

The Mysterious Son of Man

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There are many strange things about the modern, allegedly Christian, religious world, but one of the strangest of them all is its conception of Christ Himself. To many in our day, Jesus is the avatar of niceness. Apparently, He spent His days wandering around Palestine, picking flowers, giving people hugs, and never, ever judging anyone.

If idolatry is man creating a god in his own image, that is an idolatrous depiction of Jesus. That's the kind of Son of God whom our society craves. It wants a Savior whose love looks more like benevolent neglect, who brings peace by avoiding conflict, who is tolerant of everything and everyone. Of course, God didn't send us the Savior we wanted. He sent us the Savior we needed. However, most today don't have the foggiest idea what Jesus was actually like. Ironically, this was true 2000 years ago too. For evidence of this, let's consider Mark's account of the mysterious Son of Man.

Mark 8:27-9:1

In particular, we're going to examine a context that stretches from the middle of Mark 8 to the middle of Mark 9. The first section of this context is found in Mark 8:27-9:1. Within this section, the first logical subheading concerns **PETER'S CONFESSION**. This is a story of Jesus with which we're familiar, if only because people like to use it to insist that Peter was actually the first pope. However, we are used to the story as it is told in Matthew, and not in Mark. This is significant because Mark is the earliest gospel, and Mark's source for information about Jesus was most likely Peter. What we get from Mark, then, is the best picture of what it was actually like to hear this conversation.

It begins with Jesus asking His disciples who the people thought He was. They respond with answers all over the map. This is not accidental. In fact, it is our first glimpse in this context of one of the main themes of Mark. Jesus did everything He could to conceal His nature from the people. In fact, if you glance at the next story up in your Bibles, you'll see that it's about Jesus healing a blind man, and Jesus' final words to the man who received this miracle of healing were a command not even to go back to his village, lest the people there realize that a miracle had occurred.

Next, Jesus asks His disciples who they thought He was. Peter responds with the correct answer, which is that He is the Christ, the Anointed One of God. What happens next in Mark's account, though, is striking. Mark doesn't include the whole upon-this-rock-I-will-build-my-church discussion, nor does Luke, for that matter. It only appears in Matthew, and yet it is Mark that is Peter's account. I certainly don't mean to question the validity of the upon-this-rock exchange, but it is extremely significant that Peter didn't think it was important enough to repeat. That would be odd behavior, wouldn't you think, if Peter thought that Jesus' words made him the first pope? Instead, what Peter DOES repeat is Jesus' injunction to tell no one. The people were ignorant of Jesus' true nature, and they needed to stay ignorant.

However, Mark next proves that the people didn't have a monopoly on ignorance. He tells the story of **PETER'S MISTAKE**. The setup here is fascinating. Peter has revealed that Jesus is the Christ, so Jesus is going to explain to them what it MEANS that He is the Christ. It doesn't mean that Jesus is going to claim an earthly kingdom and kick out the Romans and make His disciples rich. It means that Jesus is going to be taken by His enemies, tortured, killed, and in three days, be raised from the dead. To Peter and the rest, this is a ghastly non sequitur. That is not at all what they thought the Christ was going to do. At this point, even the resurrection, which is to us a source of hope, would have been to them a source of confusion and fear. They knew as well as we do that dead people don't just bounce up and start living again. It's almost like Jesus has just promised them that He's going to become a zombie.

Peter doesn't have a clue what's going on, but he knows he doesn't like it. He takes Jesus aside and tells Him to stop saying such horrible things about Himself. Jesus responds angrily. He calls His closest disciple "Satan" and rebukes him for having a fleshly mindset. Peter is still thinking that Jesus is going to be David, Part II, and he's thinking that when his friend gets to be king, Peter's going to be on Easy Street for the rest of his life. This naïve illusion of greed is shattered by Jesus' harsh prediction, and when Peter speaks against it, he unwittingly discourages Jesus from what He must do.

After this, Mark repeats **JESUS' WARNING**. Just like Jesus was moved by Peter's confession to prophesy His own death, now He's moved by Peter's rash rebuke to reveal another unpleasant truth. This one isn't just for the disciples; it's for everybody, so Jesus has the whole crowd gather around to listen. He tells them the truth about what it's going to be like to follow Him. Remember: even though Jesus knows perfectly well that He is going to be crucified, His hearers do not. To them, a cross is a symbol of execution, like an electric chair or a firing squad to us. Jesus tells them that if they want to follow Him, they're going to have to march right up to the electric chair, march right up to the firing squad. There is no Davidic kingdom for followers of Jesus, He says. There is no Easy Street. There is only death.

And yet, Jesus tells His followers that if they are willing to embrace death for His sake, they will gain something more precious than the cushiest palace in Jerusalem. They will save their lives and gain their souls. Here, Jesus is really criticizing Peter and the rest for their penny-ante ambitions. They're concerned with material goodies, but the opportunity to preserve the soul is worth more than the world and everything in it. It's not going to be easy for Jesus' disciples to follow in His footsteps, right up to the firing squad. It's not going to be easy for them to dare the rage of the

wicked world that killed their Master, but it is necessary. If anybody wilts under the pressure, if anybody chickens out, if anybody is ashamed of Jesus, when He comes, He will be ashamed of them, and they will lose their lives and their souls.

As I've mentioned before, there are some good chapter breaks in the chapter-verse numbering system we use, and there are some bad chapter breaks. Mark 9 is a bad chapter break. Jesus isn't talking about a different incident in Mark 9:1 than He is in Mark 8:38. It's the same context; this is the same event: a coming of the dominion of the Son of Man in which He would judge the wicked and reveal His power, but that some of those standing there would see. There's only one event that fulfills all of those criteria. It's not the establishment of the church in Acts 2. That was not a time of judgment. It's not the end of the world. We don't have any first-century Jews wandering around anymore.

Instead, this is a prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, which took place some 40 years after Jesus spoke these words. Jesus couches this prediction in the same kind of apocalyptic language that we saw many writers use in our study of the early prophets last quarter, but it would be fulfilled as surely as all those other predictions were. These terrifying warnings were almost certainly not what Jesus' audience wanted to hear, but they were what they got.

Mark 9:2-13

The weirdness doesn't really tone down any in the next context, Mark 9:2-13, the action of which takes place about a week after Jesus' shocking revelations. The first portion of this text addresses **THE TRANSFIGURATION** itself. Not even all of Jesus' disciples are invited along for this particular Twilight Zone episode. Instead, only Peter, James, and John climb with Jesus up to the top of a mountain. This mountain is most likely Mt. Hermon, the closest high mountain to Caesarea Philippi, which is where the events of our first section took place. When the four reach the top of this mountain, which Luke implies happened at night, Jesus is transfigured. The actual Greek word here is *metamorphoo*, from which we derive our English word "metamorphosis". The Lord is changed, and changed greatly. Even His clothes, which were probably pretty grubby from all the trekking through the outdoors, became impossibly white. What's more, Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus. Traditionally, we identify Moses and Elijah as representing the Law and the Prophets, but that's probably not going on. Throughout the gospels, Elijah is uniformly identified as the forerunner to the Messiah. Moses, by contrast, is the great lawgiver and mediator of God's covenant, a type of the Messiah.

This is a bizarre scene. In response to it, Peter makes a **SUGGESTION**. His motivation is quite simple: pure terror. I have to say, I sympathize with Peter here. As Lauren can attest, there have been times in our marriage when anything I say is going to be the wrong thing, but I say something anyway and hope that somehow it will work out. Peter seems to be employing a similar strategy here. He proposes to Jesus that the three disciples build three tabernacles to the three great men. However, it quickly becomes evident that a capital-S Somebody disagrees. A cloud surrounds everyone on the mountaintop and a voice from heaven commands the disciples to listen to Jesus.

The wording of this command is significant. In Deuteronomy 18, Moses himself predicts that a prophet like Him will arise from among the people, and He commands the people to listen to that prophet. When God, in the presence of Moses, commands Peter, James, and John to listen to Christ, He is identifying Jesus with the prophet of Deuteronomy 18. In other words, Jesus isn't simply an anointed king like David. He is an anointed prophet like Moses. All of those things are bound up in His Messiah-ship. To underscore the point, Moses and Elijah disappear. However, this further revelation of Jesus' nature isn't for everyone. Once again, Jesus urges them to keep it secret, this time until He rises from the dead. This confuses Peter, James, and John. They appear to think Jesus is speaking in parables.

The three apostles do understand the point about Christ as the second Moses quite well. What they don't understand is **ELIJAH**. Here Jesus is, identified by no lesser authority than God as the Messiah, but the scribes have taught them that Elijah is supposed to come before the Messiah, and as far as they can tell, Elijah hasn't come back yet. Jesus responds in three main ways. First, He says that for once, the scribes got it right. Elijah is supposed to come before the Messiah. From there, though, Jesus diverges from answering their question. Instead, He addresses their speculation that when He's predicting His resurrection, He's speaking in parables. Here's Jesus' argument: They're correctly interpreting the Elijah-comes-first passage, which appears in Malachi 4. However, they are overlooking all kinds of passages that predict that God's great Servant, when He comes, is going to suffer and be abused. They need to be consistent. If they want to really, really look for Elijah to come, they really, really need to look for Jesus to die and be resurrected too. As for Elijah, if the people are wicked enough to kill God's own Anointed, they're wicked enough to kill the Messiah's forerunner too, and indeed they've already done it. With this, Jesus repeats the identification of John the Baptist as the predicted Elijah, and He defeats another attempt by His apostles to tone down His harsh message.

Mark 9:14-32

The final section that we'll be considering this morning, and the section to which we will call our attention before the Lord's Supper, is Mark 9:14-32. This particular pair of stories begins with **AN ARGUMENT**. Remember, this is an encounter that Jesus, Peter, James, and John have as they are coming down from the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus has just received the endorsement of a voice from heaven; His closest disciples have seen an earthly glimpse of His heavenly

glory, and while all four of them are on this spiritual high, they come back to where they had left the disciples and find them bickering with a collection of scribes. And so it is, that just as often happens to us, their spiritual high crashes and burns. They discover that a man brought his son to Jesus so that an unclean spirit might be cast out of him, but the man finds that Jesus is absent—up on the mountain, in fact. The disciples, at least some of whom have been given the power to cast out demons, make the attempt in Jesus' place, but they fail, much to their astonishment.

However, somebody else was delighted by this failure—Jesus' enemies, the scribes. Much earlier in the gospel, in Mark 3, Mark notes that the Pharisees had begun to plot against Jesus. It may well be that part of the plot involved setting spies on Jesus, men who would follow Him everywhere looking for evidence of failing or failure. This time, they think they've found it. We can easily imagine them crowing, "Aha! These disciples couldn't cast out the demon, so Jesus isn't really a prophet!" The scribes are excited, the disciples are angry and defensive, and the crowd is confused.

Mark next recounts **JESUS' RESPONSE**. The Lord comes striding into this mess, figures out what is going on, and is immediately expresses His disgust. Jesus' words appear to be addressed to the scribes, the crowd, and His disciples alike. He describes the whole lot as a faithless generation, and He makes perfectly clear that He is sick and tired of putting up with them. Now that the children are done squabbling, Jesus the grownup is going to solve the problem.

Jesus asks them to bring the boy, and as soon as the demon within the boy recognizes the presence of Jesus, he throws his host into another convulsive fit. This is weird behavior from a demon. Normally, the demons Jesus encounters are afraid of Him; this demon, though, seems almost to be thumbing his nose at Jesus. We tend to think of demons as a generic group. This behavior, though, makes clear that demons differed in power, and this was a strong one.

While the boy is busy convulsing, Jesus takes the opportunity to have a conversation with Dad. The father fills Him in about the sad circumstances of the boy's possession, but then, in an unfortunate choice of words, appeals for Jesus' help "if You can". Jesus, who is already fed up with the lack of faith shown by everyone involved, is in no mood to hear this. Even though the failure of the disciples might reasonably sow doubt in the heart of an honest man, Jesus cuts the father no slack. He emphasizes that the doubter cannot hope to receive blessing from God.

This and passages like it are much beloved by the members of the charismatic community. Many charismatic preachers love to promise the world to their listeners: miraculous healing for serious illnesses, quick and easy riches, and every other blessing that the earthly-minded might desire. Of course, in real life, few, if any of those things ever happen. That would seem to leave such preachers with a serious credibility gap, but they solve the problem by pinning the blame on the person who wasn't blessed. Their problem, the preachers say, is that the one in need of healing didn't believe hard enough, so they short-circuited God's efforts to help them.

While it is true that faith and its lack can be important factors in our prayer lives today, the faith of the recipients of miracles 2000 years ago had nothing to do with the ability of Jesus or anyone else to perform that miracle. Take, for instance, the story of Jesus expelling a legion of demons into a herd of pigs. Who had faith there? It certainly wasn't the recipient of the miracle. He was a Gentile, he wasn't in his right mind, and he had no idea who Jesus was. In truth, Jesus could heal whomever He wished, and others could only prevent Him by not giving Him the opportunity to heal.

In any event, the father responds to Jesus with the anguished, yet mournfully amusing cry of "I believe; help my unbelief!" I think this comment amuses us because we remember the times when we have felt the same way. The comforting thing is that God will answer our contradictions. If we ask in faith for the greater faith that we need, He will give us what we seek. Jesus doesn't require perfect followers. He only requires ones who want to be.

Following this, we see **THE POWER OF JESUS** clearly displayed. First, Jesus waits to make sure that a crowd has assembled before He does anything. This seems to contradict what we've seen out of Jesus earlier. All through our study this morning, He's been telling His disciples to keep things quiet, but now He wants an audience. What's going on here, though, is not that Jesus has suddenly become a publicity hog. Instead, His disciples' failure has given His enemies the opportunity to publicly challenge His authority, and Jesus needs equal publicity to set the record straight.

Then, Jesus accomplishes what His disciples could not. He frees the boy from the demon. This was apparently not a pleasant process, as the casting out of demons often was not. This demon in particular seems to have nearly killed his host in an effort to remain. However, in the end, Jesus ejects the demon and saves the boy.

Third, and perhaps most interesting for us in this section, once the crowd has dispersed, Jesus' disciples take the opportunity to talk to Him about what happened. They had expected to be able to cast out the demon themselves, but instead, the demon defeated them. Jesus reveals to them that only their prayers could have cast it out.

This is significant for two reasons. First, it confirms our earlier speculation, that there were different kinds of demons. Some were weak enough that the disciples could handle them on their own; others were too strong for that. Second, though, it reveals something important about Jesus. The disciples could only have cast that demon out by prayer. They would have had to appeal directly to God for help to succeed. Jesus, however, when He cast the demon out, didn't pray. Instead, He did it by His own power and authority. By this, Jesus demonstrated that He was God too.

Finally, though we come to **JESUS' THIRD PROPHECY**. The wording here is quite similar to the wording of the first two prophecies we've already seen. Jesus predicts that He is going to suffer at the hands of His enemies. He

predicts that He is going to be raised from the dead. The reaction of the disciples, though, is strikingly different. The first time, Peter pulled Jesus aside and yelled at Him for saying such a crazy thing. That didn't go so well for Peter. The second time, the apostles decided that Jesus was speaking in parables, but Jesus shot down that theory too.

Now, though, the disciples have reached the point of cognitive dissonance. On the one hand, they've seen the divine origin of Jesus clearly demonstrated. Peter, James and John saw Him on the Mount of Transfiguration. They heard a voice from heaven confirm that He was the Son of God. All of the disciples saw Jesus cast out a demon that only God had the power to cast out, so proving His own divinity. On the other hand, though, this same heaven-sent Messiah is predicting that He will come to a horrifying end, and, equally horrifyingly, is predicting that He will rise from the dead. The disciples are terrified by this—it sounds like God's final rejection of His people—and they have no idea what to say. It's on this gloomy, confused note that the section of stories we've studied this morning comes to an end.

This is not the Jesus that we're going to hear about out of the mouths of TV preachers. This Jesus isn't going to win any popularity contests. His glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, His power in casting out the demon, can't be matched by any mere human, but He doesn't seem to take any pleasure from these things. Instead, Jesus comes across as a tormented soul. He's frustrated by the faithlessness and lack of understanding of everyone around Him, when He has given them every reason to believe. Most of all, though, He is haunted by the knowledge of the cross that is waiting for Him, a burden that He has to bear alone, because not even His closest followers believe Him when He tells them about it.

This Jesus has nothing to do with the sunshine-and-rainbows Jesus of our invention. However, the true Jesus is far more compelling than the false one. The imaginary Jesus doesn't make sense. What kind of a foolish Son of God would go trooping happily along toward a horrible fate to save mankind from the sins that He doesn't even care very much about? The real Jesus does care. He cares passionately, intensely, about everything. Most of all, though, He cares passionately about the very people who drive Him crazy, which is why they drive Him crazy. Every step that He takes toward the cross is a step He takes for their sakes, because He knows that their sin demands a price that only He can pay. If He comes across as being under a lot of pressure, that's because He is, but it is pressure that He chose to put Himself under because it was the only way He could save all of us. That's the real Jesus. Let's remember Him as we partake.