

Gospel of Mark: The Beginning of Victory

“These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.” – I Corinthians 10:11

We have come to the midpoint of Mark’s Gospel. Mark seems very conscious of balancing his account with events from the first chapter (or opening since he didn’t write in chapters) along with foreshadowings of the conclusion. Jesus’ instruction is repeatedly addressed to the disciples who struggle greatly here to understand what is going on.

I. The Second Pronouncement of the Father – Mark 9:1-13

- a. Jesus announces that “there are some standing here that will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power” (Mark 9:1). In fulfillment of this prophecy he brings three of his disciples with him to a high mountain where he is transfigured. In this event we see a number of parallels to the opening of the Gospel.
 1. the kingdom of God is being revealed – Mark 1:15; Mark 9:1
 2. Jesus calls disciples to accompany him – Mark 1:17; Mark 9:2
 3. God the Father’s voice is heard proclaiming him as the Beloved Son – Mark 1:11; Mark 9:7
 4. Jesus gives instructions that no one be told about him – Mark 1:34, 44; Mark 9:9
- b. There are a number of distinctive features about the Transfiguration itself
 1. Only Jesus is transfigured. His dazzling white clothes point forward to the angel at the tomb at the resurrection – Mark 16:5
 2. Elijah and Moses are present with Jesus as witnesses not as equals. Moses foretold the coming of a prophet like himself (Deuteronomy 18:15-19). Elijah was to come again “before the great and terrible day of the Lord” (Malachi 4:5).
 3. This entire scene is full of Old Testament parallels
 - a. Frequently in the Old Testament mountains have special significance. Moses encounters God at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:3). Ezekiel confronts the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (I Kings 18:19). Daniel has a vision of a “great mountain” (Daniel 2:35).
 - b. God often speaks from a cloud (Exodus 16:10; Exodus 19:9; Exodus 24:15-16; Exodus 33:1; Exodus 40:34-38; Numbers 9:15-22; I Kings 8:10-11; Isaiah 4:5).
 - c. Jesus’ reference to Elijah having come and “they did to him whatever they pleased” is a somber reference to the continuation of the story of Elijah in John the Baptist (Mark 9:11-13). In the Old Testament the evil queen Jezebel tries to kill Elijah and fails. Yet her New Testament counterpart, Herodias does succeed in killing John the Baptist (Mark 6:17-29). This will be seen as another foreshadow of Jesus’ own suffering in leading to the restoration of all things (Mark 9:12, 31).
 4. Peter’s mistake is in suggesting that Jesus can be put on an equal standing with the two great prophets. Only Jesus is God’s Beloved Son. Peter is in effect going backwards to the prophets and not seeing the full reality of Jesus as the fulfillment of the law (Mark 9:5; II Peter 1:16-18).

II. Jesus casts out a fierce demon – Mark 9:14-29

- a. As in the first chapter there is a major casting out of a demon (Mark 1:21-27). This demon is especially fierce and the disciples cannot cast it out. The boy has been afflicted from childhood (Mark 9:21) and he can neither hear nor speak and is assaulted by the demon (Mark 9:17-18, 25).
- b. Jesus again expresses his frustration with the lack of faith on the part of the disciples (Mark 9:19). The disciples bring the demon possessed boy to Jesus (Mark 9:20).
- c. The father, understandably distraught, and faced with the failure of the disciples, asks Jesus to help if he is able (Mark 9:22).
- d. Jesus replies that “All things can be done for the one who believes” (Mark 9:23).
- e. The father in a famous response cries out, “I believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24).
- f. Jesus in the act of exorcism restores the boy’s hearing and speech. The boy appears to be dead. Jesus raises him up using the same verb that will describe his own rising from the dead (Mark 9:25-27).
- g. The disciples ask why they failed to cast out the demon. Jesus replies that “this kind,” i.e. a severe form of evil, can only come out through prayer (the reference to fasting is apparently a later addition to the text). Jesus does not need to pray in this case. The disciples do (Mark 9:29).

III. The Continuing Struggle of the Disciples – Mark 9:30-49

- a. Jesus foretells his own death and resurrection. This has been implied through all the events of this chapter. The disciples continue to not understand and they are afraid to ask Jesus about it (Mark 9:30-32).
- b. Arriving in Capernaum Jesus confronts them with their arguing over who among them was the greatest (so much for following Jesus’ instruction to focus on prayer!) Using the example of a child Jesus teaches them a much needed lesson in humility: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:33-37).
- c. The next exchange shows the disciples at their most clueless.
 - i. John (no less) tells Jesus how they tried to stop someone from casting out demons in Jesus’ name “because he was not following us.” The irony here is that they’re trying to stop someone from doing the very thing they could not do. (Mark 9:38).
 - ii. Jesus once again rebukes them (Mark 9:39). Jesus here seems to be speaking about those who do “a deed of power in my name.” This seems very broad as is the statement that anyone who gives them a cup of water because you bear the name of Christ “will by no means lose the reward.” Broader still is the statement, “Whoever is not against us is for us” (Mark 9:38-41). This all suggests that those who belong to Christ include a number of those outside the company of the disciples. In John 10:16 Jesus speaks of having “other sheep.” Some regard this as Gentile believers but it may be broader than that (cf. Matthew 25:31-46).

- d. Following these broad statements Jesus gives a stern warning which arises from the possibility of being a stumbling block to “one of these little ones who believe in me” “Stumble” here really means “to make to sin” so one can appreciate the severity of the warning (Mark 9:42-48; Romans 14:13-21; II Corinthians 11:29).
- e. Jesus concludes this discourse speaking of salt. Salt both preserves and gives flavor. If it loses this flavor (or “saltiness”) it has no advantage. The image of fire has the sense of judgment or purging (Malachi 3:2; Matthew 3:11-12). Yet this will lead to peace. The idea here is that if we purge away the chaff or impurities in our lives we will be able to “be at peace with one another” (Mark 9:49-50).

Questions for us –

1. What do you think Mark is trying to communicate by having references both to the beginning and the ending of his Gospel at this midpoint in his narrative?
2. Peter consistently seems to want to go backwards in his faith (even to calling Jesus a Rabbi (Mark 9:5; Acts 10:1-16; Galatians 2:11-14). It’s as though he’s reverting to the faith of a child in an inappropriate way by going back to the Law. Why do you think this is? Is this a tendency we fall into as well?
3. What is the meaning of “I believe, help my unbelief?”
4. The disciples are unable to rebuke a demon so they rebuke someone who casts out demons in Jesus’ name. Huh!? They argue among themselves as to which of them is the greatest. They don’t understand Jesus’ repeated statements of his death and resurrection and they’re even afraid to ask him. Why do you think they have such great difficulty in making sense of Jesus and his message? What about us as disciples today?
5. What do you think Jesus means by saying, “Whoever is not against us is for us?”
6. What are examples of salt for us today? How can we have both fire and peace?