

Our passage today forms the center point of Mark’s gospel.

The geographical movement of Mark’s gospel reaches its northernmost point at Caesarea Philippi far in the north.

From here it will move relentlessly southward until the conclusion in Jerusalem.

The Transfiguration will be the “highest” point vertically as well, as Jesus takes his disciples up a high mountain.

Even as the ministries of Moses and Elijah were centered on events on high mountains, so also the ministry of Jesus.

And here at the center of the gospel of Mark, the central question is “Who do you say that I am?”

Who *is* Jesus?

How you answer that question will set the trajectory for everything else that you do.

1. “You Are the Christ” (8:27-30)

27 And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi.

And on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”

28 And they told him, “John the Baptist;

and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.”

Some were saying that Jesus was the resurrection of John the Baptist.

Others thought he was Elijah or one of the prophets.

Why?

Because Jesus talks and acts like a prophet.

When you look back at the OT, Jesus looks most like one of the prophets of old.

He certainly does not look like a priest or a king –

and for that matter, if you think in terms of Jewish expectation, he does not even look that much like Moses.

He is doing nothing that would lead anyone to expect

that he is about to deliver Israel from their enemies –

because they think that their enemies are the Romans.

29 And he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.”

30 And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

Popular ideas about the identity of the “Christ” suggested a deliverer

who would bring national liberation as well as spiritual restoration.

But Jesus has no interest in being identified with this popular notion of the Messiah,
and so he commands them not to reveal that he is Messiah.

And then he begins to instruct them about the true identity and purpose of the Messiah.
Peter has understood that Jesus is the Christ,
but Peter does not yet understand what that means!

Who do you say that I am?
All of you, no doubt, know the right answer.
Most of you could probably do pretty well on Bible knowledge exam.

Don't get cocky!
Peter knew all the right answers, too!

But it is not enough to "get the right answer."
It is not enough to "know stuff."

2. Who Is the Christ? (8:31-33)

*31 And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things
and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed,
and after three days rise again.*

32 And he said this plainly.

This is the first time that Jesus has spoken of his death and resurrection.

He will say it again in 9:31 and 10:33-34

Mark's account differs slightly from Matthew and Luke:

Mark uses the active verb *anistemi* not *egeiro*

It is not that the Son "is raised" (passive)
but rather that the Son "rises again"
(implying a certain activity of the Son)

Matthew and Luke speak of the Father raising the Son,
but in Mark the Son of Man will have the last word.

We are used to this today.

We understand that the Messiah had to suffer.

But the disciples did not.

And you need to realize that *they* had the entire weight of biblical tradition behind them.
After all, remember Moses?

Sure, Moses went through some rough spots,
but through Moses God humiliated Pharaoh and delivered his people.

And Joshua?

Joshua only has a few speed bumps along the highway to the Conquest!

David endured years of exile and tribulation,
but then God used him to cast down the Philistines and establish the Kingdom.

So Israel was primed and ready for a Messiah who might endure a few setbacks –
a Messiah who would be disciplined by God and prepared for glory.
Trial and tribulation was viewed as the way in which God prepared his people for glorious battle.

But Jesus says that they have missed the point.
The point is that the suffering of the Messiah *is* the battle.

Death is not the triumph of the opposition
but the triumph of God

And so Jesus takes the figure of the Son of Man and turns it on its head.
In Daniel, the Son of Man is a triumphant figure.
After he overthrows his enemies he comes in glory and triumph
to the right hand of the Ancient of Days.

But Jesus says that the Son of Man comes in glory and triumph – *only through death*.

And this is too much for Peter!

*And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.
33 But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said,
“Get behind me, Satan!
For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”*

The last time we heard of Satan he was tempting Jesus in the wilderness (Mark 1).
Jesus says that now Peter is acting like Satan –
he is tempting Jesus to turn away from the path that God has set for him.

Peter, you are thinking in human terms.
You are thinking about the kingdom of God
as though the kingdom of God was an earthly kingdom.

You cannot bring the kingdom of God through the methods of earthly kingdoms!
Far too often the church has sought to bring the kingdom of God by earthly means.
We think in terms of “demographics” –
and we try to develop strategies of “reaching people” by certain techniques.
But that’s not the way the gospel works.

The gospel is that Jesus has suffered and died and rose again on the third day.
And the kingdom of God comes through the preaching of that gospel –
a good news that comes through death and resurrection –
a good news whose power is the cross – a device of torture and cruelty.

So what does it mean to “set your mind on the things of God”?
What is the right way to seek first the Kingdom of God?

It is really interesting to see how Jesus does this:
after saying “get behind me, Satan” to Peter in verse 33,

he says once again, “get behind me” in verse 34.

It is the exact same phrase: “opiso mou” in both verses.

If you would set your mind on the things of God,
get behind Jesus.
Do not try to get in front of him!
Get behind Jesus.

3. What It Means to Follow the Christ (8:34-9:1)

*34 And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them,
“If anyone would come after me,
let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*

So often we read this and we “translate it” into something like:
“if anyone would come after me, let him be self-controlled,
and endure hardship patiently and follow Jesus.”

That is *not* what this means.
This is *not* a call to strenuous moral exertion.
Jesus is *not* saying, “just try harder!”

There is no worse way to turn the call of the gospel into a mere moralistic rant!

Do not domesticate this!
Take up your cross did not mean then, and does not mean now,
“bear hardship patiently.”
It means
that you
must die.

“Deny yourself” does not mean “giving up chocolate for Lent.”
It means denying the self itself.
It means “stop setting your mind on the things of man.”
It means “stop trusting in the power and wisdom of man.”
“Take up your cross” does not mean “endure difficulty.”
It means “come and die!”

And “follow me” means simply this:
Jesus is not asking you to do anything that he did not do first!

Get behind me.
Come after me.

When Jesus bids a man to follow him
he bids him, “come and die.”

In the latter part of Mark’s gospel you can see the alternative:

Deny yourself
(instead, Peter will deny Jesus)
Take up your cross
(instead, Peter will hide from the cross)
Follow me
(instead, Peter will flee)

If you have any doubt that this is what Jesus means,
just look at his next words in verses 35-37

Please understand that whenever you see the word “life” or the word “soul”
it is the same Greek word (psuche).

This one Greek word has a double meaning,
and Jesus is playing off that double meaning here!
(so I will read it with the word “life” in all instances)

*35 For whoever would save his life will lose it,
but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.
36 For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?
37 For what can a man give in return for his life?*

You cannot translate it “soul” in every case,
because then verse 35 makes no sense:
“whoever would save his soul will lose it,
but whoever loses his soul for my sake...”?!
But at the same time, the modern sense of “life” doesn’t work easily either.

Plainly, “life” means more than just the temporary duration of our earthly sojourn.

Jesus is working off the discussion of the value of a life in Psalm 49:7-9.
“Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life,
for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice,
that he should live on forever and never see the pit.”

Psalm 49 goes on to point out that “even the wise die;
the fool and the stupid alike must perish and leave their wealth to others.” (v10)

Death comes to all.
And yet Psalm 49:15 says that “God will ransom my life from the power of Sheol.”

In other words, Jesus is saying,
Do you not understand that the final enemy is not Rome?
If I deliver Israel from the Romans, there will be another Rome!

The greater Exodus – the great deliverance from Exile –
is the great deliverance from Death and the Grave.
Jesus has come to do battle with Sin, Death, and the Devil.

He has come as the deliverer who will ransom his people from their enemies –
but the enemies that he will conquer are far, far more powerful
than Rome could ever pretend to be!

And therefore, Jesus says,

*38 For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation,
of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed
when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”*

Usually we think of v38 in terms of the second coming.
But when does the Son of Man come in the glory of his Father with the holy angels?
The Son of Man comes in the glory of his Father
when he ascends to the right hand of God.
The point is that if you are ashamed of Christ on earth,
then he will be ashamed of you before the Father *NOW* (as well as later).

What makes this generation “adulterous and sinful”?
It is adulterous and sinful because it has set its mind on earthly things.
It really doesn’t matter what earthly things.
If you set your mind on *any* earthly things,
then you are adulterous and sinful.

And Jesus bids you come and die.
Deny yourself – turn away from those things!
Take up your cross – come and die!
Follow Jesus!

He does not mean “try harder.”
He means “come and die”!

Are you ashamed of Jesus?
Are you embarrassed by his radical, uncompromising words on the reality of hell?
Do you really believe that everyone you meet is either heading toward heaven or hell?
and that your interaction with them is either helping them towards one
or towards the other?
I’m not suggesting that you should become that annoying person

who is constantly trying to “evangelize” their colleagues.

But I am saying that you need to have a clear picture of what you are really doing in life.

You are always making disciples –
the question is, whose disciples are you making?

Jesus’ disciples, however, are in no position to be making disciples for Jesus yet.
They still need to see the power of the Kingdom.

9:1 And he said to them,

*“Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death
until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.”*

Plainly Mark intends us to see the Transfiguration as the primary fulfillment of this.

But only some (three) would see the Transfiguration.

John will also see the glorious vision of the Apocalypse.

But if you want to understand what it means for the kingdom of God to come with power,
the Transfiguration is crucial,
because the *power* of the kingdom is not an earthly power.

The power of the kingdom is resurrection power.

4. The Kingdom of God Comes with Power (9:2-13)

*2 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John,
and led them up a high mountain by themselves.*

“Six days” indicates that Mark is connecting this very explicitly with what came before.

It also suggests a parallel to Exodus 24,
where the glory of the LORD covered the mountain after six days.

And he was transfigured before them,

3 and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them.

4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus.

5 And Peter said 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 For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

Elijah and Moses were both associated with high mountains.

So when Peter sees Moses and Elijah, he babbles about building tents.

But you can how far short Peter comes in his understanding.

Just a few verses ago he was calling Jesus the Christ.

Now he calls him “Rabbi” – “teacher” –

plainly missing the point of all that Jesus has said.

And as if to correct him...

*7 And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud,
“This is my beloved Son; listen to him.”*

8 And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.

The cloud reminds us of the glory-cloud that led Israel through the wilderness
and settled on the top of Mt. Sinai.

Now the glory-cloud settles on the top of the Mountain where Jesus is.

There are three figures on the top of the mountain when the cloud comes –
but after the voice speaks, there is only One.

In other words, Moses and Elijah both must give way to Jesus.

“This is my beloved Son” – Jesus is not merely a prophet.

His is a divine sonship.

He is the Son of God.

And therefore the voice of the LORD says,

“listen to him!”

Moses had told Israel to listen to the prophet that would come after him (Dt. 18:15).

Now God says, “this is it!”

*9 And as they were coming down the mountain,
he charged them to tell no one what they had seen,
until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.*

*10 So they kept the matter to themselves,
questioning what this rising from the dead might mean.*

Why are they puzzled about the resurrection?

Because it sounds like Jesus is saying that he will be restored to life.

Jewish theology debated the question of a future resurrection and eternal life

(Pharisees said yes, Sadducees said no),

but all of this debate had to do with the end of history.

This would be very confusing to the disciples.

The resurrection is supposed to be something that happens at the end of history,

but Jesus is talking as though he is the only one who will be raised.

What they don't understand –

and what you *must* understand –

is that the death and resurrection of Jesus means that the end of history has come.

The final judgment *has happened* – to Jesus.

Jesus has endured the last days wrath of God.

And therefore, all those who are united to Christ by faith
pass through death – and the final judgment –
and are united to his resurrection life!

But they don't get it yet, and so...

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

12 And he said to them, "Elijah does come first to restore all things.

*And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things
and be treated with contempt?*

*13 But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased,
as it is written of him."*

In Malachi 4 the reappearance of Elijah means the coming of the Day of the LORD.
And so the disciples ask how that fits with the mission and ministry of Jesus?

Jesus says that it is true – and that Elijah has already come (John the Baptist)

Conclusion: the Power of the Kingdom

Paul reflects on this in 1 Corinthians 1.

The church in Corinth was divided.

Each faction had aligned itself with a "great leader" –
whether Paul, Apollos, Peter, or "Christ"!

And Paul rebukes them for missing the point of the gospel.

The point of the gospel is not about leadership or wisdom or great preachers.

The point of the gospel is the cross.

As Paul says in 1:18

"the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing,
but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

The power of the Kingdom is the Cross of Jesus.

Greeks seek wisdom – but Paul would not give them what they sought.

Jews demands signs – but Paul (like Jesus) refused to give them signs.

Rather, "we preach Christ crucified." (1:22-24)

The final judgment – the end of history – has come upon Jesus.

Therefore, if you would live – if you would get behind Jesus –

then you need to deny yourself (turn away from this age and its ways)

take up your cross and follow Jesus.

In other words,

you must die.

Death is the only path to life.

The Cross is the only way to glory.

This is the point that Hebrews 2 makes when it says,

*5 Now it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come,
of which we are speaking.*

6 It has been testified somewhere,

*“What is man, that you are mindful of him,
or the son of man, that you care for him?”*

*7 You made him for a little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned him with glory and honor,*

8 putting everything in subjection under his feet.”

*Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control.
At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him.*

*9 But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels,
namely Jesus,*

*crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death,
so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*

You, too, can see the glory of the Transfiguration!

You, too, can see the resurrected Jesus in glory!

You can see the coming of the Kingdom with power,
because by faith you see Jesus seated at the right hand of the Father.

By faith you have been united to his death –
so that you have passed through death to life.

And as we have been united to him in his death –

that union has two fruits:

there is the legal fruit of justification,
whereby the guilt of sin has been dealt with.

Your sins have been forgiven
and you have been declared righteous in Christ.

And there is the transformative fruit of sanctification,
whereby the power of sin has been dealt with.

You are a new man – you are alive in Christ.
And every time sin rears its ugly head,
you are to put it to death.

And so as you hear the call to discipleship,

“deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me,”

you have confidence that you *have* died,
and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

I am crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live,
but Christ who lives in me.

You have passed through death to life –
therefore, be who you are in Christ!