

2018 Pre-Lent Seminar
Jan. 28-29, 2018

Mark 9

9:1 Serves both as a conclusion to what Jesus has just said and as well an introduction to what is about to take place. Yes, and NB that conclusion with its emphasis on clinging to the words (8:38) - - each and every one of them - - a clinging so necessary under the cross, both his and ours!

Some will *see the kingdom having come in power*. Some have falsely concluded that Jesus was here speaking of his final coming, the coming to which he referred in vs. 38. But his final coming is not the only coming of his kingdom in power. Keep in mind the basic meaning of the *kingdom*; with that in mind the disciples will indeed *see the kingdom come in power* in at least two ways:

- a) In his resurrection and then in his judging power in 70 AD - - how very necessary then will be the clinging to his words commanded in 8:38!
- b) in a deeper way they will *see* in the success of the gospel message - - accomplishing through the clinging to and faithful proclamation of his words!

We too *see the kingdom come in power* and that in our members and in the mirror, made the more dramatic by life under the cross.

Note the colorful expression: *taste of death*. What does death taste like?

9:2 Why the delay? Why just three disciples as witnesses?

Notice: He takes them quietly, privately; he steals away with them to show them himself and let them hear of his so loving mission as the sum of all the words of God. COVET SUCH MOMENTS ALONE WITH JESUS! - - Consider how much the disciples lost by sleeping through much of the event! At the dawn of Lent we caution ourselves and our people not to sleep through it!! Each goes in the company of the saints into Lent and yet each goes alone to the foot of the cross. These moments with Jesus are designed by him to prepare us for the blessings that can come only from the cross - - both his and ours.

What is about to take place is for whose benefit? In those private moments with Jesus he makes deposits in the bank of the soul, with interest he intends to pay under the cross.

9:3 *In him dwells all the fullness of the godhead bodily!* And now it bursts forth in incomparable splendor, if not fully. Peter never forgot it (2 Peter 1) and neither did John (John 1). Isn't it interesting that when John saw the vision the second time, he was still struck all but dead in terror. How that puts the end of the transfiguration into a special perspective for us. Yes, we would see Jesus; but where? But how? Nevertheless, fleeting though it was, the *metamorphosis* had its point.

9:4 Look whose there! The teacher of the law and the preacher of repentance. What a thrill that must have been for them. Now they converse with the one who will finish their work, indeed who will make right their failures. Luke tells us what they were talking about: the impending humiliation of this glorious

Christ! How perfectly it all fits with chp. 8 and the promise of the cross now about to be fulfilled. How total must be the focus on the word of promise, the promise of redemption and resurrection, if the disciples are to survive (and we with them) the cross. REMEMBER YOUR MOUNTAIN TOPS; THEY ARE A PREPARATION FOR THE VALLEY; AND THE VALLEY IS ALWAYS BUT A REMINDER OF THE MOUNTAIN TOP AND A PREPARATION FOR RETURNING THERE!

9:5-6 Don't you just love Peter! Having nothing to say, he nevertheless is never at a loss for words. But what he says here is the sum of what we all say when we would be better off just listening. *It is good for us (that includes Jesus!) to be here!*

And how foolish - - if unselfish - - the building project suggested! Still there's a paradigm to be learned: works of love and devotion apart from the Word always get in the way of God's saving purposes.

But even here, note the compassion of Jesus. In Mark 8:33 he had given Peter a tongue lashing like no other; here he just ignore his presumption and folly.

9:7 Now God appears in his more usual mode: Shrouded in cloud, just as his Son returns to his shroud in human flesh and form. But even thus, the presence of God in the cloud needs the presence of the Son in the flesh if it is to be endured. Yes and how then should we go to meet God, if not clinging to his Son? And how will we do that? The Father says it all: **LISTEN TO HIM!**

Worthy of special note is the Father's identification of his Son as the Beloved. (And note the word used for "love"!) But it's the dawn of Lent. Is this any way to show his love to the Beloved? Who in Lent is really the beloved? LENT FOR JESUS IS ALL ABOUT US! LENT FOR US IS ALL ABOUT JESUS!

Peter shows that he finally got the point in 2 Peter 1:16-17.

9:8 Could anything be more perfect: To see Jesus only! That's the whole point of both his cross and ours, his life for us and our life in him, his resurrection as the first-fruit of our own entry into his glory. Matthew gives us that beautiful addition that likewise sums everything up for us in life under the cross: *Don't be afraid!*

9:9-11 Look what happens when we try to figure things out without careful listening. Grasping the truth that Peter had earlier confessed and that they had now seen confirmed, they try to get matters straight by asking Jesus about the prophecy of Malachi 4; the prophet said and the scribes still taught that Elijah must come before the Messiah comes to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. Was the promise of Elijah's coming fulfilled at the Transfiguration? Did the promise still need to be fulfilled, given the simple fact that no one saw Elijah except them, and that sight did not do anything to prepare anyone else for the coming of the Messiah? Indeed if Elijah came and set everything right to prepare for the appearance of the Messiah, then why would the Messiah be killed, especially be killed at the instigation of the leaders of Israel?

9:12-13 Jesus in his answer ties a number of things together and does it in part with a rhetorical question:

- 1) Elijah has already come and done the work which the Scriptures foretold [**Note the perfect tense of the verb when referring to the Scriptures**];
- 2) How is it written that the Son of man would suffer many things? That could only happen if Elijah had already come - - that should be their appropriate conclusion;
- 3) Indeed Elijah of old was a picture of the second Elijah - - Jezebel and the nation as a whole did with him just what the rulers and the majority of people did with the second Elijah: most ignored him and proved how little they were interested in his work; no voice was raised in protest when he was arrested and then beheaded by the new Jezebel, namely Herod and the women around him.

All of that should stick in the minds of the disciples as they tried to sort out the painful prophecy of Jesus' own impending suffering and death; it should at least begin to disabuse them of notions about a Messianic kingdom - - *the things of men* (8:33) and redirect their focus to what was promised of old and to the corresponding words of Jesus concerning his coming redemptive sacrifice.

9:14-18 As is so often the case, there is little time between the mountain top and the return to the valley. Further instruction will have to wait. It's back to the turmoil of life with people, always a messy proposition. Everyone in this scene has his own agenda, and as important as these are, the one most important thing, the coming suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus are far out of sight and mind - - even as Jesus continues on his path to the cross.

The scribes have no end of ridicule for the disciples as a prelude to the ridicule awaiting Jesus on the cross. It's interesting that the crowd listens to the scribes without answering: *Yes, and what are you doing to help the situation*. How things change only to stay the same! The sharpest critics are often those who themselves have done little or nothing. But then dealing with people is always a messy proposition, is it not?

9:19 Jesus' words are addressed **to the disciples!** For the disciples had the ability to help (Mark 6:7-13), but had given up their trust in Jesus' command and promise and thus were with respect to those promises *unbelieving*. That's the result of not listening as one ought. Jesus' stern rebuke is a warning to all who want to give up on parts of his Word that just seem too hard to *believe*. Again the emphasis: *Listen!* Jesus rhetorical question of *How long?* adds punch to his warning. The history of the church reminds us that his question is not without a lot of pain in his own heart over apostasy.

9:20 See how the devil really is, he who deceives us night and day: He can only cause misery.

As we look at this boy in his misery, at the boy's father in his despair, and at the disciples in their humiliation and at the scribes in their faithless scorn, we do well to bear in mind that all of that is our plight apart from Jesus and his Word. We too easily take for granted and become ungrateful for the opposite of those things, of the blessings that the boy, his father and the disciples soon will experience when Jesus is there and when Jesus speaks.

9:21-24 The dialogue with Jesus sets the case clearly as a problem hopeless from any human standpoint. The man's *if you are able* makes clear his own helplessness and the condition of his soul as near despair: the disciples couldn't help; maybe Jesus won't be able to help either! What are the *all things that are possible for the one who believes?* They are all those things that are proper objects of faith. In this situation

a proper object for the father's faith would be to trust that Jesus could help him; if the man didn't believe that, then there was no point in his approaching Jesus in the first place. That he came to Jesus was an expression of a hope, a faith, storm tossed and on the brink of failure. Jesus bids the man consider that. In vs. 24 the father recognizes the contradiction raging inside of him and in his anguish cries out as he does for Jesus to overcome that contradiction by helping him. Again we need to remember:

Faith is 1) knowledge, 2) assent, 3) confidence.

We need as well to consider that sometimes faith has Jesus and his gift of salvation as the object, sometime other promises of God. In this instance the two are muddled and mixed in the father; in either case, one thing is clear: **the father recognizes that only Jesus can resolve the contradiction and bring peace to the struggle in his soul. Notice that the immediate need of the child has now been transcended, though certainly not left behind, one very much tied up with the condition of his son; the father also has a need, one which his discourse with Jesus has brought to light.**

The pastor does well when writing his sermon to keep this man in mind. There may well be someone sitting in front of him in church whose prayer either because of his physical or his spiritual condition or both is little different from this father's prayer.

9:25 -27 The devil is always angry, but never more angry than when Jesus with his word sends him packing. But don't miss the irony: As the demon's action here shows how powerful he is, so at the same time Jesus' far greater power is made manifest. If the devil were really so smart, he would have done better to leave quietly! His violent departure just serves to demonstrate the greater power of Jesus. As well the nature of the devil's power and the nature of Jesus' power are again set in sharp contrast: All the devil's power is devoted to misery and pain and suffering; Jesus' power is used to comfort, to rescue, to save. Even reason should tell us which to prefer; again how striking the contrast that we so often miss that point, and that Jesus nevertheless in our lives keeps making it!

The miracle is perfect in every respect. The boy is completely and immediately freed from the devil's bondage. The faith that the father begged for is strengthened in answer to his prayer for help. And then there is this little touch, the one seen so often in Mark - - Jesus attends to a detail so tender, so touching.

9:28-29 Jesus indicates that some demons are more powerful than others - - a fact which perhaps was impressed on the minds of the disciples already when they saw the state of the boy possessed. In such cases trust in the promise/command of Jesus with respect to their ability to cast such out would indeed be tested. It would seem impossible to them to accomplish what Jesus had commanded them to do. And so what should they do in such cases? They should pray. Pray for what? Pray for trust in the command/promise that Jesus had earlier given them. Such a prayer would certainly not be in vain as they would recall his promise and by it be moved again to trust and act in accord with his Word. **What Jesus says here is applicable to the specific commands/promises that Jesus has given all of us; we are not told to perform miracles as they were; but we are told to trust him in like impossible situations where faith seems impossible - - to survive and continue the struggle against the devil, the world and our own flesh when it seems that such a struggle is doomed to failure. We pray in such conditions. Then we go back again to listening!**

(As regards the reading *prayer and fasting* the addition seems unlikely; fasting in this case would not have been possible.)

9:30-32 What should we expect from the disciples as Jesus once again points them to the immanent future, to the greatness of his suffering and the greatness of his victory? We get the opposite of what we might expect and again: **Note Jesus' patience face of what seems invincible, even inexcusable ignorance. That is surely one of his most beautiful attributes**, one that we have occasion to marvel at all the more the older we get. The changes and the constants in our frailty are what make the oft-heard observation of the delinquent so foolish and so wicked - - *But I already know what you're going to say.*

Note too in his repetition: Not one word of complaint or even reluctance - - God did not spare him and he did not want to be spared! How vast the difference between his cross-bearing and ours!

Jesus here adds one new feature: *The element of betrayal.* But even that does not provoke a question from the disciples. Nor does the promise of the resurrection evoke any response beyond: *I don't get it and I'm not sure I want to get it.* (On the other hand, one might observe in passing what a blessing it is that Jesus does not give us the details of our times of suffering beforehand as he gave the details of his own!)

9:33-35 On Jesus' last visit to Capernaum, a bit of support or sympathetic understanding from the disciples would have been nice. But since they wanted to understand nothing of what was coming, they are busy with the one thing that we all know REALLY matters: WHOSE BOSS? For, as Luther remarked more than once, everybody wants to be pope. Isn't it interesting: Their reluctance to answer Jesus' question shows that they know full well that he would not be pleased with their argument; but that didn't keep them from having it - - another of those telling marks of our condition as *simul Justus et peccator.*

In the context of the Transfiguration this dispute must have had some additional interesting coloring.

Jesus' answer is altogether remarkable; again bear in mind the emotions that must have been stirring in his own soul on this last visit and the nearness of the cross. But no anger, no rebuke in his voice. Instead **AN ENCOURAGEMENT TO BE AMBITIOUS WITH A RE-DEFINING OF AMBITION WORTH REMEMBERING EVERY DAY. WHAT A BRILLIANT TEACHING OF BOTH THE FIRST AND THIRD USE OF THE LAW!**

9:36-37 What a perfect illustration of the point: Who is more needy, less deserving, less useful, less appreciative, less able to repay than a child - - especially someone else's child? Who more than a child thinks himself the center of the universe whose instant gratification is what life is all about? But wait! That's exactly what we think our whole lives long, exactly what the disciples had been arguing about! See what an exalted, incomparable encouragement for real ambition: Receive Jesus and his Father too in serving the least deserving. Can we find a time to encourage fathers and mothers with these words when they think themselves too busy to read a Bible story to their children, to encourage and listen to their memory work when they are in Confirmation class, when they wear out parents with *But everybody is doing/wearing it!* Jesus puts it all in perspective in Matthew 25:34-40 and so does St. Paul in his discussion of spiritual gifts and their use in 1 Cor 12-13. Luther does too in *On the Freedom of the Christian.*

All of this is really a restatement of the call to the cross in Mark 8 and a commentary on it.

9:38-41 The section has more questions than we have answers. We need to focus on the fullest sense of Jesus' expression: *In my name*.

Jesus returns to what he had been speaking about moments before. Notice here how Jesus uses his formal and exalted title, one he rarely used: He is the Christ, that is, the anointed One from God, anointed as Prophet, Priest and King. Thus, the one who gives to another even a cup of water because of the receiver's connection with the exalted Christ will not fail to receive his reward. It is the connection to Jesus that is all important - - a connection the essence of which is faith in him and his saving work, as distinct from works whose motive is merely humanitarianism or for *Eigenlob* or in order to merit something from God.

WE CAN'T OUT-SERVE JESUS. Jesus remembers! What an incentive to see more and more our lives as hidden in Christ (Colossians 3:1-4)! He is aware of all of it. Nothing escapes his notice. Jesus doesn't spell out what the reward/wage is for such works. He leaves us to trust his promise, that he who is the Anointed One will not be lacking in ways to repay, nor will he forget, nor will he ever be left a debtor to us!

As with so many of his blessing, so with these rewards: They come quietly and without fanfare. It will be interesting for us in heaven to sort it all out: *Oh, that's why you gave me thus and such! I never would have thought ...*

9:42 IF THE LESSOR GOOD WORKS ARE NOT OPTIONAL, WHAT OF THIS GREATEST GOOD WORK AND THE AVOIDANCE OF ITS OPPOSITE: *THE STRONGEST POSSIBLE WARNING TO INDIFFERENT PASTORS AND PARENTS!* If an adult falls, he to be sure has the deceiver to blame for it; but he is himself ultimately responsible for turning his back on the Word he should have known and on the help Jesus intended to give him in that Word. But a child, whether a child in years or an infant in faith, is so easily made a victim of both false teaching and sinful examples. The child has no weapons of knowledge or experience to warn or protect it. The child trapped by indifference or by heresy or by faith-contradicting examples is trapped, ensnared. We have seen all too often what becomes of such a child by the time it has reached late teens and the twenties.

There is a here special woe in Jesus' words for those who think that a little child cannot have faith and therefore wait to bring the child to Jesus until it is older.

The woe for failing to do such a work matches its importance. Just think of it: A millstone around the neck so that drowning is absolutely assured! Imagine the horror as that millstone is tied around the neck, and then the push into the ragging sea. It makes us shudder to think of it! And it should!

9:43-48 If the woe for ensnaring someone else is horrific, no less so the woe for ensnaring our own souls. Still, how the soul wants to cry out in these self-mutilating verses: *Would, O Lord, that it were that simple!* – even as horrifying as the verses are. But it isn't that simple. Cut away and off to your hearts content, there will always be something left that ensnares us. And that something? Our heart, our very nature as the Bible tells us so devastatingly often (e.g. Genesis 8:21, Jeremiah 17:9 Matthew 15:19, Romans 7:18-19, et al.). Clearly an impossible condition. So then, entrance into the kingdom of God, whether we are

thinking of the church on earth or the church in heaven, is impossible for us - - unless it's entirely a gift to those whose impossible condition is healed by the cleansing blood of Christ!!

So then, run, run to the cross for rescue! Horrible almost beyond description is the alternative: *Gehenna*; it was vile and unclean, the city dump. It was often on fire and so it made a good picture for hell, a place cursed and filthy, beyond any use except for destruction. As the fires of Gehenna never go out, so to the pain of hell is never extinguished.

The second dread description of the torment of the damned is that they have a worm that forever gnaws away inside of them. What might we think of in this life that resembles such a gnawing? Would it not be our conscience when we have fallen into sin? They heard the church bell on Sunday morning but preferred the cross-word puzzle in the Sunday paper. They knew their acts hurt others and that their behavior was indecent. But so what? In hell the worm at the very least reminds them that they have no one to blame for their misery but themselves and that it will never end.

So the fire is pictured as forever burning the body, and the worm foretells the eternal anguish of the soul. The body is the instrument of the soul; both suffer in hell.

Notice the contrast in these verses between "being thrown" for those going to hell and the simple "to enter" for those going to heaven. And notice too: they "enter into life!" - - not just existence, but life as God intended it in the Garden and as Jesus promised it in John 10:10, a life in which the phrase "kingdom of God" finally reaches its full realization.

So much for the notion that God couldn't possibly send someone to such the suffering here described as hell. Those who think so flatly contradict Jesus.

Jesus' words here about the reality of hell is **the second use of the law** in its most dramatic form. The second use of the law is its use as a warning: Let all beware of ensnaring themselves by false doctrine and impenitent living, lest this be their self-inflicted fate! At the same time Jesus' words are also a powerful preaching of **the first of the law**: They drive us to our knees in repentance and in longing for the gospel of forgiveness. And as well they are a strong preaching of **the third use of the law**: They exhort us and urge us on to a heart that gladly hears the Word which creates and preserve our faith and to a life that is faithful to what we believe.

9:49-50 "Salted with fire!" That's what we are with God's Word. The sinful flesh sees the law as something that stings and burns. The law opens wounds in the conscience, in the soul, and then pours salt into them. The law forbids what the flesh wants and urges a selflessness that the flesh abhors. Its *don't do that, do this* makes us angry and resentful: *I know what I want and you can't tell me what to do!* It even provokes sin! Paul says that the very command that I should not covet (i.e. desire what I can't have) makes me covet. Even the message of the gospel rubs the flesh, our fallen nature, the wrong way; the notion that my salvation must come entirely from God, that I will never be good enough to contribute to it in the least, that message irritates and angers our proud and fallen nature.

But the selfsame gospel message of salvation that so irritates the flesh is what overcomes the flesh. It creates faith and then as salt preserves it in spite of the opposition of our fallen nature, a faith that heaves the sigh of relief in response to the gospel: *It's true!*

Finally the whole of the section is tied together: The gospel preserves and the salt of the law keeps reminding me of the need for repentance and for struggle. Struggle against what? Against that *Me-firstism*; against that casual attitude towards any part of God's Word which might by teaching or example cause one of Jesus' little ones to be ensnared and to fall; against those very lusts of the flesh that are carried out by hands and feet and eyes. Saltless salt is of course a contradiction in terms, i.e. there is no substitute for the salt of the Word; when it's gone, or, let us say, diluted with the sand of indifference, so too is the preservation which it alone can effect. That's what happens in those who know the law but refuse to take it seriously.

When the salt helps show me my constant need of the Savior's saving work, when by the law's instruction and by the gospel's motivating power, we long only to grow in service to one another, then we will have peace with one another. We will have peace with one another when we are united in doctrine on the basis of that Word and in the resolve to serve one another in love. All of this is just another way of stating Jesus' great theme in Mark 8:31-38.

Notice in this whole section how once again Christianity is not presented as a Sunday walk in the park. Jesus calls for a commitment altogether different from any that we might make from nature, from within ourselves. He must work that commitment with his Word. And, again, apart from his Word it is all impossible