



The Gospel of Mark - Chapter Nine

- III. Mark 8:27-16:8 - Testing Jesus' Authority in Suffering (continues)
- III.a Mark 8:27-10:52 - Journey to Jerusalem (continues)
- III.a.ii Mark 8:31-9:1 - Jesus Predicts His Death (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Nine

The chapter starts with the conclusion to a passage on teaching about the cost of true discipleship, where Jesus stated that there were disciples with him who would see him in his glory, most likely his imminent transfiguration, although other options were discussed at the end of Mark Chapter Eight.

About a week later, Jesus took three of his apostles with him and went up on a mountain, where he was transfigured in the presence of those with him. He was met by the prophets Moses and Elijah, who were sent by God apparently to discuss Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. A cloud enveloped them all to enable God to speak, giving his divine affirmation to the work of his Son. After it was over, Jesus gave strict instructions for them not to speak of it until after his resurrection.

As they were returning from the mountain, the disciples questioned Jesus on the teaching that Elijah would come first. Jesus explained to them that this was a reference to the work of John the Baptist, who was sent to prepare the way for the Messiah, both of whom were destined to suffer and die, as foretold in the Scriptures.

When they arrived back in Cæsarea Philippi, Jesus and the three apostles encountered a dispute going on between some teachers of the law, a man and the rest of the disciples. The man had brought his spirit possessed son for Jesus to heal him. When he found that Jesus was not there, he had asked the disciples to drive the spirit out, something they had done at other times but, on this occasion, they could not. Jesus rebuked those around him for their lack of faith and healed the boy before a large crowd had time to gather around him.

Afterwards, when he was alone with his disciples, Jesus again predicted his impending death and resurrection. The disciples still failed to understand. From there, they travelled back to Capernaum. On the way, the disciples had been arguing about which of them would be the greatest, so Jesus taught them about the need to serve by putting others, even a lowly child, ahead of themselves in all that they did for the Kingdom.

Jesus then taught that it is alright for anyone to teach the Gospel, providing it is authentic. They do not have to be part of any particular group to do so. For whoever speaks positively about Jesus as the Son of God cannot subsequently speak ill of him.

Jesus then concludes the chapter with a warning about causing others to stumble and fall away from the faith. He also warned of the real danger that sin posed to disciples. The cost to those who do so without repentance will be catastrophic when judgement finally comes upon them.

¹ And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.”

Mark 9:1

This verse completed the previous section and was commented on at the end of Mark Chapter 8.

III.a.iv Mark 9:2-13 - The Transfiguration

Jesus took his inner core of three apostles with him up onto a mountain, where he was transfigured in the presence of both Elijah and Moses. Then his heavenly Father spoke, giving affirmation of the work Jesus was doing. Transfiguration affords all disciples a glimpse into the Christ’s divine nature. The three disciples with Jesus saw his glory, they saw his greatness even over the most revered of men like Moses and Elijah, and they heard the divine authentication of Jesus as the eternal Son.

² After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them.

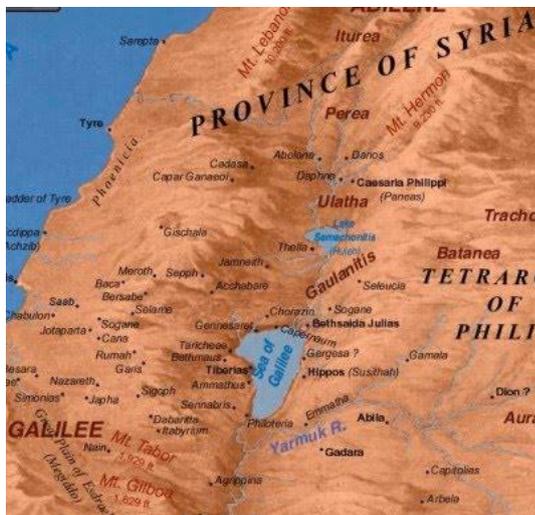
Mark 9:2

After six days is confirmed in Matthew 17:1, although Luke writes: <<**About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray**>> (Luke 9:28), which probably indicates that Matthew and Mark use actual full days, whereas Luke counted all inclusive days. All three agree that it occurred about a week after Jesus quote given in v.1, probably linking his comments to this event.

Took Peter, James and John with him. These three men had become Jesus inner core of apostles and were with Jesus on special occasions, such as the raising of Jairus’ daughter: <<**He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James**>> (Mark 5:37), and during his last night in the Garden:

<<They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled>> (Mark 14:32-33). Peter confirmed being on the mountain with Jesus and others: <<For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. He received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain>> (2 Peter 1:16-18). John also speaks of seeing his glory, probably referring to this event: <<The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth>> (John 1:14).

High mountain. Church tradition identifies this as Mount Tabor about 12 miles or 19km from the Sea of Galilee, but most scholars favour Mount Hermon, outside of Galilee, close to Cæsarea Philippi, and rising 9,166 feet or 2,794m above sea level.



The map shows Mt Hermon to the north and Mt Tabor to the southwest of the Sea of Galilee.

The image shows Mt Tabor, one of the possible locations for the Transfiguration of Jesus.



Mt Hermon, at over 9,000 ft, is a popular destination for skiers.

Either of these mountains would seem suitable for the psalmist: <<*You created the north and the south; Tabor and Hermon sing for joy at your name*>> (Psalm 89:12).

³ His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.

Mark 9:3

His clothes became dazzling white. The transfiguration offered a glimpse into the radiant and divine glory of Jesus, who is God's Son and the judge of all: <<*The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven*>> (Hebrews 1:3). The transfiguration was not an illumination of Jesus from the outside but from the inside.

Whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. That is, as white as heavenly brightness, for it is a symbol of purity: <<*As I looked, "thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze"*>> (Daniel 7:9), <<*While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them*>> (Luke 24:4), <<*They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them*>> (Acts 1:10), <<*The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire*>> (Revelation 1:14), and: <<*Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them*>> (Revelation 20:11). Prophesying the coming of the Messiah through the tribe of Judah, a dying Jacob said: <<*His eyes will be darker than wine, his teeth whiter than milk*>> (Genesis 49:12), and the prophet wrote: <<*Their princes were brighter than snow and whiter than milk, their bodies more ruddy than rubies, their appearance like lapis lazuli*>> (Lamentations 4:7).

Other descriptions of this event speak of the appearance of Jesus changing even more dramatically than his clothing: <<*There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light*>> (Matthew 17:2). It is not known if Jesus changed immediately or gradually because the disciples missed the actual process: <<*Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him*>> (Luke 9:32). Whichever it was, he was a sight to behold: <<*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life*>> (1 John 1:1). Within a few months John, an eyewitness at the Cross, would see Christ in an almost inhuman appearance after the scourging and the agony of his crucifixion: <<*But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed*>> (Isaiah 53:5 NLT).

⁴ And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

Mark 9:4

Elijah and Moses were not reincarnations, rather they came from being in the presence of God. Luke adds the detail that they discussed Jesus' imminent 'departure', which referred to his death, resurrection and subsequent ascension back to the Father: <<*They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem*>> (Luke 9:31).

Jesus is greater than both Moses, who represents the Law, and Elijah, who represents the Prophets. Jesus thus fulfilled both the Law and the Prophets, as he had so clearly stated: <<*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them*>> (Matthew 5:17).

Whereas Moses' radiance reflected God's glory: <<*When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. But whenever he entered the Lord's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the Lord*>> (Exodus 34:33-35), Jesus radiates the light of God from within himself.

⁵ Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁶ (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

Mark 9:5-6

Once more, Peter and his companions did not grasp the greatness of their Messiah or the reality of this situation. Although he realised this was a special moment in history: it is good for us to be here, Peter saw Jesus merely as someone similar in stature to these great men, Moses and Elijah, and wished to put up three shelters, possibly tents or similar structures made from available materials. They may have had some form of portable shelters with them as they on a mountain in autumn, and would be there for at least one night. These shelters would have been earthly habitations, here intended for heavenly beings, perhaps because Peter wanted to prolong the experience, although more likely because he did not know what to say in such unusual circumstances, for it was an immense experience. He was simply speaking out of natural human fear, they were so frightened.

It seems once again that Peter wanted Mark to record specifically that Peter made such mistakes and was fallible, just as he did when Jesus rebuked him, saying: <<*Get behind me Satan*>> in Mark 8:33, and later when he would deny even knowing Jesus in Mark 14:72. These are examples that add to the authenticity of this being an eyewitness account by Peter and the way he wanted to portray human frailty when trying to comprehend the true greatness of Jesus as the Christ of God, indeed God incarnate.

Peter's idea of putting up three shelters was soon superseded: <<*Then the Lord will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over everything the glory*>>

will be a canopy>> (Isaiah 4:5). This would remind them that God does not require structures built by man: <<The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else>> (Acts 17:24-25).

⁷ Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”

Mark 9:7

A cloud appeared refers to the *Shechinah* or glory of God’s presence: <<By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night>> (Exodus 13:21), <<When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the Lord. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled his temple>> (1 Kings 8:10-11), <<Then the glory of the Lord rose from above the cherubim and moved to the threshold of the temple. The cloud filled the temple, and the court was full of the radiance of the glory of the Lord>> (Ezekiel 10:4), and: <<After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight>> (Acts 1:9).

A voice came from the cloud echoes: <<When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud>> (Exodus 24:15-16). Or perhaps when God spoke to the people in Jerusalem, in answer to Jesus’ prayer: <<Father, glorify your name!” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.” The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him. Jesus said, “This voice was for your benefit, not mine>> (John 12:28-30).

This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him is uttered for the benefit of the three disciples, and is reminiscent of the baptism of Jesus: <<And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased”>> (Mark 1:11). Jesus, with all his claims, is endorsed by the Father: <<I will proclaim the Lord’s decree: He said to me, “You are my son; today I have become your father>> (Psalm 2:7), and: <<“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations>> (Isaiah 42:1).

Listen to him recalls: <<The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him. For this is what you asked of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, “Let us not hear the voice of the Lord our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die.” The Lord said to me: “What they say is good. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him>> (Deuteronomy 18:15-18), where Moses is shown to be a leader-prophet. Anyone who does not listen to the Messiah of God rejects God, who sent him, as Jesus has confirmed: <<“Whoever listens to you listens to

me; whoever rejects you rejects me; but whoever rejects me rejects him who sent me”>> (Luke 10:16).

⁸ Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

Mark 9:8

No longer saw anyone, except Jesus. Moses and Elijah had returned into glory but Jesus remained. He could have gone with them no doubt but he still had his main work to do, reconciling the whole of mankind to himself. Paul debated the option of whether he should remain on earth or to go to be with Christ. The latter was his preferred option: *<<but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith>> (Philippians 1:24-25).*

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Mark 9:9

Not to tell anyone what they had seen. Jesus commanded silence, even with regard to the other apostles and disciples, in order to avoid a popular movement that would try to make him into a political freedom fighter: *<<Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself>> (John 6:15),* thus blocking his path to suffering and dying to save his people. It would not have been in the apostles' best interests either to show the close intimacy and privilege they had shared with Jesus in this foreshowing of his glory, for it may have given rise to jealousy in the others or become a source of unhelpful pride for the three.

After the Son of Man had risen from the dead they would not only be free to tell everything, they would be commanded to do so: *<<Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age”>> (Matthew 28:18-20),* although such a command was not strictly necessary: *<<But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard”>> (Acts 4:19-20).*

¹⁰ They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what “rising from the dead” meant.

Mark 9:10

The disciples did not understand what rising from the dead meant, as they expected simply the resurrection of all mankind at the end of this age, after the coming of Elijah: *<<Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt>> (Daniel 12:2),* although in reality it goes beyond that: *<<Very truly I tell you, a time is*

coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live>> (John 5:25), and: <<Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”>> (John 11:23-26).

From a distance, both space and time, it is easy to criticise the disciples for their lack of comprehension until we realise that this was part of the way God intended it to be: <<The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about>> (Luke 18:34).

¹¹ And they asked him, “Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?”

Mark 9:11

Elijah must come first: The teachers of the law would have been referring to the prophecy: <<See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes>> (Malachi 4:5).

¹² Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected?”

Mark 9:12

Elijah does come first, and restores all things. John the Baptist restored all things by preparing the way: <<I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty>> (Malachi 3:1), for the coming of the ultimate Restorer: <<And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord>> (Luke 1:17), and: <<Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets>> (Acts 3:21).

On John the Baptist as Elijah, the prophet had written: <<Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction”>> (Malachi 4:4-6), where it is likely that this future prophet was identified with Elijah, not because Elijah was spared from death, as if this might permit a literal return to life, but because the future messenger would have a prophetic ministry similar to that of the historical Elijah: <<Now this was John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, “I am not the Messiah.” They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No”>> (John 1:19-21). When John the Baptist denied that he was Elijah, it is

possible either that he was denying that he was Elijah in person, or that he rejected, not the ministry predicted in Malachi, but misguided popular elaborations of this promise based on other notable features in the original Elijah's ministry, especially his many miracles, which pointed more to Christ than to John. As noted in Luke 1:17, John was to operate in the spirit and power of Elijah. Both John the Baptist and Jesus experienced suffering and contempt in the process of restoration: <<*He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem*>> (Isaiah 53:3). According to Jesus, Isaiah Chapter 53 and Malachi 4:4-6 should be understood together; rather than each taken in isolation. There is an overview of Isaiah Chapter 53 on the website.

Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected?

This is not a straight forward question from Jesus. What he was pointing out to his disciples was that the teachers of the law spoke of the coming of Elijah and were right to do so, for indeed he did come. However, those same Scriptures that they taught from, which tell about Elijah coming, also tell of the suffering Messiah, especially in Isaiah, who was probably the Jews' favourite prophet, and who foretold the suffering, death and resurrection of the Messiah in such great detail about 700 years earlier; yet those same teachers did not teach this to the people, as they should have. Therefore, they were not really in a position to understand that Jesus was indeed their long awaited Messiah.

¹³ But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him.”

Mark 9:13

Referring to John the Baptist, Jesus stated that Elijah has come; both were preachers of repentance, and John came in the: <<*spirit and power of Elijah*>> (Luke 1:17b). Jesus thus contradicted popular expectation (v.11), which expected and hoped for the literal return of Elijah, just as it expected a political Messiah.

III.a.v Mark 9:14-29 - Jesus Heals a Boy Possessed by an Impure Spirit

This passage represents the continued struggle against evil, as Jesus healed a boy who had an unclean spirit. This may seem like an eternal struggle although the victory has already been accomplished and it is God who is the ultimate victor.

¹⁴When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. ¹⁵As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

Mark 9:14-15

When they came to the other disciples. Jesus, along with Peter, James and John, arrived back in Caesarea Philippi following their time on the mountain. If they had been to Mt Hermon they would have been gone probably three days. Mt Tabor would have required an absence of about two weeks or so. Either way, their arrival was perfectly timed.

Both the teachers of the law and the father of the spirit-possessed child expected to find Jesus, and they transferred this expectation to his disciples, who were learning to represent Jesus. When they failed to deal with the situation, an argument broke out, although explanations of the exact nature would only be speculation.

They were overwhelmed with wonder is a statement that is difficult to explain. It is not clear whether there was something about Jesus' appearance from the transfiguration that remained, or it was simply amazement that he should arrive just at the right moment to intervene and save this poor child, especially as the teachers of the law may have been gaining the upper hand on his disciples.

Ran to greet him. This phrase translates the Greek word *prostrechontes*, which appears in many early and reliable manuscripts. Other equally reliable manuscripts have the word *proschairontes*, which means 'bidding him welcome'. This slight copyist error in no way detracts from the Scripture or the scene of excitement that was produced through the arrival of Jesus.

¹⁶ "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked.

Mark 9:16

The question posed by Jesus brought no response from the religious leaders, who were no doubt displeased to see Jesus arrive at this point, just when they had the upper hand over his disciples. The disciples themselves did not need to ask any questions for their master had returned and they could leave it all to him, so it was left to the father to open the dialogue.

¹⁷ A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. ¹⁸ Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

Mark 9:17-18

The evil spirit had robbed the boy of speech, and clearly abused him violently, making the child's life, and that of his father, clearly intolerable.

I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not. Jesus had given his apostles specific authority to drive out demons: <<*Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits*>> (Mark 6:7), and a wider group of disciples certainly had success over spirits as well: <<*The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name"*>> (Luke 10:17). It must have been puzzling to them why they could not do so on this occasion. Jesus will give them an explanation in v.29.

¹⁹ "You unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

Mark 9:19

You unbelieving generation. The fundamental problem with these people: his opponents, the spiritually oppressed, and even his own disciples at times, is that they either have no faith or their faith is in some way deficient: <<**He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”**>> (Mark 4:40), whereas everything is possible for those who do have true faith (v.23). Jesus’ burdened expression echoes that of the prophets: <<**“I will hide my face from them,” he said, “and see what their end will be; for they are a perverse generation, children who are unfaithful**>> (Deuteronomy 32:20), <<**Then I said, “For how long, Lord?” And he answered: “Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken**>> (Isaiah 6:11-12), and: <<**Hear this, you foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but do not see, who have ears but do not hear: Should you not fear me?” declares the Lord. “Should you not tremble in my presence? I made the sand a boundary for the sea, an everlasting barrier it cannot cross. The waves may roll, but they cannot prevail; they may roar, but they cannot cross it**>> (Jeremiah 5:21-22). Although this rebuke is seen by many to be aimed at the disciples, the teachers of the law would no doubt also be Jesus’ target, for they seemed to glory in the misery of the child if it meant the failure of the disciples, rather than having the hope and belief that he would be healed of his affliction.

How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? It may appear that Jesus was rebuking his disciples especially, or showing his exasperation at them at least. However, it could be more of a way of gaining their attention to the fact that he would not be with them much longer and that they would have to learn how to deal with these situations without him; although they would have the Holy Spirit by that time, leaving them exceptionally well equipped for ministry: <<**Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father**>> (John 14:12).

Bring the boy to me is a reminder that Jesus does not impose himself but everyone must go to him, whether it be for healing, rest or eternal life!

²⁰ So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

Mark 9:20

When the spirit saw Jesus. Immediately, there was recognition at a spiritual level that Jesus is his true master with superior power over him. The spirit reacted violently, abusing the boy in a terrible way perhaps as one final act of defiance because it knew what was going to happen to it. The glory will always go to God: <<**All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying: “Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!”**>> (Revelation 7:11-12).

²¹ Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?"

"From childhood," he answered. ²² "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

Mark 9:21-22

It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. The devil offers nothing to those he possesses, whether they come to him by choice or are taken by him, as this boy was from childhood.

Take pity on us and help us. Jesus' compassionate nature was as well known as his great healing power, no doubt one of the factors for the man bringing his child to Jesus in the first place. The modern church is called to reflect this same level of compassion on people, which does not mean feeling sorry for them but helping them practically in their plight, teaching them to trust in God at the same time.

²³ "'If you can?'" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes."

²⁴ Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

Mark 9:23-24

The father was merely seeking help through Jesus' miraculous powers: <<*if you can do anything*>> (v.22). Jesus corrected the father's statement: <<*if you can?*>>, by calling him to put his trust in God, everything is possible for one who believes. Of course, the man had some faith otherwise he would not have sought Jesus to start with. It is those who do not seek Jesus at all who are most at risk in their unbelief.

I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief! The father immediately confessed that he had some faith but also acknowledged his spiritual weakness and appealed to Jesus to create in him a heart that would believe more firmly, recalling the plea of King David: <<*Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me*>> (Psalm 51:10). This was a very emotional scene, with the father perhaps realising that his own deficient faith had contributed to his son's suffering, for it says in some translations that he was in tears: <<*Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"*>> (v.24 NKJV). However, people should not think that their own lack of faith is necessarily the reason why healing does not come. The issue is far more complex than that.

There are, no doubt, many disciples in churches around the world today who could identify with this man's honesty, especially when they encounter really difficult times in their own lives. Can they just sit back and rely on God's provision for their life or do they call for their own Plan B?

²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."

Mark 9:25

You deaf and mute spirit does not mean that the spirit could not speak or hear, otherwise Jesus would have had to communicate at a spiritual level with it, although he could no doubt have done both simultaneously, speaking only for the benefit of those around him. His words are more an indication of the effect that the spirit had over those it possessed, in this case the boy.

A crowd was running to the scene. News of Jesus arrival had spread around the town and people wanted to see the miracle. It seems that Jesus wanted to complete the healing before too many of them gathered around, probably to avoid too much speculation about his identity, although he would no doubt have compassion for the boy and his father, and would not have wanted to make them part of a public spectacle.

It is perhaps worth contemplating the stories of modern miracles. There are those that are witnessed by very few people and seem to be authentic. There have been occasions where similar miracles have been performed live on national television and seem perhaps bogus and faked. Even today Jesus does not see the need to make a spectacle of his ministry, recalling the words of Abraham to the rich man: <<“He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead’”>> (Luke 16:31).

I command you, come out of him and never enter him again. Jesus knew the devastation demons could cause if they returned to someone from whom they had been driven out, especially to a person who has not taken care to avoid such repossession through lack of faith and due diligence. Jesus explained this: <<“*When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, ‘I will return to the house I left.’ When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first*”>> (Luke 11:24-26). Therefore, he ensured this could not happen again to this boy for he told the spirit never enter him again. This would be a command that it could not disobey due to the overriding power of Jesus’ Holy Spirit.

²⁶ The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He’s dead.” ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

Mark 9:26-27

The spirit shrieked. This may have been petulance, an attempt to put fear into the people watching or fear on the part of the spirit. It had perhaps tried to resist the Holy Spirit of Jesus but found that its power was just too great and so it came out, but not before abusing the boy one final time, leaving him like a corpse.

He’s dead. Of course, the child may have indeed died as a result of the harm the spirit had caused him. Whether in a coma or dead, he was not beyond the power of Christ, who simply took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet.

Took him by the hand is the Greek word *kratesas*, which means to take a strong grip on the boy. No doubt it was a hold that he would have on him for the rest of his life as the boy came to know the truth of who had healed him that day. This would be similar to the blind man that Jesus healed in Jerusalem: <<*Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” “Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.” Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him*>> (John 9:35-38).

²⁸ After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?”

²⁹ He replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer.”

Mark 9:28-29

Why couldn’t we drive it out? This kind can come out only by prayer. Besides lacking understanding: <<*Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don’t you remember?”*>> (Mark 8:17-18), the disciples also apparently lacked the ability to fully carry out their commission from Jesus. Their failure here was an occasion for encouragement to more prayer, implying that more time and effort in prayer and, by implication, a closer relationship with God, would lead to growth in faith. It is interesting that Jesus did not actually pray before driving out this demon, although it is known he had spent a lot of his time in prayer to his heavenly Father, showing that it should be a natural part of a disciple’s life to pray as often as they can and wish, rather than to wait until there is a particular need in their mind to do so,

III.a.vi Mark 9:30-50 - Instruction on discipleship: putting others first

The second prediction of Jesus’ death and resurrection is followed by the second instruction in discipleship, which focuses on childlike trust and an attitude of service that places others first. This is part of the great reversal that Jesus initiated during his earthly ministry.

III.a.vi.1 Mark 9:30-37 - Jesus Predicts His Death a Second Time

This is the second of three occasions that Jesus would inform his disciples of the need for the Christ to suffer and die, then be raised on the third day. Jesus first told them this in Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:32-38), when they struggled to comprehend what he was saying. He would tell them again in Mark 10:34-45.

³⁰ They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, ³¹ because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.”

Mark 9:30-31

Jesus did not want anyone to know. Jesus sought privacy in order to continue teaching his disciples about his impending suffering in Jerusalem. While the disciples still did not understand, they would later remember the wordplay, the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men: <<Returning the third time, he said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners>> (Mark 14:41), although the Son would go where the King feared: <<David said to Gad, “I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into human hands”>> (2 Samuel 24:14).

By the foreknowledge and will of God the Father, Jesus would be intentionally delivered into the hands of men, i.e. the Jewish leaders: <<He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again>> (Mark 8:31), and Gentiles, that is, the Roman authorities that could pass a death sentence on him. The paradox is profound. The murderous intent of Jesus’ opponents succeeds, because God the Father handed him over to achieve the atonement planned through his death: <<For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many>> (Mark 10:45), <<We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all>> (Isaiah 53:6), <<After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors>> (Isaiah 53:11-12), <<This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross>> (Acts 2:23), and: <<Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen>> (Acts 4:27-28).

After three days he will rise. Jesus did not speak about his death without pairing it with his resurrection: <<The Jews then responded to him, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days”>> (John 2:18-19). His manner of death was truly horrifying and brutal. It would damage him to such an extent that he would not even appear to have been a human being, for his flesh would have been that badly mutilated by the scourging, and his face distorted beyond recognition due to the excruciating pain of crucifixion and the crushing burden of the sin of all mankind; past present and future! However, his real triumph was in overcoming that death: <<The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father>> (John 10:17-18).

³² But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

Mark 9:32

They did not understand what he meant. The disciples understood neither the necessity of the Messiah's death, for they still expected a political liberator, nor the idea of the resurrection of an individual, as they only knew of the general resurrection of mankind that would occur at the last judgment as noted previously. Yet they understood enough of what Jesus was saying so that they did not want to know more, therefore, they were afraid to ask him. Perhaps they remembered that Peter's earlier attempt to express disapproval of Jesus' predictions of suffering led to a harsh rebuke: <<*But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns"*>> (Mark 8:33).

³³ They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?"

Mark 9:33

In the house. As they were back in Capernaum, this probably refers to the home of Peter, which seems to have served as an operational base: <<*A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home*>> (Mark 2:1). As is so often the case, Jesus instructed the disciples in the privacy of his adopted home.

Jesus' question: what were you arguing about does not display his ignorance, for it served as a trigger for the following lesson on discipleship (vv.34-37). He wanted to hear the folly of their reasoning from their own lips. It also reminds all disciples that Jesus knows all that they do, say and think while they are on their journey; nothing is hidden, although he calls them to give an account in a way that is gentle, which is different from: <<*And if I had put my life in jeopardy – and nothing is hidden from the king – you would have kept your distance from me*>> (2 Samuel 18:13), although it is by their own words and deeds they will be justified or condemned.

³⁴ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

Mark 9:34

They kept quiet. In v.32 they had kept quiet because of their ignorance and lack of understanding, here it was probably because they were ashamed of the self-centredness of the conversations they had been having with each other.

Who was the greatest. In conjunction with their messianic expectation of a political liberator, the disciples' dream of status, honour, and power, perhaps along the lines of the Maccabæan revolt of 166-160BC, rather than that of the servanthood that Jesus had been so passionate about in his teaching. Amazingly, such is the fickle nature of the human mind, the disciples would have a similar discussion during the Last Supper, *after* Jesus had told them that one of them was going to betray him, where none of them, except Judas, was really sure that it

would not be them: <<A *dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest*>> (Luke 22:24).

³⁵ Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”

Mark 9:35

Sitting down. Teachers often sat in order to teach: <<At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them>> (John 8:2), and: <<In that hour Jesus said to the crowd, “Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me>> (Matthew 26:55).

Just as the Messiah of God leads by suffering, each disciple is to lead, i.e. be first, by becoming the servant of all. The suffering of Jesus not only marked the beginning of the messianic rule of God, it characterised patterns of conduct, such as humility, faith and love, all of which are required in the Kingdom of God: <<Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father>> (Philippians 2:1-11).

³⁶ He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ “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.”

Mark 9:36-37

Taking the child in his arms. The attitude of heart Jesus is teaching does not even overlook a lowly child, for at times children were marginalised in ancient societies, but he receives, and thereby cares for, such a little one in his own name. In contrast to the status-seeking of the disciples in v.34, Jesus showed them that they should willingly take on lowly, often unnoticed tasks and care for those who have little status in the world. Anyone who does this, Jesus says, welcomes me and in so doing also receives the Father, i.e. the one who sent me.

Although it can only be speculation, since they were probably in Peter's house and since it is known that Peter was married, this may well have been one of Peter's children that Jesus had picked up.

Does not welcome me should be understood as an idiom meaning: welcomes not only me; this is an example of step parallelism, in which the first thought is raised a step higher in the second thought, i.e. a child is received as a representative of Jesus; Jesus is received as a representative of God. Humbly caring for people, who are deemed to be of lowly status, out of obedience to Christ, i.e. in my name, will be rewarded by rich personal fellowship with both the Son and the Father.

This lesson in humility should have come as no surprise to them for one of their greatest men in history was also known for his humility: <<**Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth**>> (Numbers 12:3). Many Jews aspired to be like Moses; few ever were!

III.a.vi.2 Mark 9:38-41 - Whoever Is Not Against Us Is for Us

In this brief passage of Scripture, Jesus gives an insight into how the global and even local church is supposed to be. It does not matter who is doing the work or spreading the Gospel, providing it is being done authentically and with the right motives, that is, to advance the Kingdom of God.

³⁸ “Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”

Mark 9:38

Not one of us in modern times could be seen as the attitude that sometimes exists between the different denominations of the church, which is not something God instituted but has come about through the desires of men. Jesus has but one church, which is there to serve the one true God and all his followers are his own spiritual children, belonging to just one family, albeit a dysfunctional one at times.

³⁹ “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, ⁴⁰ for whoever is not against us is for us.

Mark 9:39-40

Do not stop him. No one who follows Jesus should put up barriers to others who wish to do the same. In fact, there should be open support, moral, practical and financial, from all the genuine believers for all others who are doing the work of Christ.

It is not known who this man was or how he had come to faith, although clearly he had heard Jesus teach, seen the miracles and felt called by God to serve him in a different capacity to those who physically followed Jesus. It holds similarities to the story of Eldad and Medad, who were leaders in Moses' day: <<**Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied – but 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!”>> (Numbers 11:25-29).

It could also fit with: <<I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd>> (John 10:16).

Say anything bad about me. There is a simple test that can be applied to determine who are for Christ and who are for the devil, even if only by default: <<This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God’s child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister>> (1 John 3:10). If they were false they would deny Jesus: <<For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord>> (Jude 4).

For whoever is not against us is for us. Paul put forward a similar argument: <<The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice>> (Philippians 1:17-18). All disciples are to focus on their task and leave the rest up to God, not being quick to criticise others who also follow Christ, especially those who do not belong to their group. Such generous acceptance, however, does not apply to those who do not follow Christ at all. Jesus also said: <<Whoever is not with me is against me>> (Matthew 12:30), for Jesus does not allow anyone to remain neutral about him. That is not an option and will be dealt with on the Day of Judgement.

⁴¹ Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.

Mark 9:41

Belong to the Messiah. When a person chooses to give their life to Christ it means just that!

Will certainly not lose their reward. God notices the smallest of deeds, and the giving of even a cup of water to those who proclaim the Gospel will be rewarded by God himself, providing the giving was done with the right intentions.

III.a.vi.3 Mark 9:42-50 - Causing to Stumble

The chapter concludes with a stark warning by Jesus of the penalty that will be incurred by anyone who causes others to fall away from the faith. He used the innocence of a small child to support his message.

⁴² “If anyone causes one of these little ones – those who believe in me – to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.

Mark 9:42

Jesus has emphasised that receiving lowly persons in Christ’s name means receiving him (v.37). Now he warns against causing such people, i.e. those who believe in me - to stumble and sin, that is, to lead them into disbelief or to the transgression of God’s moral laws. Any who do this will receive severe punishment from God, described as thrown into the sea with a large millstone around their neck, that is, they will sink and drown with no hope of recovery. This warning applies to anyone who would seek to destroy the faith of a child or a new Christian, either of whom could be described as Christ’s little ones.

⁴³ If your hand causes you to stumble, 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.

{{Note that v.44 and v.46 are similar to v.48 and are not included in early manuscripts. They are omitted from the NIV and included here for completeness. They are taken from the NASB translation}}

{{⁴⁴ Where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.}}

⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell.

{{⁴⁶ Where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.}}

⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to stumble, 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, ⁴⁸ where

“the worms that eat them do not die,
and the fire is not quenched.’

Mark 9:43-48

Verse 48 is quoted from Isaiah 66:24. This seems to represent the eternal punishment in hell for unrepentant sinners and was meant in the context that it is where all those who do not turn to Jesus will find themselves: <<“**Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life**”>> (Matthew 25:46). Josephus wrote that ‘The Pharisees believed that the souls of the wicked were to be punished with perpetual punishment; and that there was appointed for them a perpetual prison’. According to Philo ‘The punishment of the wicked is to live forever dying and to be forever in pains and griefs that never cease’.

Some of the other teaching in vv.43-48 is very similar to that found in the Sermon on the Mount, something that Mark largely omits: <<***If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell***>>

(Matthew 5:29-30). Jesus was not talking about self-harm but the need to refrain from sin, which may not damage the body but will actually kill the soul. It also does so much damage to so many other people that are close to the sinner.

Jesus used hyperbole, that is, intentional overstatements, to show the seriousness of sin and the fact that nothing, even things of greatest importance to humans such as a hand, foot or eye, can ever be more important than God and therefore their desire to refrain from sin should be equally important.

Hand, foot and eye probably also serve as metonymies, where one thing stands for something related to it, for sins that can be committed with these body parts. For example, the hand may represent theft or murder done by the hand; the foot may represent going somewhere to undertake a sinful act; the eye may represent coveting, lust or adultery, as in: <<*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart*>> (Matthew 5:27-28).

Of course, Jesus does not mean that people should literally cut off those body parts, for the literal removal of them cannot remove the root of sin in the heart: <<*He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come – sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person”*>> (Mark 7:20-23). Jesus’ words serve as a sober warning concerning the severity of sin, which can lead to a person being thrown into hell, the Greek gehenna, of which the prophet speaks: <<*“And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind”*>> (Isaiah 66:24), and the fire is not quenched: <<*Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, circumcise your hearts, you people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, or my wrath will flare up and burn like fire because of the evil you have done – burn with no one to quench it*>> (Jeremiah 4:4), and: <<*For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?*>> (Mark 8:35-37).

Gehenna translates the Hebrew term Gehinnom valley or the valley of the sons of Hinnom, which was located just outside Jerusalem and where the entire city’s rubbish was burned. It burned day and night, giving a glow that could be seen continuously, reminding people of what it would be like to be in the fires of purgatory.

⁴⁹ Everyone will be salted with fire.

Mark 9:49

Everyone will be salted with fire is a puzzling statement that occurs only in Mark, and many interpretations have been proposed:

1. Against the background of: <<*Season all your grain offerings with salt. Do not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your grain offerings; add salt to all your offerings*>> (Leviticus 2:13), and possibly:

Mark9-21

<<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>> (Ezekiel 43:24), some think Jesus meant that believers themselves are now what is being offered to God: <<Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship>> (Romans 12:1), and the salt that is in them is the purifying fire of God's Holy Spirit. The cleansing and purifying properties of salt support this idea, but this is surely an obscure way to refer to the Holy Spirit, and the connection to the larger context of vv.43-48 is unclear.

2. A second interpretation also views believers as a sacrifice to God against that same OT background, although it understands the salt to represent purification by the fire of suffering and hardship, which is related to the costliness of discipleship implied in the willingness to give up even a hand or an eye (vv.43-48). In other words, the willingness to give up anything and also to suffer for Christ's sake, for something costly and painful will come into everyone's life (v.49). But the salt and the fire also make the sacrifice pleasing to God; whilst having a purifying effect on the believer. Also, just as salt does not destroy but preserves food, so the suffering will not destroy the believer, it will strengthen them.
3. Others think that everyone means both believers and unbelievers, thus the verse teaches that unbelievers will undergo the terrible fire of God's judgment (vv.47-48): <<The bellows blow fiercely to burn away the lead with fire, but the refining goes on in vain; the wicked are not purged out>> (Jeremiah 6:29), and: <<Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days>> (James 5:3), while believers, although not experiencing hell, will still in this life undergo the purifying, cleansing fire of God that comes through hardship and suffering: <<This third I will put into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The Lord is our God'>> (Zechariah 13:9).

Interpretations 2 and 3 are similar, 2 being perhaps the best of all three.

⁵⁰ "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other."

Mark 9:50

Salt is good as a preservative of food in the natural and a preservative of faith in the spiritual realm.

If it (salt) loses its saltiness can it be useful again? Most salt came from the Dead Sea and contained impurities, such as carnallite and gypsum. If not processed properly, it would have a poor taste and would be worse than useless, being unusable for food and creating a disposal problem. If the conditions of discipleship are not kept, the disciples likewise will become just as worthless. Jesus may have alluded to this when he instructed John to write to the church in Laodicæa: <<I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am

about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked>> (Revelation 3:15-17).

Many commentaries on this message to Laodicea refer to the warm water springs that are a feature of the area but I believe it is more about their spirituality. In Revelation 3:1, Jesus calls the church in Sardis 'dead' and you may think that surely a 'lukewarm' church has to be better than a dead one! The problem is that, although a dead church has no impact on anyone, a lukewarm church has an impact on a lot of would-be followers of Jesus and it is usually a negative impact!

Salty Christians are those who add savour to those they meet, serve, converse with and proclaim the Gospel to. Salt is a preservative; a cure for worldliness and corruption. Those who give up on the commitment they made to Jesus by faith, and subsequently return to worldly desires, not only become of no use to others, but can actually damage those who might otherwise have sought God!

Those who lose their saltiness cannot usually be re-seasoned: *<<It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace>> (Hebrews 6:4-6). Although we must remember: <<with God all things are possible>> (Matthew 19:26b).*

Be at peace with each other calls on all believers to live under the peace and grace that comes from God and should be evident in his church: *<<If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone>> (Romans 12:18), <<Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you>> (2 Corinthians 13:11), and: <<Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other>> (1 Thessalonians 5:13).*

Peace was frequently offered in benedictions and is used in many of the NT epistles' blessings. For example: *<<May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ>> (1 Thessalonians 5:23), <<To Titus, my true son in our common faith: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Saviour>> (Titus 1:4), <<Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ>> (Philemon 3), and: <<I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face. Peace to you. The friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name>> (3 John 14). The apostles were to be carriers of peace in their Gospel proclamation: <<Look, there on the mountains, the feet of one who brings good news, who proclaims peace! Celebrate your festivals, Judah, and fulfil your vows. No more will the wicked invade you; they will be completely destroyed>> (Nahum 1:15).*