

# Change We Can Believe In

Mark 9:1-13 January 14, 2026

It's the most famous reveal in movie history. Dorothy and her three friends enter the chamber of Oz, The Great And Powerful's - fire and smoke exploding around his throne. Their hopes are dashed when the curtain is pulled back, revealing Oz is no wizard. He's just a *man*, pulling levers in a desperate attempt to keep up the charade. With tears in her eyes, Dorothy tells him, "you're a very bad man." To which Oz replies, "No...I'm a very good man. I'm just a very bad wizard."

In Mark 9, Jesus brings three of His friends to a mountaintop. For a moment, the curtain is pulled back to show Jesus in His Divine glory. He's not just some hot air balloonist stranded in a strange country. He is resplendent in power. He's much *more* than the disciples thought of Him. He's *more* than any prophet. He's the great and powerful Son of Man.

Oz was revealed to be a sham. Christ is revealed as a Savior. *But* He was a Savior Who would suffer and die. And, *at the time*, that made for a "very bad messiah" in the minds of the disciples.

**Mark 9:1 - <sup>1</sup>Then he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God come in power."**

Was Jesus referring to the transfiguration here? On the one hand, Mark gives us textual clues that he's tying chapter 8 verse 38 to chapter 9 verse 1 and then to what follows. On the other hand, the transfiguration happens only six days later. *None* of the disciples died in the interval.

As things play out, we see yet again their understanding has to be adjusted. The Jews expected only *one* arrival of the Messiah.<sup>1</sup> God's work was *much* bigger than deposing Caesar and defeating his legions. The Kingdom of God was a global work, spanning millennia. The consummation of God's work wasn't going to happen suddenly like they expected. It would happen in phases.

*They* expected the Messiah to bring one-step liberation. But God's plan had first, transfiguration. Then crucifixion. Then resurrection. Then ascension. Then the interruption of the Church age and the inclusion of Gentiles. Then tribulation. *Finally* restoration, not just of Israel, but all the world.

*Three* of the disciples would see the transfiguration phase. *Eleven* would see the resurrection. John, alone, would see visions of Christ's future *second* coming.

Now we didn't get to eyewitness that scene, but we've been briefed much more fully about what is coming than Peter, James, and John at the time. The power and the character and the activity has been laid out for us. We can invest our lives in that Kingdom. We can stand firm in the power and the love and the truth of God as citizens now of His future Kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Utley *The Gospel According To Peter: Mark And I & II Peter*

**Mark 9:2-3 - <sup>2</sup> After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain by themselves to be alone. He was transfigured in front of them, <sup>3</sup> and his clothes became dazzling—extremely white as no launderer on earth could whiten them.**

James and John were brothers. Peter's brother was left behind. Sorry, Andrew. I always wonder how Andrew felt about these moments. I know I would've struggled with it.

The traditional site is Mount Tabor in lower Galilee.<sup>2</sup> But Tabor is *not* a high mountain. It's a little puny. And at the time, its summit was inhabited and walled.<sup>3</sup> Not exactly a good place to be alone. Plus, the last geographical marker Mark gave was in the region of Caesarea Philippi.

Most contemporary scholars believe this happened on Mount Hermon - the tallest in Israel.<sup>4</sup> It has an elevation of over 9,000 feet. This would fit with the themes and parallels in this passage.

As Mark has shown before, this scene again reveals that Jesus is the greater Moses - the final Prophet-Deliverer that Moses told us to watch for, Who would bring a final exodus for God's people. Hermon was known as a sacred and holy mountain and it is *higher* than Sinai.

Now, in Exodus 24, Moses brought Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu up Mount Sinai along with 70 elders of Israel. After waiting 6 days, the Lord God appeared to Moses in glory, and then delivered truth and revelation to him. Here, Jesus waited 6 days, and now brings three of His followers up - the 70 member Sanhedrin wants nothing to do with Jesus - and on the mountain, God's glory is revealed.

Mark says Jesus was *transfigured*. The word used is the Greek term from which we get the word metamorphosis. Jesus' true, heavenly glory was shown to them. He put on flesh to dwell among us, but He was always fully God, even while He was fully man.

When Moses saw God's glory, his face shined for a time. A byproduct of being in God's presence. But Jesus *is* the glory. All the power, all the greatness, all the magnificence is found in Him.

Now, there's something wonderful here about the character of our King. When earthly kings want to *show* power, they parade weapons or trophies. Their power is measured in strength or wealth or the reach of their influence. When the power of Christ was revealed - when we get a tiny preview of His Kingdom - what do we see? Light. Truth. His presence. We'll see also His patience. His kindness. That's what God *wanted* to reveal to the disciples and to us on that mountain. Behold your King!

**Mark 9:4 - <sup>4</sup> Elijah appeared to them with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus.**

Why them? Why *only* them? Why not also David, Abraham, Isaiah and a host of other characters? One possible idea God may have been trying to get across is the supremacy of Jesus. Moses

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<sup>2</sup> James Brooks *The New American Commentary, Volume 23: Mark*

<sup>3</sup> Josephus *Wars Of The Jews 4.54-55*

<sup>4</sup> Brooks

represents the Law, Elijah the prophets. And here is Jesus - Who *fulfills* the Law and is the *focal point* of Bible prophecy. And *they* come to *Him* on the highest mountain. But we'll see it was *also* an opportunity for Jesus to mend the disciples' understanding of prophecy. These two guys specifically come up in a prophecy they'll talk about on the way down the mountain.

Luke tells us that Moses and Elijah spoke to Jesus about His death on the cross - His *departure* from Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> Apparently, the disciples could hear at least some of the discussion.

**Mark 9:5-6 - <sup>5</sup> Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it's good for us to be here. Let's set up three shelters: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" – <sup>6</sup> because he did not know what to say, since they were terrified.**

Luke says that the Lord brought these guys up there to pray, but they fell asleep. They wake up to this amazing scene, and then, *as Moses and Elijah are leaving*, Peter blurts this plan out.<sup>6</sup>

Now remember: Peter was Mark's source for this Gospel.<sup>7</sup> I appreciate this moment of candid honesty here. "I didn't know *what* to say because I was scared stiff."

Peter is in a pattern of Christological misunderstanding. Even after being rebuked, he's still off base. Just a few days ago, he identified Jesus as the *Messiah*. But what does he say here? "*Rabbi*." He's *demoted* Jesus. He is struggling again to *recognize* Jesus for Who He is.

Now why would he suggest this shelter idea (your version may say tabernacles)? Well remember: The disciples consistently wondered, "Is the Kingdom going to start *now*? Is the liberation from Rome *now*? Do we get to start ruling *now*?"

The Feast of Tabernacles (which was celebrated by the construction of temporary shelters) has a clear association with the final deliverance of God's people.<sup>8</sup> During the feast of Tabernacles, the Shekinah glory of God had filled Solomon's temple. And Tabernacles had this important element called the Temple Lighting, where lights would shine for people all around to see.<sup>9</sup> Tabernacles was celebrated six days *after* the Day of Atonement. So, perhaps Peter was thinking, "Ok Jesus talked about the Kingdom, now it's been six days, there's glory and light...*are we doing this?!?"*

But, once again, Peter wants to bypass the suffering and death of the cross. Jesus had been speaking *plainly* to them about these things, but remember - Peter *rebuked* Jesus for that teaching. They *just* overheard Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus about His death, but the disciples just *couldn't* accept the idea of a suffering Savior.

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 9:31

<sup>6</sup> Luke 9:32-33

<sup>7</sup> William Lane *The Gospel Of Mark*

<sup>8</sup> Lane

<sup>9</sup> Gene Pensiero *Fantastic Feasts And Where We Find Them: Tabernacles*

He makes another mistake when he puts Jesus on the same level as Moses and Elijah.<sup>10</sup> The point of what they were seeing is that Christ is *greater* than Moses and Elijah. *They* were both men who met with God on a mountain. They went up, God revealed truth to them. But here's Jesus on the holy mountain, and *He IS the One revealed!* He *is* the glory! He doesn't need to *receive* a word from God. In a moment we'll see God says, "Listen to Him!" He *is* the Word.

But listen - *despite* Peter's mistakes, despite them sleeping when they could've been praying, despite their insistence on bypassing the cross, do you know what Jesus did? Mark skips it, but Matthew says that Jesus came over, touched them, and told them not to be afraid.<sup>11</sup> Christ's patience and grace and tenderness did not abate, even as they missed the point. The transfiguration was *for them*, not for Jesus. So *they* could see. They were still struggling. But Jesus is so long-suffering, so compassionate, so loving and faithful even when we're failing.

**Mark 9:7-8 - <sup>7</sup> A cloud appeared, overshadowing them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my beloved Son; listen to him!" <sup>8</sup> Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.**

Back in Exodus 19, God told Moses, "I'm going to come to you in a glory cloud and I'm going to speak with you so that when the people hear Me, they'll believe what you tell them." Later, at the end of his life, Moses told the Israelites, "[One day] the LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him."<sup>12</sup> And now that Figure has been decisively revealed by God Himself in a glory cloud on a mountain. The final Deliverer was not *just* a prophet, He is the very Son of God. And we must *listen* to Him.

This Deliverer does not only lead a single nation out of Egypt. The exodus Jesus leads is out of the grave. Out of slavery to sin. Out from the rule of the Devil, who holds people captive to do his will.<sup>13</sup>

Now remember one more thing: The Shekinah glory of God was no longer in the Temple. It hadn't been since Ezekiel 10. The holy of holies was *empty*. But here it has returned, enveloping Jesus and His disciples, verifying *once again* that humanity *must* listen to Jesus.

Again we remind ourselves that *listening* in the Bible is not just an auditory experience. Christian listening means to give attention, respond with submission, and move forward in obedience.

**Mark 9:9-10 - <sup>9</sup> As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. <sup>10</sup> They kept this word to themselves, questioning what "rising from the dead" meant.**

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<sup>10</sup> R.T. France *The Gospel Of Mark*

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 17:7

<sup>12</sup> Deuteronomy 18:15

<sup>13</sup> 2 Timothy 2:26

We scratch our heads at this because these three guys specifically had *seen* the dead rise. But their dyed-in-the-wool perspective was that the Messiah *can't* die. He only comes once. He only comes to conquer. A suffering, dying Messiah did not compute.

To their credit, they *did* obey Jesus' command to not tell anyone. And we commend them for that.

**Mark 9:11 - <sup>11</sup> Then they asked him, "Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?"**

"Jesus, we still think You don't have it quite right. The Messiah *can't* die. After all, the scribes say so."

They ask because Malachi 4:4-6 would've been pounding in their minds:

**Malachi 4:4-6 - <sup>4</sup> "Remember the instruction of Moses my servant, the statutes and ordinances I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. <sup>5</sup> Look, I am going to send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. <sup>6</sup> And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise, I will come and strike the land with a curse."**

The scribes seemed to teach that Elijah had to show up and that *he* would anoint the Messiah and that the Messiah himself might not even realize he *was* the messiah until that happened.<sup>14</sup>

The problem was, for all their time with Jesus, *some* of their understanding was *still* rooted to the traditional, scribal perspective.

**Mark 9:12 - <sup>12</sup> "Elijah does come first and restores all things," he replied. "Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be treated with contempt?"**

They appealed to the scribes. Jesus appeals to the Scriptures. "Hey guys - you keep thinking I'm wrong about dying. What about Psalm 22? Isaiah 49, 52, 53? What about Zechariah 9?"

Revelation always trumps tradition. *All* the Bible is necessary and revelatory and instructive for our Christian faith. The scribes' mistake was that they locked into certain Scriptures but neglected others. And here Jesus says, "These other passages matter. You can't just bypass them."

**Mark 9:13 - <sup>13</sup> But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did whatever they pleased to him, just as it is written about him."**

Matthew tells us explicitly that Jesus was referring to John the Baptist. There were some clear parallels between their lives and ministries. Not least of which was that wicked queens wanted both of them dead. It's just that Jezebel couldn't get Elijah's head, but Herodias got John's.

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<sup>14</sup> See Lane, Justin Martyr *Dialogue With Trypho*

But did you notice Jesus said both that Elijah *has* come and that Elijah does still come in the future? What's going on here? *Who's* Elijah?!?

We'll look back to Malachi 4. The prophecy is that Elijah will come, *not* to anoint the Messiah, but before the day of the Lord and Elijah will turn the hearts of fathers and children, restoring all things. But then Malachi says, "if that doesn't happen - *otherwise* - the land will be struck with a curse."

In Exodus, God led the children of Israel to the edge of the promised land. They rejected Him so there was a postponement of 40 years. Jesus came, made a genuine offer of the Kingdom to Israel. They rejected Him. They rejected His forerunner. And now there has been a postponement of 2,000 years. And the land was struck with a curse. God's people scattered through the nations.

So, Elijah still has a part to play before the Day of the Lord. What is it *exactly*? We don't know.

What's ironic is that it seems the scribes said that Elijah had to come to anoint the Messiah, who might not know he was the Messiah. Meanwhile, Jesus said John *was* Elijah. But John didn't realize it! When he was asked "Are you Elijah?" He said no!"<sup>15</sup>

So again and again the disciples are being told that they need to focus in on the teachings of Jesus and how the whole of Scripture points to Him. In the volume of the Book it is written about Him.<sup>16</sup>

In the *Wizard Of Oz*, Dorothy *hopes* that Oz will keep his promises to them. When it's revealed he's just a man, that also means he has no power to help them. But then he explains they already had the power in themselves all along.

The transfiguration of Christ shows the power is not in us, it's only in Him. *But* - He is not the only One transfigured. The Bible says that Christians, too are transfigured. The word is used only 4 times in the New Testament. Twice referring to this scene and then twice by Paul, speaking of the work God does *in us!* That we are *transformed* by the renewing of our minds.<sup>17</sup> And that as we walk with Christ, we are being transformed into His image from glory to glory.<sup>18</sup>

The disciples were still struggling with Who Jesus is. We *know* Who He is. The question is are we being transfigured by His truth, His Spirit, His sanctifying work? Are we changing and conforming to His glorious, gracious, Godly image? He is the Great and Powerful One Who *keeps* His promises. He's no phony behind a curtain. He has installed His powerful Spirit in us. He has begun the metamorphosis. Now we are a preview of the coming King and His glorious Kingdom as the Light of the Gospel shines through us.

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<sup>15</sup> John 1:21

<sup>16</sup> Hebrews 10:7

<sup>17</sup> Romans 12:2

<sup>18</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:18