elijah will restore people's hearts?

Answer: Elijah Did Come and Restore

That's a question they are willing to ask Jesus because it seems like the answer to that question must be one that will support their current beliefs and save them from having to accept the whole suffering and dying thing. So what's the answer?

12 Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things.

Why do the scribes say Elijah must come first? Because Elijah must come first. And that's exactly what happened. Elijah did come. Remember how the book of Mark began? Mark quotes the promise from Malachi about the forerunner who will prepare the way, then he introduces John the Baptist who lived in the desert and wore camel's hair and a leather belt. Who is the only other person in the Bible who wore that outfit? Remember when we studied that I told you if an ancient Jewish mom dressed her little boy in camel's hair and a leather belt on Halloween everyone would immediately say, "Oh, cute—look at the little Elijah"? John the Baptist came as the fulfillment of that Elijah promise in Malachi.

But if Elijah came to restore the people's hearts, why did they end up rejecting and killing Jesus? Did John's ministry fail? No. Remember, huge crowds listened to him and repented of their sins. And many of them followed Jesus.

But how do we explain the ones who didn't repent? Does the Malachi promise allow for that? Let's take a look.

Malachi 4:6 He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.

There was an "or else" in the promise. Under what circumstances would God strike them with a curse? If they didn't repent at the preaching of the promised Elijah figure. So, did Elijah come? Yep. Did he turn many hearts back to God? Yep. Did others reject him and end up being stricken by God? Yep. In 70 A.D. Rome obliterated Israel.

You say, "You mean to say that only some would respond to John as the Elijah and others wouldn't?" I'll let Jesus answer that question.

Matthew 11:13 For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. 14 And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.

Was John the Elijah figure? He was to those who repented. Everyone else is cursed by God.

1 Corinthians 16:22 If anyone does not love the Lord-- a curse be on him.

So that's the answer to their question. How can Elijah come and do his work of restoration and the Messiah is still rejected and killed? Some accept him and other don't. The idea that everyone will automatically listen to the Elijah prophet ignores the final words of Malachi—the "or else" clause.

Jesus' Question: Why is it Written that the Son of Man Must Suffer?

So Jesus has answered their question; now he has a question of his own.

12 ... Why then⁴ is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected?

Your question is about Elijah restoring people's hearts. That's a great question, but I have a better question. How could I possibly be the Messiah if I don't suffer, given the clear statements in the Bible about how the Messiah must suffer and die? It's all spelled out in Isaiah 53—the servant of Yahweh, the branch from David's line, must take upon himself the punishment for the sins of the people and suffer and die. Jesus says, "What I'm teaching fits just fine with the Elijah promise. And it fits with passages like Isaiah 53. If the Messiah isn't supposed to be rejected and suffer and die, how do you guys explain those passages?" Then Jesus adds this:

13 But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him.

What happened to John the Baptist? They threw him in prison unjustly and then cut off his head. Hmm—sounds like suffering, rejection, and death.

But why does Jesus say, "**just as it is written about him**"? Did Malachi say that the Elijah figure to come would suffer? No. It might be implied as a possibility in the "or else" clause, since prophets are usually mistreated when the people decide not to listen to them. But it's not explicitly stated.

However, it is explicitly stated about the original Elijah. Didn't he suffer? Isn't he known for being continually harassed by a wicked king and his even more wicked wife (1Kings 19:2,10)? If it happened to the original Elijah, why would we assume it wouldn't happen to the later Elijah? It makes perfect sense, and it's exactly what happened. Just as Elijah ran afoul of the king and especially the king's wife, exactly the same thing happened to John the Baptist. Elijah is the OT model for the suffering of God's spokesman at the hands of the wicked.

These Are the Days of Elijah

So was John's ministry mostly a failure? He came to restore hearts, most hearts weren't restored—that's a failure, right? It would be if it were over. Let me ask you this: What was John's message?

Matthew 3:1 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching ... 2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

Makes sense—he came to restore wayward hearts, so he called people to repentance. That message—it kind of sounds familiar, doesn't it? Where else have I heard about someone preaching a message like that? What happened after John got locked up?

Mathew 4:17 From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

How about that—the exact same message. Jesus took over John's ministry. And what did he do with it?

Mark 6:7 Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two ... 12 They went out and preached that people should repent.

Fast forward to the Day of Pentecost, after the ascension—opening day for the church when Peter preached his big sermon and 3000 people were saved, what was his message?

Acts 2:38 Peter replied, "Repent ... every one of you ... for the forgiveness of your sins."

⁴ The relationship between the two clauses is clarified by the recognition of the underlying μέν ... δέ construction (with καὶ πῶς, in Mar_9:12 b substituting for the δέ): on the one hand Elijah comes first to restore all things, but on the other hand the Scripture affirms that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected. It is necessary that all the Scripture be fulfilled, not only those passages concerning Elijah.

Acts 3:19 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.

Acts 20:21 I [Paul] have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

This is all stemming from John the Baptist's ministry.

Acts 13:16 ... Paul motioned with his hand and said: "Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! ... 24 Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel.

So Jesus picked up John's message, then he passed it on to the Apostles, and then what happened to it?

2 Timothy 2:2 And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.

It got passed on to us. I'm carrying out the work of John the Baptist right now. These are indeed the days of Elijah. Elijah's work of restoring people's hearts to prepare them for the Messiah is still ongoing. And it will keep going until the full number of the Gentiles have come in—and until the Jews say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" and all Israel is saved. Then the Son of Man will appear with his Father's glory with the holy angels and we will all see the kingdom of God come in power.

Expect Suffering

But for now, we are still carrying out Elijah's ministry—John the Baptist's ministry, and we can expect the same treatment at the hands of a hostile world that both Elijah and John the Baptist received. So we're right back the suffering aspect. God told the three to listen to Jesus. And what's the first thing Jesus tells them after God says that? The first thing Jesus talked about after the Transfiguration was the same thing he talked about right before the Transfiguration: the Son of man must be rejected and suffer greatly. The Transfiguration—the revelation of Christ's glory, is sandwiched between two announcements of his suffering.

And we understand now that when Jesus talks about his sufferings, that includes the necessity of suffering for all who follow him. As Paul says, we are "**heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory**" (Rom. 8:17).

The Hinge: Follow/Listen in Suffering and Glory

Mini Mark

Now, let me show you how this all fits together. I told you before there's a remarkable arrangement to this account. The statement from God is dead center with exactly 100 Greek words before it and 100 after. Now, can you think of anything else that has a structure like that—where the climax is right in the middle? The book as a whole, right? The first 8 chapters are part 1, the last 8 chapters are part 2, and in the center is the climax where Peter says, "You are the Christ," and Jesus says, "Okay, if I'm the Christ then how about you follow me? I'm going to suffer and die, if you want to be my follower then you have to follow on the path of suffering and death too." Then the Transfiguration.

Now look again at the Transfiguration account. What was the first half of the book of Mark about? Who Jesus is. What is the first half of the Transfiguration about? It reveals who Jesus is—shows his glory, he's the fulfillment of the OT, etc.

What about the second half of the book? It's all about Jesus' suffering and death. What about the second half of the Transfiguration account? It's all about Jesus' suffering and death.

And what about the middle climax? The middle of the book: “You are the Christ” and Jesus says, “Then follow me.” The middle of the Transfiguration: “This is my Son, so listen to him.” Follow Jesus because of who he is; listen to Jesus and obey him because of who he is. The whole Transfiguration account is miniature book of Mark.

And why is that important? For one thing, it puts even more emphasis on God’s statement. This section is the centerpiece of the whole book, and God’s statement is the centerpiece of the Transfiguration, so God’s statement is the center of the center. It’s the great hinge upon which everything swings.

The ideas of Christ coming in power and glory and the idea of Christ coming in weakness to suffer and die seem like a contradiction. But this hinge shows that they go together perfectly. And that’s a marvelous truth for us, because in our weakness, we need a powerful, glorious Savior who is transcendent above this whole creation. And, in our sin we need a suffering Savior who has been tempted in every way just as we are and who can sympathize with our weaknesses and will pay for our sin. We need all facets of our Savior and we share in all those facets.

Conclusion: Our Transfiguration

We share in his message, we share in his rejection and suffering, and we will share in his glory. Did you know we even share in his transfiguration? The word transfigured is used in two other places in the NT.

Romans 12:2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transfigured by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-- his good, pleasing and perfect will.

2 Corinthians 3:18 And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transfigured into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Jesus was not the only one transfigured. We share in his transfiguration. The more we behold his glory, the more we renew our minds by listening to him the right way, the more we join in his transfiguration and radiate his glory like a stick radiates the glory of a fire.

Review: Take Up Your Cross

And that’s why when Peter objected to the suffering, Jesus rebuked him harshly as having a satanic attitude and said, “You can’t be one of my followers without actually following me, which means you have to deny yourself and take up your cross.” That statement, “You are the Christ” imposes a claim on the one who says it.⁵ The price for making that statement is your life. Jesus called for absolute commitment, which is why you can’t take Christianity for a test drive. You can’t just try it out in a partial way because if you’re not 100% committed, you’re not trying it at all. Just like if a woman said, “I’ll give this marriage thing a try, but I’m not going to burn any bridges with my other boyfriend just in case I decide I don’t like it,” she isn’t really giving marriage a try at all. Crucifixion isn’t just something you try out as an experiment. If a kamikaze recruit says, “Yeah, I’ll try one of those suicide missions just to get a feel for it to see if I like it”—you know he doesn’t get the concept. We sing about surveying the wondrous cross, glorying in the cross, and clinging to the old rugged cross, which is great as long as we don’t forget what a cross is. We’ve made it into a decorative piece of jewelry. That would have been unimaginable back then for people who actually witnessed crucifixions. Someone said the cross is often worn but seldom borne—that’s true. But if you want to follow Christ, it must be borne. You can confess Christ until you’re blue in the face, but if you don’t follow him down the path of suffering, you’re not a

⁵ Edwards, 261.

Christian. But if you do follow him down that path and suffer with him, you will be transfigured with him and someday reign with him.