



The Gospel of Mark

A Living Word Independent Bible Study



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Part 26

Mark 9:30-50

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(NIV)

INTRODUCTION

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus' journey to Jerusalem began, surprisingly, by venturing north into Caesarea Philippi (in 8:27).

The journey culminates in 11:1, occupying about two and a half chapters.

The events we have seen recently – the Transfiguration and the long exorcism story of the father and son – happen within the context of this journey to Jerusalem.

Both Mark and Luke focus on this journey in their telling of the gospel story, with Luke using the journey to house a large body of teaching that is NOT in Mark's Gospel.

But like in Luke, for Mark the physical journey to Jerusalem is also a metaphor for a spiritual journey.

As Jesus travels, his disciples are being taught what it means to follow him more deeply.

Readers of Mark are invited, through the reading, to learn what it means to follow Jesus more fully alongside the disciples.

Mark 9:30-50

(NIV)

INTRODUCTION

A pattern repeats three times within these chapters:

Jesus predicts his suffering, death, and resurrection.

The disciples fail miserably.

Jesus teaches about the true nature of discipleship.

While Jesus “moves down” in humble surrender to death, in obedience to God, trusting in his future resurrection, the disciples desire to “move up”, selfishly seeking position and status, with no signs of active trust in God to secure their futures.

The entire section is bracketed by two miracles involving healing of vision – implying that we need spiritual sight to see that Jesus’ “downward” way is THE way. These are the ONLY two healings of blindness in Mark’s Gospel.

We need God’s grace to show us our own need – to overcome pride and self-sufficiency – to see who God really is, and to grow in our desire to follow and become like Jesus.

The second instance of this repeating pattern begins with 9:30-31.

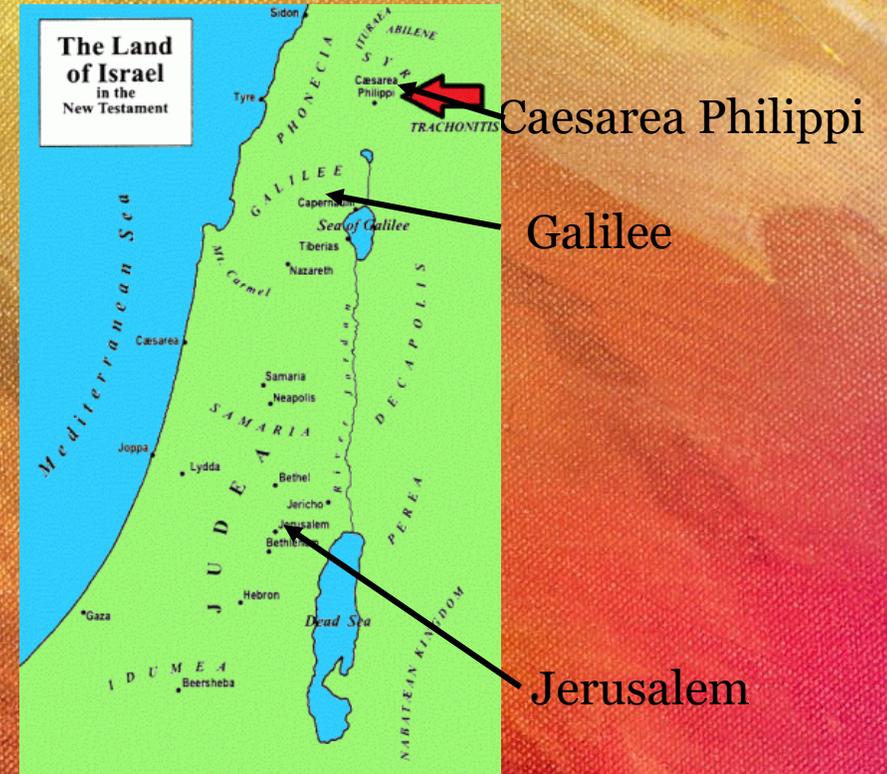
Mark 9:30 (NIV)

They left that place and passed through Galilee.
Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were,

“left that place and passed through Galilee”

They now travel from the region around Caesarea Philippi, in the north, south back into Galilee.

They are now heading in the direction of Jerusalem.



<https://meanderedwanderings.wordpress.com/2016/07/19/why-caesarea-philippi-mt-16-13-20/>

“did not want anyone to know”

Jesus wants them to travel incognito for a while – to give him the space to teach his disciples.

Mark 9:31 (NIV)

because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.”

“teaching ... betrayed ... kill him ... rise”

The content of the teaching shows the need for secrecy. Such ideas about the Messiah flew in the face of everyone’s hopes and expectations.

If such teaching were to spread, the movement might easily have collapsed, and Jesus would be widely challenged (as we saw Peter challenge him the first time).

So Jesus discusses this with only his closest followers.

The teaching itself probably involved more than JUST this saying.

It probably involved Isaiah 53, Daniel 7, and Hosea 6:1-2 – texts that the earliest Christians understood as explaining the suffering Messiah.

Read these texts in your Bible for context.

The gist of the teaching (especially from Daniel 7) would have been that God has given kingdom authority to Jesus (the Son of Man) who will contend with evil. Evil will prevail for a brief time, but the kingdom will surely overcome it.

Jesus himself will be a casualty, but his being raised up in three days demonstrates, and foreshadows, the ultimate victory.

Mark 9:32 (NIV)

But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

“did not understand”

The “dullness” of the disciples continues to be demonstrated.

“afraid to ask him”

They did not want to believe that their beloved rabbi will die.

And they do not want Jesus to underscore its certainty again.

But they probably also fear that his death could imply their own – remember that he had taught, in 8:34-37, that disciples would need to “pick up your cross” to follow him.

Mark 9:33 (NIV)

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?”

“Capernaum”

Remember from 1:21 and 2:1, Capernaum was a kind of “home base” at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry.

The “house” here is probably the same house from 1:20 – Peter’s house.



<https://bibleatlas.org/capernaum.htm>

“arguing about”

Note that in the previous verse, they were afraid to ask Jesus directly about his death, so we MIGHT think they were talking about that! But NO!

Mark 9:34 (NIV)

But they kept quiet
because on the way they
had argued about who
was the greatest.

“they kept quiet”

Not because they were still afraid, but because they are ashamed that they are arguing about who is the greatest!

Jesus is going to die, and they are arguing about rank in the Kingdom he is bringing in!

Was the point of the teaching on his death completely lost on them?

Their silence would indicate that they knew Jesus would not approve of their conversation!

Mark 9:35 (NIV)

Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.”

“sitting down”

Jesus assumes the formal posture of the teacher.

“called the Twelve”

They were already with him, but the words express Jesus’ authority over them.

The Greek word for “called” here expresses volume and command.

It is almost like a parent to children – “Come here! Sit down! This is important!”

Mark 9:35 (NIV)

Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.”

“if anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last”

The word “protos” (first) typically meant rulers, aristocrats, chief priests, people of authority and influence.

The word “eschatos” (last), on the other hand, meant no rank, no privilege, no authority. It was a state of being humans did NOT covet – a servant.

In Jesus’ kingdom, to be “first”, you must seek to serve.

Being great doesn’t have anything to do with power to heal, or to exorcise, but it has to do with service and humility.

Jesus will model this for his disciples just as he modeled the authority to heal and to exorcise.

This establishes a completely new and radical ethic for his followers, setting them apart from all other social or religious approaches to life at the time.

Mark 9:36 (NIV)

He took a little child
and had him stand
among them. Taking
him in his arms, he said
to them,

“took a little child”

Today, children are held in high regard, with schedules and lives ordered around them.

This was not so in biblical times – children were relatively invisible, often abused, with no rights, and in many ways, treated like slaves.

In fact, the Aramaic word “talya” means both “servant” and “child”!

This low view of children may stem from the fact that fewer than half lived beyond the age of 5.

By “taking a little child”, Jesus is defining what he means by “being a servant” – someone **LIKE THIS!**

The shock effect of this is impossible to grasp in our culture today.

Mark 9:37 (NIV)

“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

“welcomes”

Or, in some translations, “receives”.

The word implies being treated as a friend, or even family.

Being a servant means serving (welcoming, receiving) even the lowest (invisible, abused, without rights).

A child is an example of this “lowest” person.

And, if receiving a child is the same as receiving Jesus, it means Jesus views himself, also, as a servant.

And, the reception you give to anyone who “comes in the name of Jesus” is interpreted as a reception of Jesus ... or God Himself.

Mark 9:37 (NIV)

“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

What, though, practically, is REALLY meant by “self-sacrificial humility”?

It is NOT a cancellation of the self, or of who I am as a unique individual.

Mark 8:34 – “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

Luke 22:42 – “not my will, but yours be done.”

Galatians 2:20 – “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.”

Sometimes these passages are interpreted this way, as a call to a “cancellation of the self”, as if “I” am not important, and as if it is best if “I” just go away.

But this reflects the influence of eastern religious perspectives that envision the self being transformed into nothingness.

In Christianity, rather, the foundation is always a deep understanding of our SELVES as being beloved by God!

The goal is not NOTHINGNESS, but the “I” being perfected!

Mark 9:37 (NIV)

“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

Galatians 2:20 – “The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved **me** and gave himself for **me**.”

While Paul “dies”, his identity continues, in the light of God’s personal love for HIM.

Mark 8:36-37: “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world but forfeit **his soul**? Or what can a man give in exchange for **his soul**?”

Each soul is of inestimable worth, of infinite value – NOT something to be “lost”!

John 13:4 – “so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.”

Jesus assumes the role of a slave, but in 13:3, Jesus asserts a strong sense of personal identity:

John 13:3 – “Jesus knew that **he** had come from God and was returning to God”

Self sacrificial, humble service flows from a deep awareness of the flow of love from the Father to us, with the Holy Spirit being the channel for that love.

And God does not seek to make what he dearly loves into “nothing”!

Mark 9:38 (NIV)

“Teacher,” said John,
“we saw a man driving
out demons in your
name and we told him to
stop, because he was
not one of us.”

“driving out demons in your name”

These are actually the apostle John’s first words in Mark’s Gospel!

The man is doing a good thing, in a good way!

“we told him to stop”

Why would they do this? Because he has not been commissioned by Jesus, like the disciples have been. He is not part of their circle of relationships.

They believe the man has no **AUTHORITY** to do this!

There is a parallel story in the book of Numbers. Here, Jesus is cast in the role of Moses, and John in the role of Joshua:

Numbers 11:24-29 – “So Moses went out and told the people what the LORD had said. He brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the Tent. Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took of the Spirit that was on him and put the Spirit on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied, but they did not do so again. However, two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but did not go out to the Tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. A young man ran and told Moses, ‘Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.’ Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses’ aide since youth, spoke up and said, ‘Moses, my lord, stop them!’ But Moses replied, ‘Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!’”

Mark 9:39-40

(NIV)

“Do not stop him,”
Jesus said. “No one who
does a miracle in my
name can in the next
moment say anything
bad about me, for
whoever is not against
us is for us.”

“Do not stop him”

The reply is the same one Moses gave to Joshua!

The man was doing good, and would not be likely to speak evil about Jesus.

Also – note the irony! In 9:14-29, the disciples could not do an exorcism. Now, they try to prevent someone who can!

“Whoever is not against us is for us”

This is a saying first attributed to Cicero, in the first century BC.

In Luke, it is stated in the opposite way:

Luke 11:23 – “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters.”

Mark 9:41 (NIV)

“I tell you the truth,
anyone who gives you a
cup of water in my name
because you belong to
Christ will certainly not
lose his reward.”

“gives you a cup of water”

This implies that the man who is exorcising “in Jesus’ name” will receive HIS reward.

The heart of a disciple should be generous and open, not quick to push others away ...

While recognizing that outward appearances are not enough.

To be a servant disallows jealousy and rivalry.

Jesus does not SAY, or IMPLY, that if a miracle is performed, that person is fully confirmed in character and message!

1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 – “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.”

Testing/evaluating those who claim to speak for God is critical.

There is an accountability back to those listening, who embody the Holy Spirit for this very purpose!

Mark 9:42 (NIV)

“And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.”

“these little ones”

These are probably the children of verses 36-37.

But perhaps, even the exorcist of verses 38-41 is in view, whose faith is young and who has only a partial understanding of Jesus.

Jesus here begins teaching about the perils of causing people to stumble in their faith.

This is done from a Judgment Day perspective – the Last Judgment is clearly in mind here.

“to sin”

More literally, the words are “to stumble”, or “to fall” – a metaphor for “falling into sin”.

The warning is about failing to treat “little ones” – whether in age or in faith – as equally important or significant as the powerful and influential.

It is about failing to have consideration for the weaker and more vulnerable.

“thrown into the sea with a large millstone”

Hyperbole makes the point.

A millstone would be HUGE, and would drop you to the bottom quickly, like an anchor.

Mark 9:43-47 (NIV)

“If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the Kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell.”

“hand/foot/eye causes you to sin”

Verse 42 was about causing someone ELSE to stumble into sin.

Now, these verses are about things that cause OURSELVES to stumble!

This is again, clearly hyperbolic language – exaggeration to make a point.

There are no reports of early Christians actually cutting off body parts!

BUT ... we must be SERIOUS about addressing things that threaten our relationship with Christ, or that tempt us into sin!

This requires the help of the Holy Spirit to see and to deal with!

“thrown into hell”

The goal we are pursuing with Jesus is LIFE, not DEATH. Hell is eternal death.

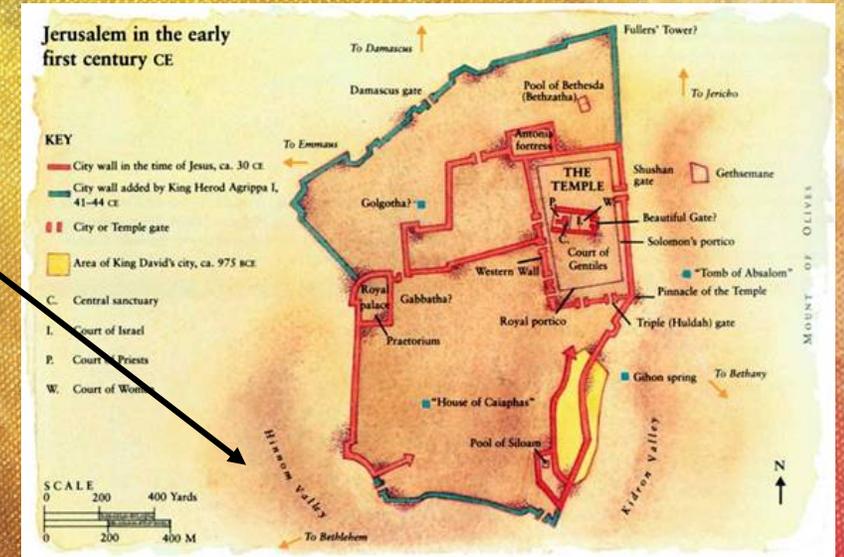
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“hell”

In Hebrew, the word is “Gehenna”.

This was a valley of ancient human sacrifice located just south of Jerusalem.



<https://i1.wp.com/paulthepoke.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/hinnom.jpg?ssl=1>

The Old Testament book of Jeremiah contains several references to this valley and the activities that occurred there:

Jeremiah 7:31 – “They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire – something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind.”

Jeremiah 19:5-6 – “They have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as offerings to Baal – something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind.”

Jeremiah 32:35 – “They built high places for Baal in the valley of Ben Hinnom to sacrifice their sons and daughters to Molech, though I never commanded, nor did it enter my mind, that they should do such a detestable thing and so make Judah sin.”

Mark 9:48 (NIV)

“where, ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’”

“worm does not die”

The quote is from the final verse of the prophet Isaiah:

Isaiah 66:24 – “And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.”

The quotation implies that causing anyone to stumble is equivalent to rebellion against God, which is what Isaiah prophesied to Israel about.

The imagery is of many rotting bodies on the battlefield, too numerous to be buried, so that the worms eat them.

Mark 9:49 (NIV)

“Everyone will be salted with fire.”

“salted with fire”

There is no single metaphorical meaning for “salt” in the Bible.

The two sayings in verses 49 and 50 relate in DIFFERENT ways to the seriousness of discipleship.

Here in verse 49, the saying implies that every true disciples will experience persecution.

Ezekiel 43:23-24 – “When you have finished purifying it, you are to offer a young bull and a ram from the flock, both without defect. You are to offer them before the LORD, and the priests are to sprinkle salt on them and sacrifice them as a burnt offering to the LORD.”

In the same way, Jesus says, every BELIEVER must be “salted with fire”.

This is purification imagery.

Malachi 3:2-3 – “But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness.”

A contrast is being drawn here.

Those who succumb to worldly temptations are cast into the fires of Gehenna, while those who submit to the PURIFYING fire of Jesus escape Gehenna.

Mark 9:50 (NIV)

“Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other.”

“salt is good”

Meaning, do not allow your unique identity as a disciple of Jesus to be lost or compromised.

Salt preserves and is sometimes a metaphor for gracious conduct:

Colossians 4:6 – “Let your conversation by always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”

Be pure and gracious - and don't lose this, because it can be hard to recover!

“have salt in yourselves”

Meaning, BEING pure and gracious deepens our Christian fellowship, and ultimately brings peace!

Mark 9:30-50

(NIV)

SUMMARY

We have now seen two of the three cycles of
Jesus predicting his suffering, death, and resurrection
8:31 and 9:30-31

Failure on the part of the disciples

Peter's rebuke of Jesus' talk of death

The argument over who is the greatest

A teaching moment from Jesus

"Take up your cross and follow me"

"The first must be last, and the servant of all"

The third cycle will happen in the second half of chapter 10.

But first, Jesus will have yet another confrontation with Pharisees,
in the first half of chapter 10.



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