

Sermons
If You're Messiah, Where's Elijah?
Mark 9:11-13
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Well, I invite you to turn with me to Mark's gospel, the ninth chapter, as we continue our study. I've entitled tonight's message, "If you're Messiah, Where's Elijah?" It stems from a question that the disciples had for Jesus after the amazing event of His transfiguration.

As I thought about the fact that the disciples were worried about Jesus' credentials and really weren't responding and accepting Him fully because of some questions about those credentials, I was reminded of an article in the London Times, back a couple of years ago. Perhaps, you read about it or heard about it in different contexts.

There was a telephone conversation with Barack Obama. He was the President Elect, and he was calling various members of Congress just to let them know that he appreciated them and to establish that point of contact. And when the President Elect called one particular Congresswoman from the district down in Miami, she hung up on him - twice! She thought the call was a hoax. The first time he called, this Republican Congresswoman greeted him by saying, "You know, you're a better impersonator than that guy who does Obama on Saturday Night Live." When he insisted that he really was Mr. Obama, the President Elect, she responded, "You are so good, but honestly, I'm too jaded for this. It's a great prank. I love it when they do it to everybody, including me - thank you very much!" According to the account, he then immediately responded, "So, what will I do to convince you that I really am who I say I am?" She replied, "Yes, sure. Have a great day!" and plunk - she hung up. A few minutes later, he tried again through his Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel. He called and said to her, "Eliana, I cannot believe you hung up on the President Elect!" The Miami Congresswoman, however, remained still suspicious, refusing to believe that it was, this time, Mr. Emanuel. So, at that point in the conversation, the record says that President Elect Obama got on the phone as well. So, now both of them were on the phone and they were both told by this congresswoman, "Guys, it's a great prank. Really, I love it, but I'm not falling for it." Plunk.

The Congresswoman simply did not believe the President was who he said he was. She doubted his authenticity because he didn't do what she expected the President to do - go through a number of intermediaries to relay a message to her. That was her explanation. When that didn't happen, she doubted his explanation.

I share that because, in a very real sense, the same problem had raised its head regarding Jesus - not so much with His disciples, as with those around the disciples and with the Scribes. And, specifically, when Jesus began to talk about His death, it raised questions in the disciples' minds. They believed He was the Messiah. They now were convinced about that but there was this one nagging question about His credentials that still needed to be cleared up.

This happens on the way down the mountain from the Transfiguration. Look at Mark 9:11. Now, remember, this is after that amazing scene that we looked at last week when Jesus allows them to see Him in His glory. Verse 11: "They asked Him, saying, 'Why is it that the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' And He said to them, 'Elijah does first come and restore all things. And yet how is it written of the Son of Man that He will suffer many things and be treated with contempt? But I say to you that Elijah has indeed come, and they did to him whatever they wished, just as it is written of him.'"

The disciples have no doubt about who Jesus is, but they are confused about how what they now know about Him, meshes with, fits with Old Testament prophecy, specifically, an Old Testament prophecy that involved Messiah and Elijah. Now, remember, they've just seen Elijah on the mountain. Remember? In that amazing Transfiguration, both Elijah and Moses show up. And so, that prompted their question.

This interchange, recorded by both Matthew and Mark, helps clear up what was a stumbling block for anybody who was familiar with the Old Testament prophecies about Messiah in the first century. You remember, Mark begins his gospel... In fact, look back at Mark 1:1. He begins his gospel with these words, "The beginning of the gospel [good news] of Jesus Christ [Christos, Messiah], the Son of God." "*I'm going to tell you the good news*", he says, "*about*

Jesus of Nazareth who is, in fact, Hamaschiach, the Messiah, the Promised One. Jesus of Nazareth is Israel's long-awaited Messiah."

Now, if you were Jewish, or if you were a God-fearing Roman Gentile like Cornelius, and you were familiar with the Old Testament, with the Septuagint, your first question would have been this: "Wait a minute! Where's the messenger? He can't be the Messiah. Where is the messenger?" Because the last prophet of Israel, some 400 years before, had promised that when Messiah came, before Messiah came, a messenger would come first and prepare the way. You see it in Malachi 3:1: "'Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,' says the LORD of hosts." That prophecy had been made almost 450 years before the ministry of Jesus and it was absolutely crucial. It was crucial. It was so important that, while all of the gospel writers don't include the birth of Christ, they all include John the Baptist, because of the prophecy. So, this section is not extraneous detail - these few verses sort of shoehorned in here after the Transfiguration. They're not unimportant. If you had lived in the first century, they would have been absolutely crucial. It goes to the heart of Jesus' credentials as the Messiah. Now, that the disciples are completely convinced that Jesus is the Messiah, this issue raises its head. Boiled down to its simplest terms, the question is this: "If You're Messiah, where's Elijah?"

Now, the first part of this text is the question that comes from them - the question about the last Old Testament prophecy about Messiah. You see it in verse 11: "They asked Him, saying, 'Why is it that the scribes say that Elijah must come first?'"

Now, let me give some context to this discussion. This conversation occurred on the day after the Transfiguration. They'd probably ascended the mountain the day before, taken most of the day to get to one of the summits, and then they had prayed. Jesus had prayed, you remember - gone off by Himself. The three disciples He'd taken with them. They prayed as well, eventually fell asleep. Jesus was transfigured before them. That was probably in the late afternoon, early evening, maybe even into the night. So, the next day they began to descend the mountain. That's where this takes place. Verse 9 says, "As they were coming down...", this conversation

takes place. Luke puts it this way: “On the next day [that is, after the Transfiguration], when they came down from the mountain.” And, eventually, they’ll come to a large crowd. We’ll look at that text next week. Verse 14 says, “When they came back to the disciples...”

Now, you put all that together and what you discover is the verses I just read to you, verses 11 through 13, occurred while they were on their way down the mountain. That means that the “they” in verse 11 is describing the three in the inner circle: Peter, James, and John. Remember, it was those three that Jesus took up with Him, up the mountain back in verse 2. It says, “Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves.” So, they’re there. The Transfiguration occurs. The next day they’re headed down. And, as they’re headed down, Jesus says, “*Don’t tell anybody about this till after My resurrection.*” And, at some point during their descent, down probably Mount Hermon, they raised this question. The three disciples of the inner circle are reflecting on all that they have heard and seen in the last eight days. Remember, it was eight days before that Jesus had said, “*I’m going to die and be resurrected.*” And now they’ve just seen this amazing occurrence of His glory on the mountain.

And they have a question. It has to do with Elijah. They’ve just seen the real Elijah there on the mountain, talking with Jesus and Moses. And so, in light of that, “They asked Him, saying, ‘Why is it that the scribes say that Elijah must come first?’”, that is, before Messiah comes.

Now, as we’ve seen before and we’ve met these guys a number of times before in Mark’s gospel, the scribes were those who had the task of ensuring the preservation of the Scripture with its integrity, the accuracy of any copies that needed to be made. And because of that, they were also the most qualified to teach. So, the scribes tended to be the teachers of the Old Testament Law and of the Prophets. And they had taught the people - they had taught the disciples, earlier in their lives, that before Messiah came, Elijah came first. The disciples are trying to reconcile what they had heard from the scribes with what they’ve learned about Jesus. The scribes said Messiah comes but, before He comes, Elijah, the Old Testament prophet, would come first as a messenger to announce Messiah’s coming. That was the prevailing idea in Jesus’ time.

In fact, if you look back in chapter 6, you remember, this comes up again and again. Mark 6, when they were trying to figure out who Jesus was, some were saying, “He is Elijah.” It’s because they anticipated Elijah’s coming before Messiah. You see it again in chapter 8:28. When Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” Some said that He was Elijah, that He was the one coming to announce the Messiah, rather than the Messiah Himself. When you get over to chapter 15, this comes back up. Chapter 15:35, when Jesus is on the cross, when He cries out with those tragic words, “MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?”, in Aramaic, they sounded very close to Elijah. And so, “When some of the bystanders [verse 35] heard it, they began saying, ‘Behold, He is calling for Elijah.’ Let us see whether Elijah will come to take Him down.” So, there was this anticipation, this sort of built-up anticipation by what the scribes taught that Elijah was going to come, and he would announce Messiah. Remember, Elijah was caught up into heaven, bodily. And so, the thought was he occupied a special place and he would come and announce the Messiah.

Some even believed that Elijah would anoint the Messiah. This idea stayed around for a long time after Jesus. In fact, more than 100 years after Christ, in the mid 2nd century, this understanding was still an issue for the Jewish apologist, Trypho, in his dialogue with Justin Martyr. Listen to what Trypho, the Jewish apologist, arguing against the Christian faith, against Christ, said, (this is from the mid 2nd century) “The Messiah, if He has indeed been born and exists anywhere, is unknown and does not even know Himself, and has no power until Elijah comes to anoint Him and make Him known to all.” So, even in the middle of the 2nd century, this idea of Elijah was still around. He’s coming.

Where did this come from? Where did this teaching about Elijah come from? What was the basis in the Old Testament for this teaching from the scribes? Well, Malachi had prophesied that before Messiah came, Elijah would come first. I already read to you Malachi 3:1 but look back at Malachi (last book in the Old Testament) - Malachi 4:5. This is how the Old Testament ends. And by the way, chronologically, this is the last book in the Old Testament as well as where it’s placed in our Bibles. “Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a

curse.” So, they expected Messiah to come, and to set up His kingdom, but before He came, Elijah would come first.

The disciples are now convinced of who Jesus is. But now He’s talking about His death and resurrection. So, the question that comes to their mind is: why hasn’t Elijah come yet and announced Jesus? Or did it mean that the scribes were all wrong about how they interpreted this text - this prophecy? Well, in the next two verses, you have Jesus’ explanation of that last Old Testament prophecy about the Messiah.

He makes several points - three points. His first point is Elijah does come first. Look at verse 12: “And He said to them, ‘Elijah does first come and restore all things.’” Jesus here affirms that what the scribes taught was, at its heart, an accurate interpretation of Malachi. Elijah comes before Messiah comes. Elijah is the forerunner.

And then Jesus adds a kind of summary of what Elijah’s responsibility will be. Notice: “[he will] restore all things.” That’s really what we read in Malachi, wasn’t it? “He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers...” In other words, this forerunner, named Elijah, will effect a spiritual restoration. The same thing is prophesied in another text about the forerunner - in Isaiah 40: “A voice is calling, ‘Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.’” Here’s the same theme. Before Messiah comes, there will be a messenger. And his responsibility is to clear the way for Messiah.

Now, we studied this text earlier, so I won’t go back there. Let me just remind you that the imagery here is, in the ancient near east, kings would send their heralds before them, sometimes months in advance, so that everything could be prepared for their arrival. What does this messenger shout to the people of the land? What message does he bring from the king. Isaiah 40:4 [he meant verse 3]: “Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God [Make ready the way of the Lord. Make His paths straight]”. Roads at that time were not properly maintained. So, the herald went before the king, announcing his arrival in time for the roads to be repaired. It meant everything that happens to

our roads here in North Texas, just with more rudimentary and basic tools. It meant removing obstacles, building bridges, causeways, strengthening crooked roads, straightening them, filling in the valleys and leveling hills.

That's what God is doing for the Messiah through the ministry of the messenger. But it's not physical preparation that God has in mind. If His people are going to be ready for the coming of Messiah, they have to be prepared spiritually and morally. The image is a preparing a road to a city. But the real message and meaning is preparing the paths of your life so that you're ready when Messiah comes. It's a demand for repentance.

But that raises another question. When Jesus affirms that their basic interpretation of Malachi was right (Elijah comes before Messiah), then the question is: where is he? That brings us to the second part of Jesus' explanation. They say, *"If You're talking about Your death, You're talking about suffering, how does that relate to the prophecy?" How does that relate to the Old Testament? How does that relate to the Elijah coming and announcing You?"*

He takes them to a second point and that is: Messiah will suffer. Jesus said, "It's true. The Old Testament prophecies Elijah will come first." But the same Old Testament that predicted Elijah's coming also predicts the suffering of the Messiah. That's Jesus point. Look at verse 12: "And He said to them, 'Elijah does first come and restore all things. And yet how is it written of the Son of Man that He will suffer many things and be treated with contempt?'" He takes them to another issue. He says, *"The Old Testament also predicts that the Messiah will suffer."*

Where is that written? Well, it's written everywhere. It's written in Genesis 3: "You shall" ... or God talking to the serpent, "you shall bruise him on the heel [the Redeemer]". Psalm 22, those words of Jesus on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning." Again, in Psalm 22: "But I am a worm and not a man, a reproach of men and despised by the people. All who see me sneer at me; they separate with the lip, they wag the head..." These are just a few of the prophecies of His suffering. Psalm 118 - a passage that the apostles refer to often in the sermons they preach in the book of Acts, verse 22: "The stone which the builders rejected [the builders rejected the stone] has become the

chief corner stone.” And in his sermon in Acts 4, Peter says, “He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone.” Isaiah 49 - He’s the despised One, the One abhorred by the nation. In Isaiah 50:6: “I gave My back to those who strike Me, and My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting.” Isaiah 52:14: “Just as many were astonished at you, My people, so His appearance was marred more than any man and His form more than the sons of men.” Of course, Isaiah 53: “He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.” This was the message of the Old Testament and, by the way, in Luke 24, after Jesus is resurrected, He takes His disciples back and he shows them that the Messiah had to suffer, and He proves it from the Old Testament. It was there. And Jesus said, not only is Elijah coming, but Messiah had to suffer.

Jesus’ third point makes it clear, because He says Elijah already came. Elijah already came. Look at verse 13: “But I say to you that Elijah has indeed come, and they did to him whatever they wished, just as it is written of him.” You remember those prophecies at the end of Malachi that we looked at - Malachi 3, Malachi 4? Jesus says Elijah already came. Both of those prophecies were partially fulfilled at the first coming of Christ. The messenger wasn’t actually Elijah. But according to John 1:21, John the Baptist said, “*I’m not Elijah.*” And yet, in spite of that, he came as Elijah would have. In fact, in Luke 1:17 he’s described as coming “in the spirit and power of Elijah”. That was the prophecy to his parents - John the Baptist’s parents: “he who will go as a forerunner before Him [the Messiah] in the spirit and power of Elijah.” That means with the same kind of character and with the same kind of ministry of reformation. Elijah already came. In fact, in Matthew 11:14 Jesus says, “And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come.”

Now, why is all that important? Because John the Baptist connects Jesus to the Old Testament. He is the connecting link. The Old Testament ends by saying Messiah is coming but before He comes, there’s going to be someone sent by God, Elijah-like, to announce Him. John the Baptist shows up and he is in so many ways just like Elijah, even down to his dress, down to his prophetic voice, down to his living in the wilderness, down to his message of repentance. So,

John the Baptist shows up and he announces, *“The Messiah is coming! He’s coming! One whose shoelace I’m not worthy to untie is coming.”* And then Jesus comes and John the Baptist, the pre-chosen pre-anointed messenger, points at Jesus and says, *“There He is! Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”* You can’t miss it. Here, again, it’s as if God is putting this sort of huge, divine, neon arrow pointing at Jesus Christ saying, *“This is the One. Listen to Him!”*

Sadly, the Jewish leaders and most of the Jewish people did not recognize John as the messenger. In fact, Jesus Himself says that in Matthew 17: “but I say to you that Elijah already came [speaking of John the Baptist], and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished.” Mark says the same thing: Jesus - “they did to him whatever they wished.” Of course, that’s a reference to his ultimate death as we studied it in chapter 6, at the hands of Herod and Herodias - beheaded, imprisoned, and beheaded.

It’s an interesting phrase at the end of verse 13, “just as it is written of him.” Where was this treatment of John the Baptist written? Not so much in a specific passage as in the type of Elijah. One commentator writes, “In this case, the Scripture has foretold the future not by prophecy, but by type. The fate intended for Elijah overtook John.” You remember what Jezebel said she was going to do to Elijah? “See if I don’t take your life by tomorrow and if I don’t, then I’ll be cursed.” And she pronounces that she’s going to be like those whose lives he took, if she doesn’t take Elijah’s life by that time the next day. It didn’t happen, but it did happen to John. Elijah spoke the truth to a weak king, Ahab, and a wicked woman, Jezebel. And Elijah suffered because of it. You remember he had to flee for his life. John the Baptist also confronted a weak king, Herod, and his wicked queen. And John too suffered but, in His case, with his life. Those prophecies in Malachi about Elijah - they were partially fulfilled in Jesus’ first coming, in the person of John the Baptist. I believe they’ll be fulfilled in His second coming, but that’s a different message for a different time. It ends with Matthew, Matthew 17:13, the parallel passage. When Jesus finished saying all of this to the disciples on their way down Mount Hermon, the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist.

Now, this passage doesn't at first glimpse appear to have much to do with us, because we don't live in the first century. Nobody here is worrying about whether or not Elijah came first. We have received and accepted Jesus as the Messiah. So, what are the implications of this passage for us?

First of all, the identity of the Messiah has been certified. The point that Jesus was making is that He is truly, inseparably linked with the Old Testament. He is the one predicted and the prophecies prove it. The forerunner has come, and the forerunner has identified Him, and there is no reason not to believe in Him.

Let me ask you tonight. Do you really believe that Jesus is who He claimed to be? Do you really believe that? God has given you every reason to believe that. He has certified it, as we marched our way through Mark's gospel, again and again - through the miracles, through the teaching, and now even through the forerunner as Jesus affirms that, in fact, John the Baptist was Elijah that was promised at the end of Malachi's prophecy. He has been announced. He has been identified. He has been certified to be the Messiah.

The only reason people don't accept it is because they won't. Don't you believe for a moment that the reason people don't accept and respond to Christ is because they just aren't convinced. The evidence is absolutely overwhelming. That's why Jesus Christ is the most respected person on the planet. The reason they won't respond to Christ is because of what it means, because if they respond to Christ, it means they have to give up their lives. It means they have to obey Him and follow Him. They have to take up the call to discipleship where Jesus says, "*You've got to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Me.*" There are lots of people who are happy to have Jesus in the back pocket, as maybe a fire insurance policy to out of hell, but they don't want the Jesus who makes those kinds of demands. And so, they find a way sometimes to sort of soften the blow by saying, "Well, I'm just not sure." The identity of Jesus is certified.

Secondly, the necessity of Messiah's suffering is proven. Jesus has predicted He's going to suffer and die, and the disciples are having a hard time with that. How could Messiah suffer and die? That doesn't fit what we expect from the Messiah. But now it has been proven. How?

Well, it was proven by the conversation on the Mount of Transfiguration. You remember? Elijah and Moses show up. There, they all are in their glory - Jesus' glory out shining them all. And they're talking about what? His death. This is something God intended to do, and God Himself put His sort of stamp of approval in that conversation by, at the end of it, coming in and covering that mountain with the shekinah glory and speaking and saying, "This is My beloved Son. Listen to Him." What He said about His death, it's true. It has to happen. And now, it is illustrated in the lives of both Elijah and John the Baptist. They spoke the truth, they lived righteous lives, and they suffered because of it. And Jesus is essentially saying the same thing is going to happen to Me. That's what the Scripture says, doesn't it? If any man will live godly in Christ Jesus, what? He will suffer. It's just the reality. It may not be physical suffering. It may be ridicule. It may be the raised eyebrow from the person across the table when you tell them you're a Christian. It may be the laugh behind your back. It may be the sort of names. It may be expletives. But it comes. And it's a necessity in Messiah's case.

The final implication for us is a general principle - a general principle that's established that suffering comes before glory. It happened with Elijah. He suffered in his ministry. He had to run, flee for his life. He was threatened with being killed and then he was transported to glory. It happened with John the Baptist. He was put to death but Jesus Christ Himself praised him as the greatest born among the sons of men. And he has been ushered into glory. It happened with Jesus. Only through humiliation and suffering will He inherit the glory. That's the message over and over again. We sang out of Philippians tonight. We sang out of Philippians 3. In Philippians 2 it says that Jesus existed in this great state of exaltation, but He humbled Himself. And He took on the form of a slave, and He eventually humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason, God highly exalted Him - suffering, humiliation, and glory. That's the pattern.

This isn't a pretty thing to hear. The same thing is true for us. Look at Romans 8. We'll close with this passage. Romans 8. Look at verse 16. Paul is in the middle of telling us that we now have the Spirit of God and through the Spirit we can cry out, "Abba! Father!". Verse 16: "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God [not by some inner voice, but by the substantiating testimony on each side of that verse], and if children, heirs also, heirs of

God and fellow heirs with Christ [now watch this], if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.”

Now, in that word “suffering”, I think there’s both suffering for Christ, because of Christ, and I think because of what he goes on to describe, he’s also talking about just the suffering that goes on in this life. Suffering precedes glory. Verse 18: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” And then he talks about all creation groans to be changed. It’s been subjected to vanity and futility because of the fall. And it longs, verse 21, “[to] be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God [the whole creation groans]. And not only this [verse 23], but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit [the promise of a harvest that’s coming. Spirit has been given to us and that’s just a promise of what’s coming], even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.” And verse 25: “...we wait eagerly for it.”

What I want you to see is that in every righteous life there is a pattern. And that pattern is suffering in this life. Sometimes it’s the normal suffering of life sanctified by the work of the Spirit in your heart. Sometimes it’s suffering because of the truth, because of what you believe, because of how you live. But that’s suffering, for Christ’s sake, ushers us into glory which cannot be even compared to what we experience here.

So, be faithful. Hold on. Don’t forget this is not all there is. This life is the front porch to eternity. As I often challenge you to do, just subtract your age from the average life expectancy of the typical American. If you’re a woman here, it’s 78. If you’re a man, it’s 74. Subtract your age and that’s how long you have left to live in this world - on average. That isn’t very long. But this isn’t all there is. This is the suffering before the glory. So, think like a Christian, live like a Christian, and remember that is coming. Live for eternity.

Let’s pray together.

Father, thank You for the wonderful example of Christ. Thank You as well for the confirmation that You've given us again and again as we've worked our way through this wonderful gospel, through the record, as we have seen You powerfully confirm who Jesus in fact was and is so that there's no question left. Lord, we say with the apostles, "You are the Messiah, the Son of God." Now, Father, help us to work that out in life. Help us to see that, in this life, that testimony might mean hardship and difficulty and trouble. But Father help us to see beyond that. Help us to see beyond the suffering to the glory. Help us to live for eternity, for the day when we will stand before our Lord and hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord!" We pray that in Jesus' name, Amen!