

Session 9

Listen to Him

Mark 9 | A Ransom for Many: A Catholic Journey Through the Gospel of Mark

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: Participants discover the mountain and the valley: on the heights, the Transfiguration, where the Father speaks for the second time in this Gospel and adds a command, "listen to him", and in the valley below, failed disciples, a desperate father's perfect prayer ("I believe; help my unbelief!"), an argument about greatness answered with a child, and warnings about sin and Gehenna that only love could utter.

Catholic Touchstone: The Transfiguration as the down payment on 9:1 and the strengthening for the scandal of the cross (CCC 554-556): for a moment the veil lifts, Law and Prophets stand witness, and the Father commands the one thing disciples on a hard road most need to do: listen to him.

What You Need to Know

"And after six days" (9:2): Mark almost never time-stamps, so when he does, look for the reason. Exodus 24 supplies it: the cloud of glory covered Sinai SIX DAYS, and on the seventh God called Moses, who entered the cloud (Exodus 24:18). Mark is setting a Sinai scene: a high mountain, a select few, a transfigured figure, an overshadowing cloud, a divine voice. But the differences preach louder than the parallels: Moses' face shone with a reflected glory (Exodus 34:29-35), which St. Paul reads as fading (2 Corinthians 3:7-13); Jesus RADIATES his own, "his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them," Peter's homely eyewitness comparison. Moses and Elijah appear, the Law and the Prophets in person, the two who met God on Horeb, whose earthly ends were shrouded in mystery, and they are talking WITH Jesus, the whole Old Testament in conversation with its fulfillment.

Peter's offer to build three booths is lovably wrong twice over: it puts Jesus in a row with Moses and Elijah as one of three greats, and it tries to bottle the moment, camp on the summit, and skip Jerusalem (Mark adds the merciful excuse: "he did not know what to say, for they were exceedingly afraid"). The Father's correction is a cloud and a sentence. The cloud "overshadowed" them: the *shekinah*, the glory-cloud that filled the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-35), and the voice speaks the Gospel's second divine declaration: "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." Compare 1:11 carefully with the group: at the baptism the voice spoke TO Jesus ("YOU are my beloved Son"); here it speaks TO THE DISCIPLES ("THIS IS my beloved Son"), and it adds the command that answers Peter's babbling: not build, LISTEN. "Listen to him" is loaded language: Deuteronomy 18:15 promised a prophet like Moses, "him you shall heed," and the Father, with Moses standing right there, points the fulfillment at his Son. And when the cloud passes, "they no longer saw any one with them but Jesus only": the Law and the Prophets have testified and withdrawn; the Word remains.

The descent (9:9-13) contains a thread-changing sentence: "he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, UNTIL the Son of Man should have risen from the dead." For the first time, the Secret has an expiration date. Every silence command since 1:25 has been open-ended; this one has an "until." The embargo is not permanent policy but Passion-keyed: after the Resurrection, when the cross has defined every title, tell everyone. Let your group feel the click of that piece; it confirms all their best theories. (They kept the matter to themselves, "questioning what the rising from the dead meant", not resurrection in general, which Pharisees believed, but HIS, now, in the middle of history.)

The valley (9:14-29) is the deliberate anti-mountain: while three disciples saw glory, nine could not cast out one spirit, and Jesus descends into an argument, a crowd, and a father at the end of his rope. The dialogue is the treasure: "if you can do anything, have pity on us." Jesus turns the man's "if" around, "If you can! All things are possible to him who believes", and the father cries out the prayer the Church has never stopped borrowing: "I believe; help my unbelief!" Faith and its own insufficiency in one breath, offered to the only One who can supply both, and Jesus treats it as enough. Afterward, privately: "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." (Many manuscripts add "and fasting," and the Church's tradition has warmly kept the pairing; the RSV2CE notes the variant. Either way the point stands: some battles are won only from the knees.)

The rest of the chapter is discipleship in the shadow of the second passion prediction (9:30-32, which they fail to understand "and were afraid to ask"). On the road, *on the way*, they argue about who is the greatest, the Way thread's bitterest irony so far: walking behind a man going to a cross, debating rank. Jesus' answer is a child in the arms, "If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all", and a startling widening: "he that is not against us is for us" (9:38-41), against John's attempt to shut down an unauthorized exorcist. Then the hard sayings (9:42-50): millstones for those who scandalize little ones, and the fierce hyperbole of hand, foot, and eye, better maimed than in Gehenna. Handle hell with the Church's balance (CCC 1033-1037): the warnings are real and they are Jesus' own, more than anyone else in Scripture, he is the source of this language; hell is not God's cruelty but freedom's last ratification, "definitive self-exclusion from communion with God"; God predestines no one to it; and the very ferocity of the warnings is love's tone of voice, no one screams "fire" in a building they do not care about. Gehenna itself is geography turned theology: the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem, site of child sacrifice (Jeremiah 7:31; the Molech connection at 32:35), later a smoldering image of everything God finally refuses.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- **Exodus 24:15-18.** The cloud covered Sinai six days; on the seventh God called Moses, who entered it (v. 18). Mark's "after six days" is the key that opens the whole scene: a new Sinai, with a greater-than-Moses at its summit.
- **Exodus 34:29-35 and Exodus 40:34-35.** Moses' face shone with a reflected glory and had to be veiled; St. Paul reads that glory as fading (2 Corinthians 3:7-13). The glory-cloud filled the tabernacle so that Moses could not enter. On the mountain, the Son's glory is his own, and the cloud now overshadows disciples who are invited, terrified, into its shade.
- **Deuteronomy 18:15.** "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you... HIM YOU SHALL HEED." With Moses himself standing witness, the Father quotes the promise and points it: listen to HIM.
- **1 Kings 19 and 2 Kings 2 (leader background).** Elijah met God at Horeb and was taken up without ordinary burial; Moses died with God alone as undertaker (Deuteronomy 34:5-6). The two mysterious ends of the two great mediators, both now standing in ordinary conversation with the One their whole lives pointed toward.
- **Jeremiah 7:31 (leader background).** The Valley of Hinnom, where children were burned in sacrifice (the Molech connection at Jeremiah 32:35): the history behind the word Gehenna, and the reason it became Israel's image for what God utterly and finally rejects.

Voices of the Church

Voices of the Church: St. Leo the Great (Sermon 51, on the Transfiguration)

St. Leo teaches that the great purpose of the Transfiguration was to remove the scandal of the cross from the hearts of the disciples: the excellence of his hidden dignity was revealed in advance so that

the humiliation of his freely chosen Passion, so near now, would not shake their faith. The mountain was mercy aimed at Good Friday: they were shown the glory once, so they could survive watching it veiled.

Voices of the Church: St. John Henry Newman (Apologia Pro Vita Sua)

St. John Henry Newman drew the distinction that rescues the father of Mark 9 and half the people in your group: "Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt." As his maxim is commonly unpacked: a difficulty is a question the mind is still working; a doubt is a verdict already rendered. The man who cries "I believe; help my unbelief!" is not a doubter but a believer with difficulties, and he brings them to exactly the right place: not to a debate, but to the person of Christ, who counts the prayer as faith and answers it.

Voices of the Church: St. John Chrysostom (Homilies on Matthew, Homily 58)

On the child set in the midst, St. John Chrysostom observes that Christ did not merely praise children but installed their condition as the entrance requirement of the kingdom: free of the love of rank, innocent of grudges, unimpressed by status, a child simply receives. The disease of "who is the greatest," he preaches, breeds division among Christians, and its one cure is the deliberate choice of the lowest place, after the pattern of the Master who took the lowest place of all.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 554-556:** The Transfiguration gives a foretaste of Christ's glorious coming, strengthens the disciples for the Passion, and shows that the whole Trinity appeared: the Father in the voice, the Son in the man, the Spirit in the shining cloud.
- **CCC 516:** Christ's whole earthly life is revelation of the Father; "listen to him" points the disciple to that living Word.
- **CCC 2610:** Christ's call to bold, faith-filled prayer, "all things are possible to him who believes", which the father's cry answers perfectly.
- **CCC 1033-1037:** Hell: definitive self-exclusion from communion with God, freely chosen; God predestines no one to it; the Church's warnings are a call to responsibility and conversion.

Thread Watch

Thread Watch (leader only)

The Messianic Secret: THE EXPIRATION DATE (9:9): "tell no one... UNTIL the Son of Man should have risen from the dead." The embargo is officially temporary and Passion-keyed. Let the group catch the "until" themselves; it vindicates seven weeks of their theorizing. Sealed-guess status: the Father has now said "beloved Son" twice, but a voice from heaven is not a human being. The guesses hold.

The Way (*hodos*): DEVELOPING through irony: "What were you discussing on the way?" (9:33-

34), they were ranking themselves, on the road to a cross. The Way is becoming a mirror.

Torn: Dormant, but note privately the bookend forming: heavens torn, voice, "beloved Son" (1:10-11); cloud, voice, "beloved Son" (9:7). One more voice-and-declaration remains in this Gospel, and no cloud will soften it.

The Bread: Dormant this session.

Session Goals

1. Participants discover the Sinai template (six days, cloud, voice) and can contrast borrowed and native glory.
2. Participants can explain "listen to him" via Deuteronomy 18:15 and the shift of address between 1:11 and 9:7.
3. Participants can identify 9:9 as the Secret's expiration date and articulate why the Resurrection is the release condition.
4. Participants adopt "I believe; help my unbelief!" as a usable prayer and can distinguish difficulty from doubt.
5. Participants can present the Church's teaching on hell with both full seriousness and full fidelity: freedom's ratification, warned against by Love himself.

Time Note (90 Minutes)

Win 15 min | Build 55 min | Send 15 min | Closing prayer 5 min. **Pre-chosen cuts if running long:** fold the Elijah discussion (9:11-13) into a leader sentence (John the Baptist was the Elijah-figure, and they did to him what they pleased), and compress question 7 (the outside exorcist) into the greatness discussion. Do not cut the Transfiguration sequence, the father's prayer, or the hell question.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Leader: Father, on the mountain you told us everything discipleship is: This is my beloved Son; listen to him. Quiet every other voice in us tonight, ambition, fear, distraction, and give us the ears you gave the deaf man: opened. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. Describe a mountaintop moment in your life, spiritual or otherwise, and what happened when you had to come back down. Did the descent undo it, or seal it?
2. Who in your life do you actually LISTEN to, not just hear, but let their words change your decisions? What earned them that?

Leader bridge: Last week ended with a promise: some standing here will see the kingdom come with power. Mark's very next words are "and after six days." Tonight we climb the mountain where the down payment gets made, and then we walk down into the valley where the rest of us live.

Build (55 minutes)

Read Mark 9:2-13 aloud.

1. "And after six days", Mark almost never gives time-stamps, so this one is a key. **DISCOVERY:** someone read Exodus 24:15-18 aloud. What scene is Mark rebuilding on this mountain, and, comparing Exodus 34:29-35, what is the decisive difference between Moses' shining and Jesus' shining? (Keep 2 Corinthians 3:7-13 in reach.)

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Exodus 24: the glory-cloud covered Sinai SIX DAYS, and on the seventh God called Moses into it (24:18), so Mark's time-stamp tells us we are climbing a new Sinai: high mountain, chosen few, cloud, voice. But the difference is the theology: Moses' face shone with reflected glory and was veiled (Exodus 34); St. Paul reads that glory as fading (2 Corinthians 3:7-13). Jesus is not reflecting anything: "his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them", Peter's wonderfully homely eyewitness detail, whiter than any laundry could manage. The glory is native. It streams from the inside out. For one moment on that mountain, the disciples are seeing not something given TO Jesus but something true OF him, the veil of his ordinary appearance pulled back (CCC 555: the whole Trinity appears, Father in the voice, Son in the man, Spirit in the shining cloud). And Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets in person, the two who met God on Horeb, stand there talking WITH him: the entire Old Testament in conversation with the One it was about.

2. Peter's offer (9:5-6): "let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." Mark kindly adds, "he did not know what to say." What is wrong with the offer, in two different ways? And how does the Father's response, the cloud and the sentence, correct both errors at once? **DISCOVERY:** someone read Deuteronomy 18:15.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Error one: three matching booths puts Jesus in a row with Moses and Elijah, first among peers, one more great man of God. Error two: booths are for staying; Peter wants to bottle the moment and

camp on the summit, which, given last week, is Caesarea Philippi's glory-without-a-cross wish in architectural form. The cloud answers error two: it is the *shekinah*, the tabernacle glory of Exodus 40, and you do not build tents for God; he brings his own. The voice answers error one: "THIS is my beloved Son", not one of three, and when the cloud lifts, Moses and Elijah are gone: "they no longer saw any one with them but Jesus only." The witnesses testified and withdrew; the Word remains. And weigh the command, the only imperative God the Father speaks in this entire Gospel: "LISTEN TO HIM." Deuteronomy 18:15 promised a prophet like Moses, "him you shall heed", and the Father, with Moses standing right there as witness, points the ancient promise at his Son. Also mark the change of address from the baptism: at 1:11 the voice spoke TO Jesus ("YOU are my beloved Son"); here it speaks to the DISCIPLES ("THIS IS..."). The first declaration was for the Son; the second is for us. And listening to him, this week of all weeks, means listening to a man who keeps saying he will be killed and rise. Which is exactly what nobody wants to hear.

3. **The descent (9:9-10): "he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, UNTIL the Son of Man should have risen from the dead." Your group has spent eight weeks theorizing about the silence commands. What is brand new in this one, and what does it confirm?**

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The word UNTIL. Every silence command since 1:25 has been open-ended; this one has an expiration date, and the date is the Resurrection. The Secret is officially temporary and Passion-keyed: the titles and the glory cannot be preached until the cross has defined them, and once the Son of Man has risen, the embargo lifts and the lamp goes on the stand (remember 4:21-22: hidden ONLY in order to be revealed). This confirms the group's best theories and sharpens the plot: something must happen at the cross and the empty tomb that makes the truth finally sayable, safely, correctly, out loud. If your sealed guessers are getting restless, they should be. Note the disciples' response with sympathy: they kept it, "questioning what the rising from the dead meant", not doubting resurrection in general (most Jews expected one, at the end of time) but baffled by HIS, in the middle of history. They have the vocabulary and not yet the grammar.

Read Mark 9:14-29 aloud.

4. **The valley (9:14-29): while three saw glory, nine could not cast out one spirit, and a father is at the end of his rope: "if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us." Trace the exchange: what does Jesus do with the man's "if," and what do you make of the prayer that results, "I believe; help my unbelief!"? Be honest about whether you have ever prayed it.**

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Jesus picks the "if" up and hands it back: "IF you can! All things are possible to him who believes", not a rebuke so much as a re-aiming: the question was never Jesus' capacity but the man's trust, and the man rises to it with the most honest prayer in Scripture: "I believe; help my unbelief!" Faith and its own insufficiency in one breath, both offered to Christ, and, this is the Gospel, JESUS TREATS IT AS ENOUGH. He does not send the man away to firm up his faith and reapply; he heals the boy on the strength of a faith that is asking for help being faith. This prayer is usable equipment for everyone in your group: St. John Henry Newman's distinction is the key, ten thousand DIFFICULTIES do not make one DOUBT; as the maxim is commonly unpacked, a difficulty is a question still being worked, a doubt a verdict already rendered, and the father is a believer with difficulties who brings them to the right address. So can we (CCC 2610). And the private epilogue: "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer", many manuscripts add "and fasting," and

the Church has warmly kept the pairing, because the nine had apparently been attempting by technique what is only given through dependence. Some battles are won exclusively from the knees.

Read Mark 9:30-50 aloud.

5. **Second passion prediction (9:30-32), and then Mark's bitter little scene: "What were you discussing on the way?" Silence, "for on the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest." Sit in that irony. Then Jesus' answer: last of all, servant of all, and a child placed in the midst. Why a CHILD, in that culture, and what exactly is he installing as the kingdom's measure of greatness?**

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The irony first: walking behind a man who has just said, again, that he will be delivered up and killed, they are ranking themselves. The Way is becoming a mirror, and nobody likes the reflection; hence the embarrassed silence when he asks. The child: in the ancient world children held low status: loved, but without leverage, achievements, or anything to offer a patron. That is precisely the point. Jesus does not say children are innocent or humble by nature (any parent can testify); he installs the child's POSITION, the one who can only receive, who confers no advantage on you for welcoming him, as the kingdom's unit of greatness: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me." Greatness is measured at the bottom: last of all, servant of all, welcoming those who bring no advantage (an emphasis Luke 14:12-14 makes explicit) (St. John Chrysostom: the itch to be greatest is the mother of nearly every division among Christians, and its cure is the deliberate choice of the lowest place). Note too the widening at 9:38-41: John wants to shut down an exorcist "because he was not following US", not "not following you", and Jesus refuses: "he that is not against us is for us." A Church of servants can afford generosity at its edges; a Church of rivals cannot.

6. **STEELMAN, build it strong before you answer it. The hard verses (9:42-48): millstones, severed hands, and "Gehenna, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched." A sincere modern friend, maybe a voice inside some of us, says: "I cannot worship a God who tortures people forever. Infinite punishment for finite sins is monstrous; a truly loving God would empty hell, or never have made it." Build that objection at full strength, it is morally serious. Then answer it, honestly, from the Church's actual teaching. And notice first: WHO is the source of the New Testament's hell language?**

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Honor the objection: it takes love and justice seriously, and it is usually powered by grief for particular people, treat it gently. Now the facts. First, the uncomfortable one: Jesus himself is the New Testament's principal speaker of Gehenna and its severest warnings, the most loving man who ever lived, not medieval imagination. Gehenna was real geography turned theology: the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem, where children had been burned in sacrifice (Jeremiah 7:31; 32:35), Israel's permanent image of what God finally and utterly refuses. Second, the Church's actual teaching (CCC 1033-1037), which the objection rarely engages: hell is "definitive SELF-exclusion from communion with God." God sends no one; he predestines no one to it; hell is what remains possible because love, to be love, must be refusable, forever, if the refuser insists. The corrected picture is not a torturer God but a rescuer whose rescue can be declined: the door, as Christian writers have memorably put it, locked from the inside. Third, reread the ferocity of Jesus' warnings in that light: hyperbole about hands and eyes (the Church has never read it as literal surgery) is the

tone of voice love uses about mortal danger, no one screams "fire!" in a building they do not care about. The millstone saying and the amputation sayings say the same thing from two sides: sin is not a lifestyle inefficiency; it can cost you everything, so treat its occasions with wartime seriousness. A God who never warned would be the unloving one. And the final Catholic word is neither presumption nor despair but the two things the Church actually does: she warns with Jesus' own urgency, and she intercedes for the salvation of the whole world, praying in the Fatima petition that all souls be led to heaven, because "God our Savior desires all men to be saved" (1 Timothy 2:4). Hold the warnings and the desire together and you have the Church's whole mind.

Dig Deeper

The chapter ends strangely: "every one will be salted with fire... Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another" (9:49-50). A dense saying with several honest readings: salt purifies and preserves; sacrificial offerings were salted (Leviticus 2:13); and fire tests. The drift most commentators hear: the disciple's life will pass through purifying fire one way or another, the chosen fire of self-denial or the unchosen fires of trial, and disciples so seasoned keep their savor and their peace with each other. After a chapter that began with rivalry "on the way," ending on "be at peace with one another" is not an accident.

Send (15 minutes)

1. The Father's one command is "listen to him." What is the loudest competing voice in your life right now, the one you actually obey, and what would a week of deliberately listening to Christ first look like, concretely?
2. Pray the father's prayer right now, silently, over the area of your life where belief runs thinnest: "I believe; help my unbelief." What difficulty (not doubt, difficulty) would you name there, and who could you talk to about it this week?

Live It This Week

- Make "I believe; help my unbelief!" your morning prayer for seven days, especially on the days you least feel like praying it. It was counted as faith once; it still is.
- Listen to him, mechanically: pick one Gospel command you have been treating as optional (forgive him, tell the truth there, rest on Sunday) and obey it this week, as your response to 9:7.
- Take the lowest place once, deliberately and secretly: the worst chore, the last serving, the seat no one wants, and offer it for the person in your life most obsessed with rank (it may be you).

Closing Prayer

Leader: Father, you opened the cloud and gave us one command: listen to him. Lord Jesus, we believe; help our unbelief. Holy Spirit, walk us down this mountain into our ordinary valleys with our ears open, our rank surrendered, and our salt intact. Through Christ our Lord. Amen. (Together: one Our Father.)

Scripture Memory Verse

"I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24, RSV2CE)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Primary text: Mark 9

Every passage used this session, in order:

- Mark 9:2-8 (the Transfiguration)
- Exodus 24:15-16 (six days, the cloud on Sinai)
- Exodus 34:29-35 (Moses' veiled, reflected glory; St. Paul reads it as fading, 2 Corinthians 3:7-13)
- Exodus 40:34-35 (the glory-cloud and the tabernacle)
- Deuteronomy 18:15 (the prophet like Moses: him you shall heed)
- Mark 9:9-13 (the Secret's expiration date; the Elijah question)
- Deuteronomy 34:5-6; 2 Kings 2 (the ends of Moses and Elijah, leader background)
- Mark 9:14-29 (the boy; I believe, help my unbelief)
- Mark 9:30-32 (second passion prediction)
- Mark 9:33-41 (greatness; the child; the outside exorcist)
- Mark 9:42-50 (millstone; Gehenna; salted with fire)
- Jeremiah 7:31 (the Valley of Hinnom)
- Leviticus 2:13 (salt of the offering, leader background)
- 1 Timothy 2:4 (God desires all to be saved)
- CCC 516, 554-556, 1033-1037, 2610
- Memory verse: Mark 9:24