

The Curse of Unbelief

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[0 : 00] Keep your Bibles open to Mark chapter 9 and there should be an outline as well to follow along. A boss, some CEO of a company, probably like of a burger chain or something, going undercover and working as a pleb at some far-flung outlet of their empire.

And you know, what they'd be doing is taking out the trash, scrubbing the pots, that kind of stuff. And the aim was to gain insights into the working conditions of these employees so as to see if there are things that could be improved.

And always at the end there's this surprise reveal, you know, he's now back in his suit and you know, expensive Rolex watch or whatever. And then there is a surprise reveal where the unsuspecting but hard-working employees come in.

And often there's a teary story of some sort and they end up getting some life-changing reward. Whether, you know, free college education for all their kids or free trip to Disneyland or something like that.

Well, as we resume our series in Mark's Gospel, we come to a key event that is commonly referred to as the Transfiguration. Some of you may have heard it before. But for me, I would think of it more so as the day in which Jesus, the undercover God, reveals himself to humans.

[1 : 47] Although it's just to Peter, James and John. So let's get into it and see what we can learn from it. Verse 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. 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.

Now, for many years, my image of this scene was very much influenced by the Renaissance painters, you know, when you go to some European museum. So I've got one here like Raphael.

Yes. There's another one. Giordano, Lucas Giordano, I think. And you can see, as you can see, and many more such as these. What they always do is paint Jesus with Moses and Elijah.

Suspended in the sky while the disciples were always down below. But if you look at these verses, I'm not sure that that's actually an accurate description, is it?

[2 : 51] We read that Jesus led the disciples up the mountain and then was transfigured while among them. And then we have Elijah and Moses appear, maybe from the sky.

But it seems then that Jesus was actually more already, was already with the disciples when Moses and Elijah appeared, right? Now, it may seem like, why am I quibbling about all this?

But what I'm trying to say is that I think it conveys that Jesus did not need to go to heaven in order to be transfigured. Because he was already glorious all the time that he was on earth.

Only that he kept it undercover, hidden, and then now unveiled, if only for a glimpse, to his disciples.

And so really, the picture is not accurate in the sense that it's not Jesus, Moses, and Elijah on the one hand, and the disciples on the other.

[3 : 53] Jesus was distinct from everyone else, including Moses and Elijah. The contrast is between God and humanity. Jesus, even though he's human, is God undercover.

God in human form. Everyone else is merely human, right? Now, why did, then some people ask, why is it Moses and Elijah?

And often the connection is, oh, it's the law and the prophets, right? Moses is the law giver. Elijah is the first among the prophets. I think though that that's something a bit more significant that is going on here.

And that is that Moses and Elijah are the two people in the Old Testament who encountered the Lord on a high mountain. In both cases, you go and read the passages, the Lord appears to them and passes them by.

Because the glory was too much for them to actually face God. So, God passed them by as they were hiding in the rock or whatever. For Moses, it was in Exodus on Mount Sinai.

[4 : 59] For Elijah, it was Mount Horeb in 1 Kings. But actually, Sinai and Horeb are actually just two names for the same mountain. They're actually the same place.

Now, there's no suggestion that the disciples here are on Mount Sinai. But you can see the parallels, can't you? The big difference, of course, is that God is now appearing in glory in the person of Jesus.

But what is common is that whenever God appears, whether it's Moses, Elijah or now, he speaks. And that's about to happen again. God the Father will speak, but so will Jesus.

Now, Peter being Peter, if you know Peter, he's naturally confused. He probably thought he died and went to heaven or whatever. And so, he says, Rabbi, it's great to be here.

Let's put up some shelters. One for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. But then, note what Mark adds as straight after. He says, he did not know what to say. They were so frightened.

[6 : 04] What that means is, Peter had no clue, basically. But in fear, blurts out the first thing that comes to mind. You know, maybe he wanted to prolong the moment. And so, he said, let's make some shelters so that Jesus, Moses, and Elijah can stay here for a while.

You know, mountain top glamping kind of thing, maybe. But God now interjects to give his word, verse 7. Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from heaven.

This is my son whom I love. Listen to him. And God now here confirms Jesus' identity. That he is my son whom he loves.

Now, this declaration, if you go back all the way to the start of Mark's Gospel, is the same as the one that happened at Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. There is one difference that we'll get to.

But the phrase there, this is my son, is repeated. And that in itself is a reference to Old Testament prophecies. One key passage is Psalm 2, verse 6, where God installs his son as king on Mount Zion.

[7 : 14] And here again, Mount Zion is another mountain top, isn't it? And so, while Jesus is like Moses and Elijah, a prophet, he's more than a prophet.

He's God's son, loved by the Father above all else. Now, the phrase that changes is the one in the second half, isn't it? Because instead of saying, in whom I am pleased, what happens is that there is now an instruction which says, listen to him.

And here we get another connection back to the Old Testament, which is that Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 18, I think I forgot to put the verse on the slide. Is that right, Doris? Yeah, okay. So, if you want to turn to it, it's page 194 on your Bibles.

If you look at it, Deuteronomy chapter 18, verse 15. What we read there is that Moses said that the Lord your God will raise up for you, that is in the future, a prophet like me, from among you, from your fellow Israelites.

And then, notice what he then says at the end of verse 15. You must listen to him. That is, that's exactly what Jesus, now God says about Jesus in the transfiguration.

[8 : 34] So, Moses, therefore, is saying there's going to be another prophet like me. I'm the type and, you know, sorry, Jesus is going to be a type of me. And he will be another prophet.

And then, you must listen to him. And God confirms this now in the transfiguration by saying, listen to him. Now, there is one more passage and that is in Malachi chapter 4.

Because there, it also says this, and I've got this on the slide, thankfully. Yep. It says in verse 4 of chapter 4, Remember the law of Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb, which is Mount Sinai, for all Israel.

And then, he goes on to say, See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the hearts of the children to their parents.

Or else, I will come and strike the land with total destruction. And so, what we have here in Malachi 4, in the one place, is the same two prophets that have just appeared.

[9 : 36] Side by side, in the same passage. Both a pointer to Jesus as the fulfillment of these prophecies. Now, I'll say a bit more about Elijah in a while when we get to verse 12.

But, let's just finish up what happens on the mountain top. Because, in verse 8, we find that no sooner has the transfiguration occurred, that it ends. And, Jesus heads down the mountain with the disciples.

But, the thing we are to take away, apart from that Jesus is the Son of God, is God's command to us. That is, we need to heed God telling us, listen to Him.

Listen to Jesus. And so, if you look at the rest of the passage, there will be times that Jesus is speaking. And so, from there, we will have three lessons from Jesus, which we are to listen carefully to and obey.

So, per your outline, lesson one, and this is the second point now. Lesson one is now in verses 9 to 13. Let's read it. So, Jesus' aim is to remain undercover until His day of glory, which is His death.

[11 : 00] And, Peter, James, and John are happy to obey. But, they are confused. They are not sure what this rising from the dead is all about. Because, after all, they have just seen Jesus in all His glory.

So, what is this about Him then, now going to die and rising from it? But, the disciples, I think, clearly have Malachi's prophecy in mind. Because, what they ask is, why does Elijah have to come first?

So, Elijah has just appeared and then he goes, oh, is this about Malachi? Elijah coming. And, Jesus' reply then is where we get our first lesson, verse 12.

He said, 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 wish, just as it is written about him.

So, we need to work out what Jesus is trying to say here. And, the first thing, of course, is to say, who is this Elijah that Jesus is talking about? Right? I would say he is not the one that just appeared on the mountain because he lived before Malachi.

[12:08] And, he has come and he has gone. Rather, the Elijah that Malachi was speaking of, and Jesus is now going to speak of, was a type or a pointer.

Right? Someone who points forward to a person that would follow. It's a bit like how Moses was pointing forward to the prophets in Deuteronomy 18. Well, Elijah is doing the same.

And, I believe here that Elijah was pointing to both Jesus and John the Baptist. Okay? I'll explain that a bit more in a while. But, I think the first mention is Elijah of Elijah.

Elijah does come first. That first reference is actually a reference to Christ. Why? Because it says that Elijah restores all things. And, we know that only Jesus can do this.

And, the message that the latter day Elijah, the Elijahs that come after the first, would preach is that of Malachi 4, verse 6. That is, preach a message to restore relationships between children and fathers and, you know, parents and children.

[13:15] In other words, restoration, which in the Gospel of Mark, only comes with repentance. And, if you go all the way back to the start of Mark's Gospel, that is the exact message that both John and then later Jesus preached.

For, Jesus said, repent, for the kingdom of God is near. So, Jesus was to preach a message of repentance. So, was John, in order that restoration then can occur.

But, whereas John was only the messenger, Jesus preaches and then fulfills what is preached. Right? And, what he, how he fulfills what is preached is by rising from the dead.

That's why you get the question straight after the restores all things. Then, Jesus says, why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer and be rejected? He's saying that, in order for things to be restored, the Son of Man must suffer and be rejected.

Now, if you look around the world and you see all the brokenness, you know, between countries, it often breaks out into war. Between people groups like the Jews and the Palestinians.

[14:30] Or, between indigenous and migrant citizens even in our country. Or, in a marriage, a breakdown between husband and wife, family feuds. Or, even sometimes, sadly, in the church, conflict.

Well, if you look at all these cases, whenever there is brokenness, there is always a disagreement, isn't it?

As to who's right and who's wrong. And then, sometimes, it degenerates into violence. But, at some point, where there is wrong done, and usually there is lots, peace and restoration can only be achieved when repentance and forgiveness occurs.

Right? Whether it's Ukraine and Russia, Jews and Palestinians, or between brothers and sisters in Christ. Hurts and wrongs have to be left behind eventually.

Now, of course, there's a place for justice, proper punishment and restitution and all that. But, there is a limit, isn't there? Because, no amount of punishment or restitution will bring back someone's life wrongly taken.

[15:38] Or, repay the years of grief and trauma that has been caused by sin. Restoration of relationships involves forgiveness.

So, if we're in the wrong, then definitely we need to own up. Repent and seek forgiveness. But, the other side also has to forgive in order for there to be restoration.

And, how much more then, if the restoration that we're speaking of is between God and humanity? Except that with God, God's not just the only one that is willing to offer forgiveness.

Because, in the last part of this, He actually provides for the restoration as well. By giving His Son, who has never sinned, to pay the price of His death. To ensure justice is done, so that we can be restored with God.

So, our response then, when God has offered all this, is to say sorry, isn't it? To repent, to look to His Son, Jesus, and His death as the provision to restoring our relationship with Him.

[16:49] That's the wonderful gift that God has given to us through Jesus. And yet, Jesus now goes on to lament and warn that many will choose to reject this.

Wonderful this gift though it may be. Some will choose to persecute and kill the messengers. So, the second reference then, to Elijah by Jesus, is actually that of John the Baptist, who has come.

Right? Just as the original Elijah was hounded by Jezebel, so John the Baptist was imprisoned and beheaded by another ruler, Herod.

And sadly, so will the ultimate Elijah, that is, Jesus, the Son of Man, when He goes to the cross. But remember what Malachi then said would come after Elijah.

Right? If you go back to Malachi, it says, The dreadful day of the Lord will come for those who reject Him. And so, the first lesson from Jesus is really, we need to repent to be saved, to be restored.

[17:53] We need to listen to Him and respond or else, the dreadful day of the Lord will come upon us. Well, that's the first lesson. The second is in the second scene, verse 14 and onwards.

So, what happens now is that they come down from the mountain, and they see the other disciples arguing with the teachers of the law amongst a large crowd. And when they see Jesus, they rush to Him because, as it will become clear, they've actually been talking about Jesus.

And now they think that He can solve the problem. So, resuming in verse 16, I'm going to read the entire incident, and then I just want to focus on one thing. So, Jesus says,

Everything is possible for one who believes. Immediately, the boy's father exclaimed, I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief.

And when Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, He rebuked the spirit. You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again. The spirit shrieked, convulsed violently, and came out.

[19:58] The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, he's dead. But Jesus took him by the hand, lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. He stood up. Now, as I said, I'm not going to focus on the exorcism because I think that's merely the context.

Rather, the real lesson here is about the nature of faith or belief. And the key verse is actually number 23. And that's where we find our second lesson, which says, Everything is possible for one who believes, for the one who believes.

And I filled it out a bit more to say everything is possible, including salvation, for the one who believes in Jesus. Because even more challenging than driving out demons is our salvation.

Because that can only be restored by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus, you know, it's not just Jesus' power, it's actually Jesus' own sacrifice.

And of course, that requires God's power as well. That will achieve that, and faith in him. Thus, believing in Jesus is actually important. That is the object of our faith.

[21:06] Jesus is not saying here that, as long as you believe, you can believe whatever you like, and it will happen. No. He is the object of faith. That's why we ask to listen to him, and him alone.

And then believe in him, and him alone. Now, all this was brought on because the disciples failed, didn't they, to drive out the Spirit. They were doing it, I think, I think they must have tried everything, right?

They probably used Jesus' name, tried all sorts of various methods, but they failed. And so the people are now turning to Jesus to ask, you know, why are your disciples so lousy, if you're so powerful?

And Jesus' first response is what, in verse 19? He actually rebukes them, isn't he? He says, you unbelieving generation. And what he's saying then is that the underlying issue really is your faith.

And here, generation means everyone. Disciples, crowd, teachers of the law, and even the Father. So the problem here is not that the disciples lack power.

[22:10] It's not like Jesus was not there and therefore couldn't do it. It was not even their method. It was their lack of faith. And you sense Jesus' despair, isn't it, in verse 23?

If you can, I mean, what do you mean by that? Of course I can. Everything is possible if you believe in me. Now, the man here appeals to Jesus to say, have pity on us.

But Jesus did not heal him on that basis, isn't it? Because if Jesus healed him just out of pity, the man would have been passive.

He would have not needed to do anything. But Jesus demanded something more, didn't he? Something active. He said, have faith in me.

Right? And so within this context, this is not just a promise from Jesus that if you believe in him, your wishes will all come true. Rather, Jesus is making the point to this man to realize that if you know who I am, the Son of God, you will believe in me.

[23:21] Right? You don't need heaps of faith. All you need to do is believe in me. Because as the Son of God, I can do anything in accordance with the Father's will.

And then, look at the man's response in verse 24. He exclaims immediately in desperation, I do believe. Or I think more accurately, I want to believe.

Help me overcome my unbelief. Now, friends, this is a very honest response from the man, don't you think? Because I'm sure we face many situations in our own lives where actually we want to believe, we desire to believe, but we struggle to believe, don't we?

For some of us, it's even working out whether Christianity is true or not. For others, it's, you know, has God forgotten me in my hour of need? But consider this.

How often is your response then to ask God to overcome your unbelief? Because often we think that, oh, if we can't believe, then, oh, well, I just have to walk away.

[24:29] I have to go and look for something else to solve my problems. We stop asking God. We stop praying. We never ask God to give us the faith that we lack.

But this man looks to Jesus and asks for the faith that he lacked. Because even faith is a gift from God, isn't it? Which we need to overcome our unbelief.

And ironically, what has just happened when the man has asked Jesus for faith? He has just exercised faith in Jesus, hasn't he? So, friends, whatever your faith struggle is currently, ask God to overcome your unbelief.

Don't just ask God to do this for me or take that away from me or whatever. Ask for the faith to believe God and that his will for you is the best, whatever that may be.

And then to step out in that faith. That is what it means for you to overcome your unbelief. Which brings us to the third lesson. And that is that prayer is the expression of our faith and dependence on God.

[25:33] So, it's after the healing that the disciples are still perplexed. They're saying, hey, Jesus, why can't we do this? What did we do wrong? So, in verse 28, Jesus had gone indoors.

His disciples asked him privately, why couldn't we drive it out? And then he replied, this kind can come out only by prayer. Now, again, I don't want to focus as if there are different kinds of spirits, you know.

These ones come out by prayer. These ones don't need to come out by prayer. Because that's again the side point. Because the main point really is about prayer. But firstly, notice, did Jesus himself pray before he healed?

Answer? Thank you. Do you agree with Jeff? Jesus didn't pray, did he?

Why is that? Is he saying that this kind can only come out by prayer, but I don't have to pray? Why not? Well, Jesus did not need to pray because he has the power himself to drive out that demon.

[26 : 41] And the spirits recognized it. But for the disciples and for the rest of us, prayer is a demonstration of our dependence on him, on God.

So, prayer actually is more important than using God's name or Jesus' name. Or for us here at Holy Trinity, it's more important than quoting the right Bible verse.

Or having a special spiritual gift. Prayer recognizes where the true power lies. And because the disciples were prayerless, it betrayed an attitude of self-sufficiency.

You know, as long as we use Jesus' name, you know, we've got this, God. We don't need you. We don't need to rely on your strength.

But when we pray, what we're saying is that God, we're actually helpless without you. Prayer is, in one sense, the purest form of dependence, isn't it? Because when you pray, you're sitting there, you're just asking God, you're not even doing anything to help yourself achieve or answer that prayer.

[27 : 49] Right? Of course, God would then say, yep, go and do this, go and do that after that. But at its very core, when we pray, we are saying, God, you need to do this. And you know, we get this instinctively, don't we?

Like, if you go back to your growth groups and you look at the prayer lists that you have, the kind of items that you put on the prayer list, it's those things that you find hard to do by yourself, isn't it?

Finding a job, you know, getting well from sickness, when you're puking, that kind of stuff. Trying to, if you're married and trying to have children, these are the things we know we need to rely on God for.

Right? But when we don't pray, it's often because subconsciously we think we don't need God. Right? Now, I'm not saying that that means you never do anything but pray, we need to get to stuff as well.

Right? But it's the habit of prayer that cultivates dependence on God. That shapes our posture and our mindset for living life generally. Because our challenge is to see that our dependence on God is not just in those usual things like health, safety, exam results, but actually, we need God for everything.

[29 : 01] To realize that every breath we take, every minute of our life, even the things we think we're capable of, nothing is achieved except by the power of God. I'll give you an example of myself.

I know not many of you are parents, but for me, parenting is about, you know, when we lack trust in God, parenting can very easily verge into controlling our children.

Right? Maybe you've been experiencing that in your own lives as children, but, you know, we want them to be safe. Helicopter parenting, yep. We don't let them go out, you know, too dangerous, all that kind of stuff.

But, at the heart of that, what's that saying? It's saying that actually we are in control, isn't it? That we can protect them from every bad thing in life, which is, of course, stupid, isn't it?

Yes, we do need to supervise them, tell them that there are things, risks out there that they should be aware of. But, ultimately, the only thing, really, that we should do is pray, isn't it?

[30 : 04] I mean, not the only thing, but the thing that we ought to do when we sense that we need God to protect them is to pray, isn't it? Because we know that just as with our own lives, so with the lives of those we love, we're actually not in control, right?

God is. Now, that's me as a parent, but I'm sure that all sorts of examples in your own life, where instead of worrying and controlling, really, the thing we should do is pray.

Because prayer is our acknowledgement that actually we are deeply dependent on God. And we want God to work in order to ensure His goodwill for us.

Friends, as the title says, unbelief is really a curse. We know this in life generally, like if there is no trust between a husband and a wife, a marriage does not exist.

If you can't trust your friends, you'll be lonely, right? What more than with God? Because with God, we have a heavenly Father who is standing there with all the power in the world, who loves us, who wants the best for us, who is waiting with open arms to receive us and to have us trust in Him.

Friends, let's pray to ensure we are expressing our dependence on God. And when we struggle to believe, pray, I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief.

Let's do that right now. Father, we praise you that because of Jesus, His death and now victorious resurrection, all things are possible if we believe in Him, the Son whom you love.