

# Back down the mountain

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 25 August 2019

Preacher: Ali Sewell

[ 0 : 00 ] It would be worth keeping those verses open in front of you if you've got them there. I wonder, first of all, if anyone's ever had that experience of kind of coming back down to earth with a bump, where one minute everything seems so kind of sweet and easy, and the next minute reality comes crashing in.

A couple of years ago, my sister and her family moved house, and they'd finally got to the end of this fairly long and protracted move into their new home. And just a week or so later, they were away on holiday to Euro Disney.

So it was a great sort of time as a family, all very nice. When they got home, they found that actually there was a problem with the plumbing in the new house, and there was a leak and water everywhere, and the carpets were all moldy, and it stunk.

And worst of all, my nephew told me his football stickers had got wet. So he was pretty disappointed about that. It was one of those times when you come kind of crashing back down to earth with a bang.

They're all fine now, though, so don't be sad about that. But perhaps you've had those times yourself. One minute you're kind of right up here, and then the next minute you're right down here.

[ 1 : 09 ] Perhaps even you've had those after, you know, the kind of the summer holidays, or a bit of a break over the last couple of months. Perhaps even sometimes Sundays can seem a bit like that on a smaller scale.

It's kind of nice to get together, it's nice to sing and hear from the Bible. And yet, when we go home, the kind of the challenges and the difficulties of the world have not simply disappeared.

The passage that we're looking at this morning is perhaps the ultimate back down to earth with a bang that you can imagine. You might remember, and you'll see it just above the passage that we read here, that we finished last week, looking, although quite briefly, looking at what was called the transfiguration, which was really a glimpse for three of the disciples, a kind of look behind the scenes to see the true glory of Jesus.

Jesus there transfigured, it said, literally dazzling white. He told them prior to that that to be their Christ meant suffering and then glory. And then they get to see, they get a taste of that glory which is to come.

It was there as a great encouragement for them. And yet now we turn to our passage this morning and we start verse 9. They are coming back down the mountain. They're coming back down to real life.

[ 2 : 29 ] And they're going to come, as we said, back down with a bang. And I think really this passage in Mark, before we kind of dig into it, it's here to teach us, to remind us that actually the Christian life is not this one big, long, kind of mountaintop experience.

It is not kind of walking along on fluffy clouds far above the mess of the world below us. It's a life that is lived in that world. It's a life that is lived in that mess.

But most importantly, we're going to see here, it's a life that is lived dependent on Jesus in that mess. So let's get stuck into these verses. We mentioned last week again how this second half of Mark is really going to focus on, kind of deal with that question, what does it look like to follow Jesus?

We see here in this section four, I think four kind of big lessons that help us answer that question. And so just before we jump in, also, I'm really keen to say you might be here this morning and you might not be a Christian.

And as always, we're delighted that you're here. We think this is kind of the best place for you to be to find out all about what the Bible teaches. I'm really keen to say that this, what we're looking at this morning is not a kind of an insider thing, that we want everyone, and Jesus wanted everyone to know what following him means.

[ 3 : 51 ] Because that invitation that he offers is open to everyone. And like every invitation, we want to know what we're really being invited to. We want to know what's in store.

We want to know what is being offered before we sign up. And so that's what this passage is going to show us. So let's dig in and have a look. And the first thing is this, and it's kind of Jesus recapping what we saw last week, but it's this, it's that the Christian life is suffering now with glory to come.

It's suffering now, but glory to come. And so on the way down the mountain, Jesus talks to his disciples. He tells them not to tell anyone about this transfiguration, not to tell anyone about what they've just seen until he's risen from the dead.

And we might wonder, why is that? Why does he not want the disciples, these three disciples, to tell everyone else? And the answer really is in verse 12 and 13. You see there, the disciples ask about Elijah.

Why does it say that Elijah must come first? And we don't want to kind of spend too long here. It's kind of big picture things. But the point is this, right at the end of the Old Testament, that part of the Bible written before Jesus came, that part of the Bible that the disciples would have had and known so well.

[ 5 : 08 ] In fact, the penultimate verse of the Old Testament, a prophet called Malachi writes about how Elijah will return to mark the next great stage of God's unfolding plan.

And Elijah was a great man of God in the Old Testament. And the disciples basically here are saying to Jesus, when is this going to happen? When is Elijah going to come? Why does it say that? And Jesus says to them, well, that has happened.

And again, we're not going to kind of jump around the Bible to prove this, but the answer to that question is that John the Baptist, who was introduced at the very beginning of Mark's gospel, preparing the way for Jesus, John the Baptist is this Elijah figure.

He has come, Jesus says. This new stage in God's plan is afoot. And as we've seen it, all centers on Jesus. And yet then Jesus goes on to remind the disciples, actually, what happened to John the Baptist?

He has come, he says, and they did to him whatever they pleased. Verse 13. And actually, what did they do to him? That they killed John the Baptist. We read about that quite a while ago.

[ 6 : 19 ] Mark chapter 6. This fairly kind of grisly account of John the Baptist having his head cut off and served to King Herod on a platter. It's pretty grim.

And we think, well, what has that got to do with the disciples keeping quiet about the transfiguration? And I think kind of the idea is this. Imagine you have just seen what Peter and James and John, these three disciples, have seen, the transfiguration.

How would you describe that to the people you're going to meet at the bottom of the mountain? You'd say, you'll never believe what we have just seen. Jesus is incredible. He is glorious.

Guys, we're on the winning side. We've got no doubts. Jesus is powerful. We're just going to kind of cruise through this because he's with us. And to a degree, all those things are true.

Jesus is glorious. Jesus is powerful. They are on the winning side. But Jesus wants his disciples to know and to remember and to expect that actually before all that, that there is suffering to come.

[ 7 : 19 ] He reminds them that that is what happened to John who prepared the way. That is what's going to happen to Jesus. Remember last week, he will suffer. He will be rejected. He will be killed before he rises again.

And the point is, that is what is going to happen to these first disciples. And that is what happened. And that continues to be the pattern for followers of Jesus throughout the age. And so the transfiguration shows something incredible, something true, that there is glory to come.

But Jesus begins this section where he finished last week by making sure that the disciples understand and pass on and remember that it is suffering first and glory to come.

That is a pattern of which Jesus is not ashamed. Jesus doesn't use any kind of sales technique, a kind of bait and switch where he offers one thing but then gives something else.

Now what Jesus offers is amazing. It is glory. It is sharing in his glory for all eternity in that new Jerusalem, that new creation. But in the meantime, he's keen that we are aware that the journey to that destination, there is suffering for God's people, for Jesus' followers, just as there was suffering for him.

[ 8 : 35 ] So that's the first thing. The Christian life is suffering followed by glory. And we might ask the question, well, why is that? Why is being a Christian not easy? Why is there this present kind of suffering and struggling to go through?

And really that brings us on to the second point that we see in these verses, verse 14 onwards really. And it's this, that the Christian life is lived in a fallen world. The Christian life is lived in a fallen world.

Jesus and the disciples come down literally from this mountaintop experience and bang, they walk into a midst of this crazy, messy, kind of manic scene.

The remaining disciples are there. There's a big crowd of people there. The scribes, who are the religious leaders of the day, are there as well. They're crowding together. They're arguing. It kind of looks like a scene out of Coronation Street.

Everyone is yelling at each other. It's manic. What's going on? What's caused all this? Well, at the center of it, there is this man and his son who has an evil spirit that torments him, that damages him, that seeks to destroy him, that prevents him from speaking.

[ 9 : 47 ] Now, I think it's important that whenever we come across something like this, a kind of an evil spirit, something that we probably don't see in our day-to-day experience, just to pause for a minute and ask the questions that perhaps come to mind.

Is Mark making this up? Or is this the kind of thing that people believed back then, but actually we know better now? It's a bit of a myth. Or perhaps there was some simple medical explanation for this condition.

Perhaps it was sort of epilepsy. Some people have speculated. People just didn't know about that then, so they just kind of attributed it to spiritual possession or something like that. You know, this idea of spiritual possession, it doesn't seem normal to us, does it, in our Western world.

I think the point is here is that it wasn't normal to them either. Why has this big crowd of people gathered? Well, it's because this wasn't something they saw every day.

And kind of throughout the Bible, we see this. As Jesus arrives, it's as if kind of the spiritual temperature has been turned up and opposition arises specifically in response to him.

[ 10 : 55 ] And actually, you see that here, verse 20. It's when the spirit sees Jesus that he kicks off, that he sends the boy into convulsions, it says. And so we're not supposed to think, oh yeah, okay, I get that.

This is just an everyday scene. But we are supposed, I think, to think that this, to understand that this represents the reality of the world that we live in.

A world which is a fallen world. A world in which evil is present. A world which isn't in the perfect state that God made it. That's where we live.

And we're not supposed to read Mark chapter 9 and think, wow, things were crazy back then. We're supposed to think, wow, the world that we live in is crazy. The world that we live in is not as it should be.

There is opposition to God and his way of life. It might not look like what we read and see in Mark chapter 9. But we live in this fallen world, a world under the influence of evil.

[ 11 : 53 ] And so what does that look like? I think we see it in countless ways day by day. We see it as people put themselves first at the expense of others. We see it in the suffering that is all around us.

We see it in the injustice on our TV screens when we watch the news. We see it in the way that we worry about the world or the culture that the next generation are going to grow up in.

We see it in ourselves when actually we realize that we don't act in line with how we think other people should act. We live in this broken world that is all around us.

It is within us. It's true today and it was true when the Bible was written. And where are Jesus and his disciples? Well, they are right in the middle of it.

They're surrounded by the confused crowd. They're speaking to the man and his son who are so clearly impacted by this evil. They're exactly where they should be. Jesus hasn't said to his disciples, come up this mountain with me.

[ 12 : 53 ] Isn't it great? Oh, look down there. It looks a bit like this kind of arguing and evil stuff. Let's just stay at the top of the mountain. Let's not get involved. Maybe it will just all go away. Jesus comes down the mountain with his disciples knowing exactly what it's going to be like.

That it will be messy. That there's going to be suffering. But that that is where he needs to be. That is where his people need to be. That the Christian life is lived in this fallen world.

And I think for us and for all churches, that's a real challenge. Do we actually live our lives in the world and amongst people? Are we willing to get our hands dirty?

Are we willing to get involved in complicated situations? Willing to try and bring light into dark places, even when it's dark and messy? Even when it's places that we can't see an obvious solution?

Or would our kind of ideal world just be sort of church, kind of 24-7 as long as we could imagine it and sort of try and stay away from everything else? I can't remember where I read this, but it's much too clever for me to have thought of it myself.

[ 14 : 01 ] But it was someone speaking about the church, and particularly, I suppose, the gathered church on a Sunday, speaking of it as a kind of a military hospital. The idea is that each week, week by week, we come together out of a fallen world, a potentially hostile world, where there's suffering for being God's people.

We come together as people who have been kind of bruised and damaged through our various interactions with other broken people like ourselves. And we come together as the church as almost a kind of a military hospital.

And like a hospital, we don't think, well, this is great, I'm going to stay here for as long as possible. No, the point is we come together to be kind of encouraged, to be patched up, to build one another up, to hear from God's word, to be reminded of the good news about the gospel, and to be sent out again into that broken world.

To live alongside and rub shoulders with people who desperately need to hear the good news of Jesus. And so if that's the case, and I think it is the case, if the Bible rejects this idea of a kind of a holy huddle or an entirely kind of monastic, retreating picture of Christianity, then it moves us on.

Well, what are we supposed to be doing then? What is our role out in the world, in the place that God would have us be? Are we kind of the heroes who are going to sort out this mess? Well, that leads us on through the story, doesn't it?

[ 15 : 23 ] To help us find our place. And we see point number three, that actually the Christian life is not about us. The Christian life does not depend on us.

This whole kind of palaver at the bottom of the mountain, why has it happened? Well, it's ultimately because the remaining disciples, those who haven't been with Jesus at the Transfiguration, have utterly failed to be able to deal with this situation, to be able to deal with this evil.

Verse 18, the man says, I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able. Verse 28, the disciples say to Jesus, why could we not cast it out? Verse 29, and he said to them, this kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.

And kind of the implicit point is there, isn't it, that the disciples obviously hadn't prayed? That in the face of this evil and mess, that they hadn't actually asked God. They hadn't realized that their weakness or their dependence on him.

I played for a while in a five-a-side football team with some other guys, and we started to think at one point that we were quite good. We won a few games. We actually won a league. You don't need to know that, but I thought I'd mention it.

[ 16 : 35 ] But then one week we turned up, and we played against this team, and I still maintain that they must have been like the Brazilian football team in disguise come over to Manchester just for a Wednesday afternoon.

And we got absolutely panned. We kind of lost count of the score by the end. And for us, it was a serious kind of reality check. It was a serious reminder of our level in the grand scheme of things, that we were perhaps not all that we had started to think that we were.

And that's what happens here to the disciples. I think the point is, they've kind of begun to believe their own hype. You know, we're the disciples. We're on the inside track. We're somebodies. We're so close to Jesus.

And what do they get? Well, they get this kind of embarrassing reminder, this lesson that actually, the Christian life is not about them. The Christian life does not depend on them.

That on their own, they are way out of their depth. And it's a great reminder for us too. So yes, we are sent out to live the Christian life in a fallen world, in the world around us.

[ 17 : 41 ] Yes, we are to be in these messy situations, dealing with hurting people and broken people. But we'll be tired as if we think that we are the answer to the world's issues.

The New Testament uses a variety of various different terms to describe the role of Christians. They're described as stewards, as messengers, as ambassadors, and plenty of others.

The New Testament is quick to show that the church has this important role to play in the world around us. But all of those descriptions, all of those roles, are roles which are dependent on someone else.

They're roles that reach or point beyond themselves to the one who gives the message, to the one who gives the strength, to the one who works through our efforts, to the one who we're representing.

And really that brings us to our final point that we see here so clearly. And I think kind of the ultimate takeaway that Mark wants us to get from these verses, the Christian life is not about us. The Christian life is all about Jesus.

[ 18 : 45 ] And so here Jesus arrives on the scene and he and he alone is able to deal with the situation. He and he alone has the authority to command this spirit to leave the boy and it obeys.

It is faith in him and him alone that enables this to happen. And look what that faith looks like, by the way. It looks here pretty weak. At verse 22, if you can do anything, the man says.

At verse 34, I believe. Help my unbelief. Really kind of the dad of this boy is kind of the model for us to follow in this story.

And yet it's clearly not because he is some sort of giant of the faith with unwavering belief. It's actually because he knows he's helpless and he turns to Jesus.

Where the disciples had faith in themselves, his faith, however weak, is turned to Jesus. It's kind of as if you sort of fall off a cliff or fall down a hole and you're scrabbling around and you grab onto some gnarly old twig sticking out of the wall in the hope that it will save you.

[ 19 : 53 ] The truth is, it doesn't matter how strong your faith in that twig is. Really what matters is how strong the twig is. In the same way here, we see it's not the strength of our faith, but it is the object of our faith that saves us.

And the only thing that we can put our trust in that can hold that weight is Jesus. How do we know that he's able to hold that weight? How do we know that he is the only one able to deal with everything that we see around us?

Well, it's because of the whole trajectory of Mark's gospel is what Jesus has just previously told his disciples. That is the Christ, he will be rejected, he will suffer and he will die.

That he will experience to the fullest extent that the nature of the fallen world in which the Christian life is lived. He will suffer the ultimate consequence of evil through dying an unjust and incredibly painful death on the cross.

And there is nothing in the world that we'll face, that we'll go through, that Jesus hasn't faced, that Jesus doesn't understand. He has plumbed the depths of this fallen world and the evil that exists within it.

[ 21 : 08 ] But, as he has told his disciples, as the transfiguration has pointed to, as Mark's gospel is going to conclude with, after three days, he rose again.

that Jesus conquered that evil. That is not just a personal victory for him, that is a victory that he wins on behalf of all of those who trust in him.

And so the Christian life is all about Jesus. It is Jesus alone who has the power to deal with the evil we see in the world around us. And more than that, the evil that actually, if we're honest, we find within ourselves.

And we need to never lose sight of that. Never lose sight of the fact that we are not the heroes of this story. Never start to think that actually we'll clean things up, that we'll clean up the mess around us, that we'll clean up ourselves.

No, Jesus is the hero. He is the only one who can do that. And the incredible thing, really, is that as he does that, he chooses to use us as his people.

[ 22 : 15 ] Again, we're going to see over the next few weeks that he doesn't reject the disciples here after their failure. He doesn't say, this is pointless, I'll just do it myself. He keeps on teaching them through the next chapters. He sets them up as the foundation of the church, which has been going on for 2,000 years since.

And yet at the heart of that lesson that they need to learn, and the church continues to need to remember, is that they need to remain completely dependent on him. Our impact as a church and the world around us will only ever reach as far as our dependence on Jesus.

And that is what we need to remember. And what does that look like? Well, it means firstly trusting in Jesus and the forgiveness that he offers as our only grounds for a relationship with God.

It means putting aside the idea we can kind of drag ourselves up by our bootstraps and instead humbling ourselves before him, recognizing our need for him. And having done that, what does it look like kind of moving forwards?

Well, one thing that's vital, that's highlighted here, is prayer. If the Christian life is all about Jesus, and it is, if he's the source of power to live in a fallen world, and he is, if he's the only one who has defeated and has authority over evil, and he has, then of course we need to remain connected to him, and we do that through prayer.

[ 23 : 45 ] If we want to be a church that makes a positive impact in a fallen world, then we need to be people who individually and collectively who pray. We speak about the necessity of prayer as one of our key values as a church, which, and I'm talking to myself here as much as anyone else, we need to not just talk about that, we need to do that.

Part of, I think, our kind of suffering, the cross we bear as we follow Jesus, is that suffering of prayer. Prayer is hard. We're easily distracted.

There are a million other things that clamor for our attention. But one way that we take up our cross to follow Jesus is committing to prayer as he did. And one of the great things that we have as a church, one of the reasons that God brings us together as his people is that we can encourage one another in that.

And I'd love for us to be praying more for people as a church, more for people during the week, more for people after the service, that it would seem a normal thing to do to be praying for people and about people.

And so today, one of the great things of a passage like this is that actually we can just do this today. After service, we're going to kind of gather over here. I know that some people will have to dash off or look after kids or sort coffee or just might not feel comfortable to pray at the moment.

[ 25 : 02 ] That's fine. This isn't kind of a guilt trip or an essential thing. But it's great just to be able to say if you're free and you would like to pray, gather over in this corner just to pray that Jesus would have an impact, that Jesus would show his power in this community, that Jesus would graciously use us to do that, but that we would remember we do it in dependence on him.

Our prayer is that he would use us as a church, but that he does that. We would never lose sight of the fact that the Christian life is not about us, but it's all about Jesus. And we see in this passage that the Christian life is not all kind of sunshine and rainbows.

The Christian life is lived in a fallen world. It's lived understanding and accepting the reality of evil all around us. That means sometimes suffering for following Jesus.

But it's a life that is lived in Jesus' power and lived in the knowledge that even though there is suffering, even though there is hardship, for those who trust in Jesus, there is glory to come because he has won and we follow him.

Let's pray. Amen. Amen.