

The Pitiful Yet Marvellous Ministry of Elijah

Mark 9:9-13

Halifax: 1 March 2020 AM

Introduction

In our sermon series in Mark, we have come to the place where Jesus begins to talk to His disciples about His suffering, rejection by the chief priests, death, and resurrection.

- They have finally confessed that He is the Christ, the promised Messiah, but the idea of a suffering Messiah is inconceivable for them.
- Their expectation for the Messiah was like that of the people—that He would come in glory to lead His people to victory against their political oppressors.
- They expected Him to be on a glorious throne with fine apparel and lots of attendants, but instead He was poor and lowly and seemed to avoid all efforts at elevation.

However, last time, Jesus had taken His three closest disciples, Peter, James, and John, up on a high mountain where He was transfigured before them!

- Here they saw His glory revealed—albeit in His human nature.
- Elijah and Moses came on the scene and spoke to Him of His coming death.
- Then, the glory cloud that testifies of God’s presence enveloped them all and the voice of God was heard declaring, “This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!”

What we are looking at today is, perhaps, rather anticlimactic.

- Everything returns to normal and Jesus is left with His three disciples.
- As the four of them make their way down the mountain, Jesus tells them not to speak to anyone about what they saw until after He has risen from the dead.
- They then ask him about Elijah, understanding that Elijah was supposed to come before the Messiah comes, and Jesus answers them.

I will read the entire account to you, beginning in Mark 9:1.

- We will read about the transfiguration, and then we will read about the conversation of Jesus and His three disciples as they come down from the mountain.
- Here is the Word of God, Mark 9:1-13.

Mark 9:1-13: And He said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power.” ² Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up on a high mountain apart by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. ³ His clothes became shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth

can whiten them. ⁴ And Elijah appeared to them with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. ⁵ Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” — ⁶ because he did not know what to say, for they were greatly afraid. ⁷ And a cloud came and overshadowed them; and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is

My beloved Son. Hear Him!”⁸ Suddenly, when they had looked around, they saw no one anymore, but only Jesus with themselves.⁹ Now as they came down from the mountain, He commanded them that they should tell no one the things they had seen, till the Son of Man had risen from the dead.¹⁰ So they kept this word to themselves, questioning what the rising from the dead meant.¹¹ And they asked Him, saying, “Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?”¹² Then He

answered and told them, “Indeed, Elijah is coming first and restores all things. And how is it written concerning the Son of Man, that He must suffer many things and be treated with contempt?¹³ But I say to you that Elijah has also come, and they did to him whatever they wished, as it is written of him.”

May the LORD add His blessing to the reading and now to the preaching of His holy word.

In looking at this conversation, I want to focus in particular on the ministry of Elijah as it is spoken of by Jesus and His disciples.

- It is rather striking that even though Moses was also present, the disciples are entirely focused on Elijah.
- This is largely because the Jews believed that Elijah, who did not die but was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot, would return and restore Israel before Christ came.
- The Old Testament had concluded with a prophecy about this, which we have already read this morning.
 - So clearly, there is something very significant about Elijah that we need to consider, and that is just what I want to do now.

My outline is simple.

- First we will consider how Elijah’s ministry is representative of all true ministry.
- Second, we will see how the restoration was pitiful.
- And then third, we will see how the restoration was also marvellous.
- Let’s proceed.

I. Elijah’s ministry is representative of all true (faithful) ministry.

A. What was the essence of Elijah’s ministry? In short, he urged God’s unfaithful flock to return to God for salvation.

1. He came in the years when Israel had by and large rejected the LORD to worship Baal.
 - The kingdom had been divided into two kingdoms—the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom that was called Israel or Ephraim.
 - Judah was where the temple was, and Israel was supposed to worship there too, but under their first king (Jereboam), they had set up alternative worship at Bethel and Dan.
 - When Elijah came on the scene, they had turned far from God under the leadership of the King Ahab, who was manipulated by his wicked wife, a

pagan woman named Jezebel, who led Israel in the worship of Baal and Asherah.

- There was actually an effort to exclude the worshippers of the LORD.
 - Since Baal was the rain-god, God sent Elijah to declare to Ahab that He, the LORD, was going to withhold rain from them, and so He did for three years.
 - This was a mercy to make it clear to the people that it is the LORD, not Baal, who provides rain on the earth.
2. After three years of drought, Elijah came to Ahab and called him to bring the prophets of Baal and Asherah (850 in all) and meet him on Mt. Carmel.
- Elijah would build an altar to the Lord and they were to build an altar to Baal, and each party was to put a bull as a sacrifice on the altar and call upon their god to send fire down from heaven to consume the sacrifice.
 - The god that answered by fire would be declared to be Israel's God.
 - It was a dramatic showdown. The prophets of Baal made desperate efforts to get Baal to respond, but to no avail—reminding of them of the three years that Baal was not able to send rain either.
 - Then Elijah had them soak the wood and the sacrifice on the Lord's altar with water and made a simple prayer to God that was answered by a glorious fire from heaven that consumed everything, including the stones!
 - Then the people cried out that the LORD was God and executed the false prophets.
 - Elijah announced that the LORD would send rain that very day, and He did—after three long years without a drop.
3. The aim of Elijah was to restore Israel to God.
- This is reflected in his prayer at the altar where he said,
 - **1 Kings 18:37: Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that You are the LORD God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again.**
 - This is the goal of all ministry—to turn the hearts of God's people to the LORD so that they will look to Him as their Saviour...
 - So that they will simply come and put themselves in His hands to establish them as His people—to redeem them and to keep them and to bless them in His marvellous ways.
 - That is what the call of God is... “Look to Me and be saved!”
 - It is a call to be restored to our gracious God who redeems us through Christ. That has always been the essence of God's call to His people.
- B. And so at the end of the Old Testament, there is a promise that Elijah will come before Christ, the Messiah comes, to turn the people to God.
- In other words, when the time came for the LORD to act by coming in Christ to save His people, He would first send Elijah to prepare the people—to turn their hearts back to God as those who were looking to Him for salvation...

- as those who had turned to the LORD to save them according to His promise.
1. The prophecy was given at the very end of the Old Testament, in Malachi 4.
 - We read it earlier in the service, but let's take a look at it now.
 - First, at the end of Malachi 3, in verse 16, we are told of small group within the otherwise rebellious nation that was looking to the LORD.
 - They are referred to as those who feared the LORD and who spoke to each other about the LORD. They were looking to Him as their Saviour.
 - God says in verse 17 that when He comes to judge, these who fear the LORD "shall be mine." They will be dealt with as His faithful sons.
 - In chapter 4, there is the announcement of a terrible all-consuming judgment that the LORD will bring to destroy the proud among His people, leaving them neither root nor branch.
 - But in verse 2, He speaks to these who fear His name—who were looking to Him as their God and Saviour, saying: **But to you who fear My name the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings; and you shall go out and grow fat like stall-fed calves.**
 - And then there is the gracious call to all the people to turn to the LORD as Moses had called them to—to look to God as their gracious, saving God,
 - And there is a promise that God will send Elijah to unite their hearts with the hearts of their faithful fathers of old who also looked to the LORD.
 - The last two verses of the Old Testament, Mal 4:5-6, give us this promise: **Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.**
 - God is going to send Elijah to prepare them for the promised Sun of Righteousness (the Messiah, Christ) who will arise with healing in His wings.
 2. And so, it was expected that Elijah would come before Christ came.
 - Jesus' three disciples refer to this expectation in Mark 9:11 with their question as they came off the mountain: Mark 9:11: **And they asked Him, saying, "Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?"**
 - It was the common understanding of the Jewish teachers that Elijah would come to turn the peoples' hearts back to God before the Messiah came.
 3. Jesus declares to His disciples that Elijah had indeed come!
 - In verse 12, **Then He answered and told them, "Indeed, Elijah is coming first and restores all things."**
 - And then in verse 13, He adds: **"But I say to you that Elijah has also come, and they did to him whatever they wished, as it is written of him."**
 - Jesus was talking about John the Baptist.

- He was not literally Elijah, but he came in the spirit and power of Elijah, as was well known, to call all Israel, God's rebellious church, to repentance to prepare them for the coming of the LORD.
 - John pointed to Jesus as the LORD their redeemer and called Him the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world.
 - John's father, Zacharias, had prophesied of this of John the Baptist at his birth when he said, in Luke 1:16-17: **"And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."**
 - We can be sure that Jesus was referring to John the Baptist because in Matthew's account of this same conversation, Matthew explains, saying:
 - **Mt 17:13: Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist.**
- So Jesus affirms that the understanding that Elijah would come first was true, and that it had been fulfilled through the coming of John the Baptist.
- C. Consider how this shows us that Elijah's ministry is representative of all true ministry.
1. With the prophecy of Malachi at the end of the Old Testament, we learn that the whole ministry of the Old Testament was to turn the hearts of God's people to look to the LORD for their salvation.
 - The whole Old Testament points to our Redeemer who comes to save us.
 - From the time of the fall, God began to promise that He would call out a people that He would deliver from sin and Satan.
 - He promised repeatedly that He would provide deliverance and that He would cleanse them from their sin—think of all the altars that He appointed and all the promises of forgiveness and cleansing.
 - He declared that He was the LORD who would circumcise their hearts to love Him, that if they would cling to Him, they would be blessed, but if not they would be cursed.
 - When they went astray, His people were unique in that He sent prophets... like Elijah... to call them back to look to Him as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did.
 - The whole Old Testament culminates with "Elijah" or John the Baptist calling the people to repent and look to God's promised Saviour.
 - That is what the whole Old Testament is about.
 2. And if you think about it, this is also the ministry of the New Testament.
 - What else do the apostles do but call God's flock to repent and look to Christ... the only difference being that now He has been fully presented to us as crucified for us and raised again for our justification.

- In Romans 9-11, Paul associates his apostolic ministry with that of Elijah, explaining that he and the apostles cry out to the unfaithful church—Israel, the professing people of God—to repent and seek the LORD for their salvation...
- Today, ministers continue to cry out the church which is largely unfaithful, calling them to repent and turn their hearts back to God.
 - Yes, we call all the nations to look to God and be saved, but our first duty is always to the covenant people who, as always, are mostly unfaithful and not actually resting in the LORD.

II. Note well, the restoration is pitiful. It leaves much to be desired!

A. Truly, where was the restoration?

1. If John's ministry was the great restoration that Elijah was to bring (and it was), it was quite disappointing!
 - The disciples and the rest of the people could hardly suppose that what John did was it.
 - Surely there would be more.
 - Yes, people had been baptised with John's baptism of repentance and promise of God's cleansing to prepare the way of the LORD,
 - but could it really be said that this was the great promised turning of the peoples' hearts to align with their faithful fathers?
 - John had not been honoured.
 - He had been sent to prison and while in prison had himself sent to ask Jesus, "Are you the promised one, or do we look for another?"
 - If there was a great revival, it was surely not very visible.
2. Jesus Himself draws attention to the limited nature of the restoration in His words to His disciples here.
 - Look at what He adds to His pronouncement about John in Mark 9:12:
 - Mark 9:12-13: **Then He answered and told them, "Indeed, Elijah is coming first and restores all things. And how is it written concerning the Son of Man, that He must suffer many things and be treated with contempt? ¹³ But I say to you that Elijah has also come, and they did to him whatever they wished, as it is written of him."**
 - He highlights that not only restoration, but also suffering and rejection of both the Son of Man (the Messiah) and of John are prophesied.
 - What kind of a restoration is it where Israel ends up treating the Son of Man who came to save them with contempt and where they do to Elijah, as Jesus says, "whatever they wished."
 - You will remember that John (Elijah) had been beheaded!
 - What kind of restoration of all things was this?
 - Surely the hearts of these were not united to the fathers of the faith!

- Jesus is trying once again to get them to see that they were wrong in their expectation that the whole nation would receive Elijah when he came to turn the hearts of God’s people back to God, and that the nation as a whole would receive the Messiah.
 - Instead, they would respond much as they did when Elijah was here.
 - The visible church as a whole would not believe—only a remnant would believe.
- 3. Elijah’s ministry was not only a model of the message, but also of the meager results.
 - When Elijah had that great showdown with the prophets of Baal, we saw how he was excited that God, by this, was turning the hearts of His people back to the LORD as their Saviour—and He was...
 - But instead of a great revival of the whole nation, Queen Jezebel threatened to kill Elijah so that he fled into a place of hiding where he complained to the Lord about the failure of his ministry.
 - His assessment was this (1 Kings 19:14: **And he said, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; because the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life.”**)

TRANS> The restoration of Israel under Elijah returned (through John’s ministry) seemed even worse—culminating in the death of John, and the death of Christ Himself.

- This is a model of ministry for the church in all ages.
- B. Let’s face it, ministry results are disappointing! Few in the church actually turn to God.
1. Look at the days before the great flood—basically, there was only one faithful family in all the world in each generation until the flood.
 - God had promised and called them to look to Him for restoration, but the restoration was very small—reduced to only one family.
 2. What about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?
 - In many ways, most of their lives were God stretching out His hand to call them to look to Him for blessing and salvation...
 - but how slow they were—Abraham turning to Hagar, going down to Egypt; Isaac, trying to manipulate the blessing and bringing division to his household; and Jacob and all the mess he got himself into when he might have simply put himself in God’s hands.
 - Eventually, the Lord does establish all three of them in faithful service to Him—but the road is rough and the progress is slow and unsteady.
 - All this to show that it is God’s gracious work to save sinners!
 3. And what shall we say of Moses and the rebellions of the people in his day?

- The tender call was there to come to God for blessing, but instead the bulk of the people were unbelieving and contrary so that scripture testifies that with most of them, God was not pleased.
4. And there are the dreadful years of the judges—God has given them the land, but instead of resting in the LORD, they continue to go after other gods.
 - Yet He chastens them and continues to raise up judges to prevent them from being completely cut off from Him as their God, but the great mass of the people do not know the LORD as their Saviour.
 5. The kingdom years are no real improvement.
 - Certainly, there are some bright spots, like David, but even then there is much unbelief and ungodliness within the nation.
 - The kingdom years are terminated by the Lord who sends judgment against the nation for rejecting Him as their gracious Saviour.
 - He brings in enemies to destroy the city and the temple, all the while sending His prophets, like Elijah, to call for their repentance and restoration.
 6. So really the ministry of Elijah’s return to restore the people before the coming of Christ was more of the same.
 - It was a restoration that could hardly be recognised as such.
 - A restoration that culminated in the rejection of Elijah (John), and in the rejection of the Messiah Himself by the nation as a whole.
 7. Consider the ministry of Paul and the apostles.
 - I mentioned before that Paul sees Elijah’s ministry as a model for his own—and it is not just in the message of calling rebellious people to look to the Lord to save them,
 - but it is the model of calling a rebellious church that won’t hear.
 - That is the connection that Paul makes in Romans 9-11 where he quotes Elijah saying (Romans 11:3: **“LORD, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.”**)
 - and asks if God has indeed cast away the people that He foreknew.
 - And then what of all the letters he and the other apostles had to write as many of in the churches they had established began to turn from our gracious Lord.
 - There are the legalistic Galatians, the rebellious Corinthians, and the false teachers among the Ephesians.
 - At the end of his ministry, you have Paul shut up in prison testifying of how Demas has forsaken him and of how no one stood with him in his first defense before Caesar but how all forsook him but the Lord.
 8. And what has subsequent church history shown but more of the same?
 - We have great heresies in which the deity of Christ is denied.
 - We have the rebellious rise of prayer to Mary and the saints.
 - We have ungodliness.

- We have a constant return to salvation by works instead of turning to God for our salvation.
 - We have popes selling indulgences and instituting penance and masses in place of faith in Christ.
 - We have unfaithful bishops who purchase their offices for worldly gain.
 - We have the suppression of the scriptures.
 - We have a reformation where the church is called to return, but very soon it fades away and instead of clinging to the LORD, there is the rejection of His word and gospel and the denial of Christ.
9. I look at my own ministry.
- All along, I have urged people to look to the LORD, to repent and to turn to Him, to put themselves into the hands of the Lord Jesus for salvation.
 - But so many have fallen away.
 - That is a painful thing about a longstanding ministry—you see so many who fall away and who have to be put out of the church.
 - And you see so many who limp along—
 - You wonder when they will ever get on with serving the Lord.
 - You wonder whether they even know the Lord.
 - You wonder why they don't go on and put themselves into His hands for His promised salvation—why they go on hardening themselves against Him and not simply serving Him?

TRANS> The restoration can seem so pitiful, so weak, so slow.

- Jesus is rejected instead of embraced, ignored instead of trusted and served.

III. But the restoration of God's people is also marvellous!

A. It is marvellous because there are those who really do come to Christ.

- It is marvellous because God's grace is at work in the great mess of everything.
1. Paul summarises for us how God responded to Elijah himself when Elijah complained.
- Look with me at Romans 11.
 - After writing in Romans 9-10 about how disappointed he was that so few in Israel, in the church, had heard the call to come to the LORD for salvation, Paul refers to Elijah as an example.
 - Look at Romans 11:1-6: **I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.** [Paul himself is evidence that God is still in the business of saving His people because Paul is an Israelite and he is converted. He goes on (v. 2):] **God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying,** ³ **“LORD, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life”?** ⁴ **But what does the divine response say to him? “I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.”**

- The LORD points out to Elijah that his ministry had not failed. There were still 7000 who had not bowed to Baal. It was a small number, but the church of the LORD was not destroyed. It was still going on with the 7000, as weak and as invisible as they were. So Paul applies this to his own day: ⁵ **Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.**
 - God, by His grace, is still at work.
 - He still has His people and He carries them through.
 - It is not their greatness or goodness, but His grace that saves them and keeps them (v. 6:) **And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work.**
2. Just think of it... all through the centuries God has kept His church going by grace.
- Sometimes His people have been very hard to discern, as they were in the time of Elijah or in the time of John the Baptist (with Christ and His few weak disciples.)
 - Sometimes they are very weak and very few and it is very true that the majority in the church do not know God as Saviour—
 - but through all those times God has His people by grace and they carry on, as impossible as it sometimes seems, they carry on to the next generation.
 - God is doing His work.
 - It may not be glamorous and showy, but it continues marvellously by His hand of grace and mercy.
 - It may not be all that we could want it to be, but it is taking frail people and making them into the people of God for all eternity.

B. So then, what is the message for you?

1. The message for you is to be sure that you truly are one of God's people.
 - As Peter, who was on the mount with Jesus, put it:
 - **2 Pet 1:2-11: Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, ³ as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, ⁴ by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.**
 - That has always been the message—what else is it but to put yourself in the hands of the LORD for His salvation.
 - That was the message of Elijah, and that is our message today.
 - It is a message to repent and to turn to Christ.
 - And Peter goes on to urge you not to do this in some half-hearted unclear way. Because all this grace is to be found by coming to the LORD, Peter says:

- **5 But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, ⁶ to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, ⁷ to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. ⁸ For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.**
 - Don't leave it questionable as to whether you have truly come to Christ. You can have no assurance if you do that. Peter exhorts you to make it certain:
 - **10 Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; ¹¹ for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.**
2. Indeed, the reality is that many will be cut off.
- Jesus says so.
 - **Matthew 7:13-14: “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. ¹⁴ Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.”**
 - The only ones who are restored are those who actually come to Him to be saved that they might be His forever.
 - If you come to Him, but not to be His, forget it.
 - But if you come to Him looking to Him to make you His, He will receive you and never cast you out.
 - Ministry does not have broad success, but it is effectual for all who call upon the name of the Lord.
3. The message for you is that God is gracious and you are to look to Him to do the work. The call of the gospel ministry is simply to come to your gracious God to be saved and He will do the work. That is the message of Elijah.