

# Removing Obstacles -- Mark 9:30-50

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Please bow your heads with me for prayer:

*Lord, we are about to open Your Word. We ask that the same Spirit that moved Mark to record these stories might move our hearts this morning. May our experience here today be supernatural. May we leave here changed by Your power. In Jesus' name, amen.*

Our text today (Mark 9:30-50) is the first time the word "hell" is found in the book of Mark. It is a hot topic, so I thought it might be worth spending a few minutes by way of introduction on the meaning of this word. There are actually two Greek words in the New Testament that have been translated, "hell". The Greek word, in our story today is "gehenna" (Mark 9:43, 45, 47). The other Greek word is "hades", which means "to not know" or to "know nothing". It recalls the words of King Solomon in the book of Ecclesiastes chapter 9 and verse 5 – "The dead know nothing." The Greek word in our story today, which is translated, "hell", comes from a Hebrew word which is translated, "the Valley of Hinnom".

Now the Valley of Hinnom is a real place. It is just outside the city of Jerusalem and it became a symbol of hell. It is mentioned several times in the Old Testament. Probably one of the more revealing ones is in Jeremiah 7:31-34. In fact, let's take a minute to read it. (Read) The Israelites had adopted a pagan practice of burning their children in the fire. God pronounced judgment on them for this. He predicted a complete slaughter of everyone in this valley. The valley would come to be known as the "Valley of Slaughter". Body corpses would cover the ground. It would be a desolate place. In Jesus' day this valley of desolation became a symbol of hell. Notice the condition of this valley remained desolate, not a fiery inferno. The fire had gone out and only death and emptiness remained. Such is the picture of hell in the Bible.

Incidentally, you can drive through "hell" today. There is a road that goes through this valley of Hinnom.

Let's now begin with a summary of today's story:

*As Jesus and His disciples travelled through Galilee, He continued to teach them about His coming death and resurrection. In contrast, the disciples were arguing among themselves about who was the greatest. Jesus took a child in His arms and gave them a picture of true greatness. John responded by sharing how they had stopped someone from casting out demons in His name. Jesus instructed them against being obstacles that would turn people away from Him. He further appealed to His disciples to remove all obstacles that might keep them out of heaven.*

Let's now consider what Jesus experienced in this story. First of all, He experienced travelling and teaching in seclusion. Mark 9:30, 31 begin by saying that Jesus departed and passed through Galilee, not wanting anyone to know about it. And the reason was so that He could spend some time alone teaching His disciples. Now each of these action verbs is in the imperfect tense. What is significant about that? Well, if I tell you I threw the ball, you would probably assume I threw it only one time. And that would be the equivalent of the aorist tense in the Greek. But if I said I was throwing the ball, then you would probably assume that I threw it multiple times. And that would be the equivalent of the imperfect tense in the Greek. So, what happens in verses 30-32 of Mark chapter 9 is an ongoing experience. We might read it like this, "After they departed from there, they were passing through Galilee was not wanting anyone to know it. For He was teaching His disciples and was saying to them....But they were not understanding this saying and were being filled with fear." It seems that Jesus and His disciples are locked in a stalemate. Jesus keeps trying to teach them and they keep blocking it out. So, around and around they go through Galilee, and Jesus seems to be making no progress in preparing them for the future.

Second, Jesus experienced illustrating true greatness. Mark 9:33 mentions that they finally stop in Capernaum and go into "the house". We have learned that when Mark refers to "the house" in Capernaum, he is referring to the house of Simon Peter. After everyone is in the house, we find another ongoing experience takes place.

Verses 33 and 34 of Mark chapter 9 are also in the imperfect tense. So, these verses might read something like this: "Jesus was asking the disciples, 'What was it you were privately disputing about on the road?' But they were keeping quiet, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest."

So, again, around and round they go. Jesus keeps trying to get them to talk about it, and they keep refusing to discuss it. I imagine this might have been a bit frustrating for Jesus. Again and again He keeps coming up against these obstacles. Finally, Jesus sat down and called them all together into a circle. And He says to them, "If anyone desires to be first, let him put himself last and let everyone else go first." I can imagine this must have resulted in some puzzled looks. "What's He talking about? Has He been out in the sun too long?" Jesus then stood up a child in the middle of the circle. (This scene closely resembles the upper room scene before the Last Supper) Then He took the child in His arms. Don't you just love how Jesus treated children? It is so obvious that He thought the world of them. Notice what He says to the disciples in Mark 9:37. (Read) Jesus identifies Himself with the child. And He declares that His Father in heaven has identified Himself with Him. Whatever you do to a child, Jesus takes it as if you're doing it to Him. And whatever you do to Jesus, the Father takes it as if you were doing it to Him. The humble and content attitude of a child is used by Jesus to illustrate true greatness in the sight of heaven.

Third, Jesus experienced affirming His outer followers. Jesus' illustration has had an effect upon the disciple John. He begins to rethink how he and the other disciples had treated someone who was not a part of their little group. In Mark 9:38 John responds by telling Jesus what they had done. And in a subtle way he is asking Jesus for His opinion. John describes this person as "someone who does not follow us". He's an outsider. And yet he was casting out demons in Jesus' name! It seems that the disciples didn't know for sure what to do with this. One thing, though, was for sure - they wouldn't appear to be so special anymore, if other people not in their group were doing the same miracles they had done. So, in a spirit of jealousy they told this person to stop. No more miracles in Jesus' name!

Well, Jesus is very clear in His response - "Do not stop him. He's not our enemy. And if he's not our enemy, he is on our side." Then He goes on to paint a hypothetical picture: "Let's just say someone treats you nice. Someone gives you a cup of water, because you are with Me. I'm telling the truth, he will be no means (a double negative) lose his reward." In other words, Jesus was telling His disciples, "There are rewards in heaven for others besides you. Anyone who sympathizes with Me and My ministry will receive a reward." Jesus follows this subtle rebuke with a very bold warning: "Anyone who keeps one of 'these little ones' ('micros' in the Greek, referring to those just beginning to sympathize with His ministry) from coming to Me, it would be best for him to have a millstone hung around his neck and be tossed into the sea. And the word translated, 'millstone', actually means 'a millstone turned by a donkey'. This type of millstone was so big, that only a donkey could turn it. Jesus, in administering this strong warning, affirmed His outer followers. Jesus cared for all His sheep, including those not in His inner group of disciples.

Fourth, Jesus experienced ordering the removal of all obstacles. Jesus now speaks to the disciples about what in their own lives might be trying to pull them away from Him. And He repeats His message three times. Three times is significant in Scripture. The angels in heaven sing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts" (Isaiah 6:3). When Satan came to tempt Jesus, he tempted Him three times. This repetition shows emphasis and persistence. In verses 43, 45, and 47 Jesus highlights three parts of the body - first, the hand, then the foot and then the eye. All are very important body parts, and it would be a great sacrifice to lose any of them. But nothing is more important than being with Jesus, the source of eternal life. We have already considered in Mark 7:15-23 that what defiles you is on the inside. Here Jesus declared that it's what comes out of the heart that is sinful, not what goes into the stomach. Jesus here, though, is using a strong exaggeration for effect. He's trying to get the attention of His disciples who keep resisting His teaching on His own future and on true greatness as a servant or child. In context the primary obstacle that is getting in the way between Jesus and His disciples is their pride and self-seeking attitude.

Now there is also, at least in most of the English translations, another phrase that is repeated three times. They are found in verses 44, 46, and 48. (In the oldest and most dependable Greek manuscripts this phrase is only found in verse 48) This phrase has gotten quite a bit of attention from preachers preaching hellfire and

brimstone sermons. Jesus identifies hell as "where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched". . This is actually a quote from the Old Testament. I invite you to turn with me to Isaiah 66:24. (Read) This verse follows verse 23, which talks about God creating a new heavens and a new earth. The idea is that the fire (or worm) that will destroy sinners will be inextinguishable. No one will be able to put it out. Their destruction is irreversible. The only thing left will be dead corpses. Jeremiah 4:23-27 describes the desolation of the earth with the same wording as is used in Genesis 1:2. He it describes the condition of the earth as "without form and void" just before God said, "Let there be light." So once again before God makes a new earth, the condition of the earth will be ripe for His creative work. Thank God that He will create a new earth in place of this utter desolation!

Last of all, Jesus experienced calling for a pure attitude. Mark 9:49, 50 mention fire in a different context. It reveals a fire that has a preserving effect, not a destructive one. This fire is in context of the sacrifices in the temple. In the courtyard a fire burned on the altar of burnt offering. Anything sacrifice offered on this altar represented in some way Jesus Himself. Leviticus 2:13 states that salt was required for every grain offering placed on the altar. Incidentally, Jesus makes reference to "salt" in some way six or seven times in these two verses, depending on which Greek manuscripts you go by. In the New King James Version "seasoned" actually means "to be made salty" and "loses its flavor" actually means "to become saltless". Jesus is using salt as an analogy of His own righteousness and attitude. Salt was added to make the grain offerings acceptable. Jesus' righteous attitude (including humility, which His disciples desperately needed) made His sacrifice acceptable. So, in essence, Jesus is saying to His disciples, "Don't lose your salt. Hold on to My attitude. Let go of all pride and self-seeking." And His last statement is a type of summary: "Have peace with one another."

Now that we have considered what Jesus experienced in our story today, let's reflect on our own experience. What does God want US to experience as healthy and dangerous Christians? Jesus' actions in this story give us the answer. He is revealed as our Example, first of all, in that His presence condemned sin. There are three different scenes in this story which reveal this point. The first scene is of the disciples lagging behind so they can argue. They don't feel comfortable doing so in Jesus' presence. The second scene is in the house. When they are in Jesus' presence and He asks them what they were talking about on the road, they suddenly got quiet. His presence condemned their sinful attitudes. The third scene is of John relating to Jesus how they had stopped someone from casting out demons in His name. In Jesus' presence John realized that maybe they had been wrong in rebuking this man. Their actions now seemed sinful.

And so Jesus reveals that a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone whose influence is uplifting. How often in our lives this is not the case. In fact, we often drag each other down. It seems that sometimes we bring out the worst in each other. Certainly not here in Lancaster, but I have seen on other church boards some of the greatest displays of selfish attitudes. I remember my roommate and I wrestling after lights-out in the boys' dorm in academy. I don't know if I ever got in trouble in the dorm any other time. But when the two of us got together, I seemed to come out of my shell. Being from southern Texas, he liked the room blazing hot. And I, being from a cooler state, liked the room somewhat cool. And so because we had different thermostats, he would crank up the heat and I would throw open the window as much as I could, trying to create a cool draft. Often our differences would flare into wrestling matches. And the dean or RA would have to come in and discipline.

But Jesus reveals that a healthy Christian is someone whose influence is uplifting. If I am a healthy Christian, being around me makes people want to be a better person. My high school roommate might not have always been the best influence on each other, but there is another friend I came to know while serving as the pastor/chaplain at La Vida Mission. My first memory of him, after he had moved to the Mission as the bible worker, was when he brought the staff fresh baked loaves of bread he had made himself. And it just continued from there. His uplifting influence spread throughout the campus. I watched as he spent his days helping people and being a blessing. He split firewood for the Navajo on the reservation. He gave them rides into town. He shared with them the gospel of Jesus Christ. As I listened and observed, my own self-absorbed outlook became clear to me. My sin was revealed for what it was. And I, too, became free to live my life to bless others. This is the example Jesus gives us in our story. His very presence condemned sin and pride, because His heart was the heart of a servant.

Second, Jesus is revealed as our Example in that He defended His outer followers. This story identifies four groups of people outside the inner circle of Jesus' twelve disciples. First, there was the person who was working miracles in Jesus' name. Second, there were those who had not shown hostility to Jesus and His ministry. And in not opposing Him, Jesus said they were for Him. Third, there were those who would help provide for the needs of Jesus' disciples. They were sympathetic to Jesus and His ministry. Fourth, there were the "little ones", the ones who were just beginning to respond in faith to Jesus' teaching. Jesus defended each of these groups. He warned the disciples against being an obstacle between these outer followers and Himself. And He used pretty strong language in doing so.

And so He reveals that a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who refuses to be an obstacle between anyone and Jesus. The Jews had become very exclusive. In fact, in the temple worship they had created a segregation between Jews and Gentiles. An outer court had been created in the temple where the Gentiles could worship. They were not allowed in the inner courts where the Jews worshiped. The Jews became an obstacle between the Gentiles and the Lord. Many Christians today are exclusive. The early Christians in the city of Rome came to believe that their church was the only way to heaven. If you were not a member of the Roman church, then you were sure to be lost. Church membership became an obstacle between people and Jesus. Sometimes our own church buildings can be an obstacle between people and Jesus. If they're not willing to come to us, to come into our fortress, then they don't get to hear the Word of God preached.

There are a lot of people who are not baptized Christians, but are still responding to the Holy Spirit. Let us resolve to not be an obstacle but a means of them coming to Jesus. Not everyone needs to become a member of our church in order to be saved. And not everyone needs to feel comfortable in a church building in order to experience God. A lot of people are experiencing God at Foundation Dinners and the Good Neighbor Thrift Store here in Lancaster. A lot of people are hearing God speak to them on refreshing 90.9 FM radio. They might never come to our church and might never become Seventh-day Adventists. But let us refuse to be an obstacle between them and Jesus. Instead, let us be a means of them coming to Him.

In our story today Jesus is clearly very intense over people's eternal destiny. He fought long and hard anyone or anything that might be an obstacle between Him and His lost sheep. Jesus isn't the only one, though, who is intense over people's souls. Turn with me to Rev. 12:9, 12. (Read) Our enemy is very intense. While God is intensely working to bring as many people as possible through the gates of heaven, the devil is working night and day to take as many people as possible with him through the gates of hell. What about us? How intense are we?

Some of you may have heard of Desmond Doss, a private in the US Army during World War II. In Okinawa, Japan, being a conscientious objector, he served as a medic. The troops in his battalion scaled a 400 foot precipice. Just as they reached the top, they were met with heavy artillery, mortar, and machine gun fire. Approximately 75 soldiers were almost immediately killed. Private Doss refused to run. He was filled with an intense desire to save as many lives as possible. And so he stayed atop that cliff and lowered down one soldier after another safely to the bottom until each soldier had been rescued. As a result of his bravery and intense determination to save lives, he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Let us follow the example of Jesus. Let us learn from Desmond Doss. Let us spend our lives building up the kingdom of God. May we not walk into heaven by ourselves, but may we enter into the gates of heaven surrounded by those we have helped save from the gates of hell.