Rock Valley Bible Church (www.rvbc.cc)

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June 24, 2012 by Steve Brandon

Behind the Curtain

Mark 9:1-13

1. The Unveiling (verses 1-8)
2. The Debriefing (verses 9-13)

As most all of you know, Apple Corporation is one of the most successful companies in the world. In fact, as of a few months ago, they had $100 billion in cash reserves. One of the reasons why they have been so successful is that have worked in great secrecy and have unveiled and rolled out their products before the world even knew what they were working on. Case in point is the iPhone.

Five years ago, on January 9, 2007, Steve Jobs took the stage at MacWorld 2007 and said, "This is a day I have been looking forward to for two and a half years. Every once and a while an evolutionary product comes along that changes everything. He then reviewed how Apple introduced the Macintosh in 1984, and said, "It didn't just change Apple, it change the whole computer industry." He reviewed how Apple introduces the iPod in 2001, and said, "It didn't just change the way we all listen to music, it changed the entire music industry." And he proceeded to say, "Today, Apple is going to reinvent the phone." [1]

And, of course, they did. They put a full-fledged operating system (iOS, which is a derivative of OS X) on a hand-held device. This allows for any sort of application you can dream up -- music, video, internet browsing, reading, note-taking, photos, database, contacts, calendar, email, games, etc. The iPhone didn't just change the way that we talk on phones, it changed mobile computing and our ability to communicate on-the-go.

Well, today, as we come to our exposition in the book of Mark, we will see another unveiling that changed everything. It's the unveiling of the true identity of Jesus Christ in what is often called, "The Transfiguration." If you haven't done so already, I invite you to open your Bibles to Mark, chapter 9. Before I read the text for you, I want to remind you of the words of Jesus from last week. It was the call

to follow Him. Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." These are hard words. Jesus is expecting a lot from those who want to follow Him. He expects them to give up everything for Him.

And now, in chapter 9, Jesus shows why it is that He can expect so much. It is because He is, indeed, the glorious and majestic one. What we see in the first part of Mark 9 is so stunning that anyone can see why Jesus was able to demand so much!

Going back to the Apple illustration, there is a power in their products. By nature, I'm not a Mac. I'm definitely a PC. And yet, as I have begun to use their products, they are so good that I'm close to being persuaded. Such is the majesty of Jesus. It is so great that He should be followed.

In our text this morning, we are going to see behind the curtain of the flesh of Jesus. For this reason, I have entitled my message this morning, "Behind the Curtain." Until this point in the gospel, the identity of Jesus has been veiled. In chapter 8, verse 29, Peter begins to get it when he says, "You are the Christ." And yet, He is still a bit veiled. But, in our text this morning, we will get a glimpse into the real Jesus. You see His true nature behind His flesh.

> Mark 9:1-13
> And Jesus was saying to them, " Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power."
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> Six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; and His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them. Elijah appeared to them along with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." For he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified. Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, " This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!" All at once they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, except Jesus alone.
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> As they were coming down from the mountain, He gave them orders not

> to relate to anyone what they had seen, until the Son of Man rose from the dead. They seized upon that statement, discussing with one another what rising from the dead meant. 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."

This text begins with a very curious verse in verse 1, ...

> Mark 9:1
> And Jesus was saying to them, "Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power."

Jesus makes a promise. That's the point of the word, "Truly." Jesus is saying, "This is sure fact." The promise is that some of his listeners would not die until they saw the kingdom of God.

Possible interpretations of this verse are many. Some says that it refers to the second coming of Jesus. This is the official interpretation of the Mormon Church. Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon religion, "inquired through the Urim and Thummim as to whether John, the beloved disciple, tarried in the flesh or had died." They received the revelation that Jesus gave John the "power over death" until He returns. [2]

Where do they believe that John is right now? I don't know. But, according to Joseph Smith, himself, John would remain alive until the second coming of Jesus. Now, since there have been almost 2,000 years between then and now, many find this hard to believe. I do as well. It's difficult to believe in a man who has been alive for 2,000 years.

I believe there is a better way. When we think of the "kingdom of God" coming, we often think of the end of time when Jesus comes back as judge and king. But, perhaps there is a different way of understanding the coming of the kingdom. Perhaps the kingdom of God already came during the lifetime of the disciples? There is good reason to assume that, as Jesus came preaching, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15).

Jesus said that the kingdom of God is at hand. That is, it is "near." It's not unreasonable to assume that the coming of the kingdom was near the time of Jesus.

Furthermore, when Jesus describes His return (in Mark 13), much of His description sounds like what took place when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in A. D. 70. Many of the disciples were still alive in A. D. 70. So, another interpretation of verse 1 is that Jesus was referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in A. D. 70. Perhaps.

Another interpretation is that verse 1 refers to Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the church. Certainly, that was a large event. Certainly, there was great power on that occasion with 3,000 coming to faith in Christ. Certainly, with the presence of the Holy Spirit and the advent of the church, the kingdom of God is upon the whole earth in a way that has never been before. Perhaps.

Another interpretation is that verse 1 refers to the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Certainly, that was a large event. Jesus raised from the dead and ascended to heaven where He now intercedes for us. Certainly, that was a crucial event in the coming of the kingdom. Perhaps.

However, I do believe that the best interpretation of this verse comes in verses 2-8, where we see the transfiguration of Jesus. There are several reasons I think so. First of all, there's the time element. Look at verse 2, ...

> Mark 9:2
> Six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them;

You get the sense that this is the next thing on the agenda of Jesus. It's showing His disciples the power and the glory of His kingdom. Jesus shows it to them by removing the curtain of His flesh, and allowing them to see His unveiled glory.

But, I also believe that this is the best interpretation because of Matthew and Luke. They hold the exact same sequence that Mark does. In both Matthew and in Luke, Jesus makes this same proclamation. Matthew 16:28, "Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom." Luke 9:27, "But I say to you truthfully, there

are some of those standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God." And immediately following both of these statements, we have the transfiguration -- a taste of the coming kingdom of Jesus.

Well, let's look at my first point, verses 1-8, ...
1. The Unveiling (verses 1-8)

> Mark 9:2
> Six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them;

Jesus took His three closest disciples up the mountain privately. The other nine disciples remained at the bottom. Now, there is discussion as to exactly what mountain this was. Some say Mount Tabor, located 11 miles west of the Sea of Galilee. On top of this mountain sits a church, half of which is Eastern Orthodox and half of which is Roman Catholic. The church is called, "The Church of the Transfiguration." And so, many believe that this was the location.

The problem is that this mountain really isn't much of a mountain at all. In reality, it's more like a hill, with its peak being less than 2,000 feet above sea level, hardly fulfilling Mark's description of a "high mountain." Better is Mount Hermon, which towers over 9,000 feet above sea level. It's about 12 miles northeast of Caesarea Philippi, where Jesus and the disciples were in Mark, chapter 8 (see Mark 8:27).

Now, it doesn't really matter where this took place. What matters is what took place. And what took place was no less than a miracle. Jesus Christ was "transfigured." In other words, Jesus was changed. The Greek word here is "metamorphosed." He was transformed into something different!

The transformation is described in verse 3, ...

> Mark 9:3
> and His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them.

Jesus began to shine! His garments became white. They became exceedingly white. They became shining white. In fact, they were so white that no one on earth could whiten them so white; not the strongest soap; not the strongest bleach.

How can that be? The clue comes in the first adjective. His garments became "radiant." Literally, they "shone." That is, they were like light.

Suppose that you would take a white t-shirt and shine a light behind it. What would happen? The t-shirt would get whiter yet, because the light behind it would illumine it. And the shining garment would be whiter than any garment than you have ever seen, because no garment shines of its own accord.

And that's what was happening. Jesus' skin started to glow. Matthew says that "His face shone like the sun." And His garments were translucent. Jesus was shining through them.

This is how John describes Jesus in Revelation 1. He describes Him as glowing. "His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; And His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace ... and His face was like the sun shining in its strength." (Rev. 1: 14-16) All of His body parts were lit up like a light bulb.

This is what Jesus was like upon the mountain. His skin was shining through his clothes.

You ask, "How can that be?" The better question is this: "How can this not be?" Remember, Jesus was God incarnate, walking upon the earth. Jesus was God, who had taken on flesh. Colossians 1:19 says, "It was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him." The real question was this, "How could Jesus keep His glory in?" But He did.

And now, the three disciples saw something else amazing, ...

> Mark 9:4
> Elijah appeared to them along with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus.

This is even more amazing than Jesus glowing. Jesus was God! He is the one who, "dwells in unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16). Of course, we could understand light flowing from his body. But, Elijah and Moses, raised from the dead, appearing on this mountain, and talking with Jesus!? This is amazing! This fills us with all sorts of questions. How did this happen? How can two people rise from the dead? How did the disciples recognize them? (verse 5) How can they speak with Jesus? How much do they know about what's happening on earth? Did they

know Jesus? Why did these two come on the scene -- Elijah and Moses? Why not Abraham and David? There are more questions than we can answer.

But, we can make a few observations. First of all, Moses was the prime figure regarding the law. And, Elijah was the most prominent prophet. Perhaps they came as representing all of the Old Testament.

Second, each of these men had a mysterious death. Moses died on Mount Nebo. And we are told that the LORD, Himself buried Him. But nobody knows where (Deut. 34:6). We know from Jude 9 that there was some sort of dispute over his body. Elijah was taken in a whirlwind to heaven (2 Kings 2).

Also, these men both had prominent mountain-top ministries. Moses received the law on top of Mount Sinai (Exodus 19-40). Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18).

But, here is the most exciting thing. We know what they were talking about! (Mark 9:4). In Luke's account of the Transfiguration, we read that "Moses and Elijah, ... were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (Luke 9:30-31). They were talking with Jesus about his upcoming crucifixion! How much they knew about what would take place on the cross is mystery. But, something was stirring in heaven. Moses and Elijah wanted first hand seats to talk about it.

While Moses and Elijah and Jesus all were focused upon Jerusalem and His coming death, Peter's mind wasn't there. He said in verse 5, ...

> Mark 9:5
> Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

We get the explanation of why Peter said this in verse 6, ...

> Mark 9:6
> For he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified.

Peter didn't really know what to say, and he was afraid. But, he said what was on his mind. And did you catch what Peter is saying? He wants to keep the moment. He wants to keep Jesus and Moses and Elijah on the mountain. He wants to build a tent for them, so that they can remain on the mountain.

But, Jesus' plan wasn't to remain on the mountain. His plan was to go to Jerusalem and "suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31). In many ways, I believe that Peter's words in verse 5 were similar to His words back in chapter 8, verse 32, when he rebuked Jesus, telling Him that his plan of suffering was a bad plan. But, Peter's plan to remain on the mountain was equally as bad. And we get divine confirmation about how bad it was in verse 7, ...

> Mark 9:7
> Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!"

This has echoes of Jesus' baptism. When Jesus came up out of the water, the Spirit was descending upon Him like a dove (Mark 1:10). A voice came out of the heavens: "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased" (Mark 1:11). The only difference here is the added instruction: "Listen to Him" (verse 7).

Again, I think that the idea here is that the plan of Jesus is the best plan. So, listen to Him. Submit to Him. Obey Him. When Jesus says to "deny yourself and take up your cross and follow Him," then, by all means, deny yourself and take up your cross and follow Him. When Jesus says that He is going to suffer and be killed, follow Him.

And notice how second-rate Elijah and Moses are. The voice from heaven says nothing about them, even though they are some major players in Jewish history! The voice totally ignores them. It's all about Jesus and His departure in Jerusalem.

Well, no sooner had those words come from heaven, than the cloud lifted and they were all alone on the mountain.

> Mark 9:8
> All at once they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, except Jesus alone.

Jesus had just unveiled who He really was. He is the Lord of glory. We should listen to Him.

And yet, it all doesn't sink in right then and there. The disciples needed a bit of help to think it through. Thus, after The Unveiling (verses 1-8) comes, ...
2. The Debriefing (verses 9-13)

Verse 9 finds Jesus and the three disciples descending the mountain. And Jesus begins to process with them about everything that they just saw. They had just witnessed a wondrous sight! Jesus had peeled back His humanity. They had a glimpse of His deity! And I am sure that they were ready to share their experience with the world.

Isn't this how it works? You go and see a great movie, and you come home and you want to talk about it with others. You go on a missions trip, and when you return, you want to share about what you experienced. You see an accident just outside your house, you want to talk about it with your friends. Just as these disciples had experienced something life-changing, I'm sure they wanted to share it. But, Jesus had other plans.

> Mark 9:9
> As they were coming down from the mountain, He gave them orders not to relate to anyone what they had seen, until the Son of Man rose from the dead.

Jesus said, "Don't talk to anybody." This is the last of the commands in the book of Mark to remain silent. To the leper, Jesus said, "See that you say nothing to anyone" (Mark 1:44). When Jesus raised the little girl from the dead, He gave strict orders to the disciples and to the parents to say nothing about what took place (Mark 5:43). When he gave hearing and speech to the deaf man, Jesus "gave ... orders not to tell anyone" (Mark 7:36). And when Peter said, "You are the Christ," Jesus "warned them to tell no one about Him" (Mark 8:29-30). And here we have the command when coming down from the Mount of Transfiguration, "not to relate to anyone what they had seen, until the Son of Man rose from the dead."

I think that it all has to do with timing. It's not that Jesus didn't want the world to know that He was the Messiah. It's not that Jesus didn't want the world to know of His power and majesty. But, now was not the time. There would be a time -- when He rose from the dead. But, now was not the time.

As far as we know, Peter, James and John had no problem keeping their mouths tight. But, they did have a problem with the other part of what Jesus said. The part about raising from the dead. That's what we read about in verse 10.

> Mark 9:10
> They seized upon that statement, discussing with one another what rising from the dead meant.

Now, it's not that these three disciples were unfamiliar with the concept of resurrection. They had witnessed the Jesus raising Jairus' daughter from the dead (Mark 5:35-43). They knew of the resurrection of the last day (John 11:24). They had just witnessed Moses and Elijah very much alive and very well indeed (verses 4-5).

And yet, when it came to Jesus, the Son of Man (as He identifies Himself in verse 9), they didn't have a category for what He was talking about. It simply wasn't computing. Why would the Messiah need to be resurrected from the dead? And so, they were talking about it.

I can imagine them walking down the mountain with Jesus ahead of them on the trail some 50 feet or so. And Peter and James and John talking in hushed about raising from the dead. What does He mean? How can this be? The Messiah doesn't need to rise from the dead, does he?

But, further, their discussion must have contained more than rising from the dead. I think that on the way down, they were talking about how Elijah and Moses had appeared to them also. Because, because they asked Jesus about Elijah (whom they just saw on the mountain).

> Mark 9:11
> They asked Him, saying, "Why is it that the scribes say that Elijah must come first?"

They had just seen and heard Elijah on the mountain, and were confused about this as well. And so, Jesus helps them by affirming that Elijah must come first, ...

> Mark 9:12
> And He said to them, "Elijah does first come and restore all things."

Yes, the scribes are right! Yes, Elijah will come first! Yes, Elijah will restore all things.

And then, Jesus gets to the heart of their misunderstanding.

> Mark 9:12
> ... And yet how is it written of the Son of Man that He will suffer many things and be treated with contempt?

Here is the core of their stumbling: a suffering Messiah. I think that if they would get this, they would understand the resurrection. Peter stumbled at this statement when Jesus first said it in chapter 8, verse 31 (see verse 32). They will stumble upon this statement later when Jesus will tell them the same thing in chapter 9, verse 31: "The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later." The next verse says, "They did not understand this statement" (Mark 9:32). They will stumble upon this statement in chapter 10:33-34, when Jesus will tell them the same thing. Instead of reflecting upon the suffering Savior, they will turn their hearts to the glory of the Messiah and seek the best seats in the kingdom (Mark 9: 35-40).

But, the Messiah will suffer! And then, in verse 13, Jesus returns to Elijah.

> Mark 9:13
> 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."

Matthew adds a few more details that help us to understand this. In Matthew 17, Jesus said, "Elijah is coming and will restore all things; but I say to you, that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands. Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist." (Matt 17:11-13).

This is the key: Elijah would come first. Elijah would restore all things (verse 12). John the Baptist was Elijah.

Now, Mark has already clued us in on that. When John the Baptist came on the scene, Mark quoted from Malachi 3:1, "Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way." This is an obvious reference to Elijah.

But, think about what Jesus is saying. "Yes, Elijah will come." "Yes, Elijah already came." Now, how can that be?

The best way that I know of explaining how this can be is by showing you a letter that we received in our house from "The Scooter Store." We have received several letters like this. It is addressed to Stanley Brandon at our address. I remember the first time we received a letter like this, SR (whose first name is Stanley) was about 8 years old. He was really into skateboards and scooters at the time. He thought that it was pretty cool to receive a letter from "The Scooter Store." But, then, we opened up the letter and looked at the picture of the scooter that they are trying to sell. It's a scooter for senior citizens.

Now, why did my son receive a letter like this? Because he shares a name with his grandfather. There are two Stanley Brandons!

Likewise, there are two Elijahs! There is the historical Elijah, who's story is told in 1 Kings and 2 Kings, and John the Baptist, who came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). And there may be another Elijah in the future. Jesus said in Matthew 17:11, "Elijah is coming and will restore all things."

It sort of gives you a hint at how difficult eschatology can be, with prophesies being fulfilled in multiple ways, not all of which are obvious. Although John came, identified as the forerunner, nobody fully realized who he was. Even John the Baptist denied it. When the priests and Levites from Jerusalem asked him, "Who are you? ... Are you Elijah"? (John 1:19-21), John said, "I am not" (John 1: 21).

And yet, Jesus said that John was Elijah. Perhaps John didn't even realize who he was.

I do believe that this is how many end-times events will turn out. It's only after the fact; it's only after looking back, that we can fully understand what took place and the significance of it.

In some regard, that's where the disciples faced their major difficulty. They were right there in the presence of the Messiah, and they didn't quite grasp what was going on. That's why Jesus had this debriefing session with them, seeking to help them understand.

And I want for you to see how much better we have it than they do. We often can think that it would have been so much better for us to have seen Jesus in person, ourselves; then we would believe! We often can think, if only I saw the transfiguration with my own eyes, then I would really believe!

And I say, "No. We have the better vantage point. We have the benefit of history to see the work of Jesus. We have the benefit of the Scriptures, which explain the work of Jesus to us. We are better off."

And that's exactly what Peter tells us in his second epistle. Let's turn to 2 Peter and see Peter's divine commentary on the event of the transfiguration.

> 2 Peter 1:16-21
> For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, "This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased" — and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.
>
> So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Peter is commenting upon his experience on the mount of transfiguration. Peter says that we aren't following some mythical story. No, Jesus came in the flesh. And, we saw His power and His majesty (verses 16-17). Furthermore, we heard God's voice from heaven (verses 17-18). And seeing these things and hearing these things have the effect of making the "prophetic word made more sure" (verse 19).

In other words, we ought not to look at the mountain. Rather, we ought to look at the Scriptures. Experience is not the reliable guide. The Scriptures are the reliable guide. That which happened on the mountain simply confirms the written word that we have!

And this written word tells us that Jesus Christ came as the suffering servant to die for our sins. What the disciples didn't fully realize while upon the mountain, they came to understand later.

Peter, Himself, would say to Israel, "God has made Him both Lord and Christ -- this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). And, "there is salvation in no one else;

for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Because, "He, Himself, bore our sins in His body on the cross" (1 Peter 2:24). Do you believe it?

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on June 24, 2012 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

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[1] You can watch this fascinating video here: part 1, part 2.

[2] Doctrine and Covenants, section 7 and verses 1-3.