

Mysticism in Mark's Gospel

by Matthew Clendineng

The term “mysticism” is looked on with great suspicion by many Christians. To suggest that mystical experiences can be found within the gospels is often viewed as heresy. It is unfortunate that Christians have allowed this term to be corrupted by other belief systems to the point where it is practically unusable within Christian circles. At its most basic level the term “mysticism” means to have immediate consciousness of the transcendent or ultimate reality of God. Given this definition, and without the term “Mysticism” attached, most Christians could easily see that it is applicable to a Christian context.

The gospels are full of mystical moments; moments when one of the characters has a sudden glimpse of the reality of God. These moments may be as mundane as a time of praying in solitude, or as exciting as a demon pronouncing Jesus to be “Son of the Most High God.” If time is taken to explore the mystical moments in the gospels, it can make it easier for each Christian to recognize the mystical moments that may come in his or her life.

Mark's gospel begins with two mystical experiences. The first occurs during the baptism of Jesus. “As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.” (1:10) The Gospel mentions that Jesus saw the Spirit, but gives no implication that anyone else saw the Spirit descend; it seems this moment was for Jesus alone. Then a voice from heaven, presumable God, declares, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”(1:11) If it is possible for Jesus to have a sudden glimpse of the reality of God this would be that moment. It is interesting that immediately after this moment Jesus is sent by the Spirit out into the desert to be tempted (1:12-13).

Shortly thereafter Jesus begins his ministry. After calling his first disciples and performing a few miracles Jesus goes to a solitary place to pray (1:35). This is the first of three times that Mark specifically notes that Jesus goes off by himself to pray. These incidents are equally spaced throughout the gospel. The second instance Jesus goes up into a mountain (6:46) and the third time is in the Garden of Gethsemane. It could be argued that prayer is always a mystical experience.

Prayer is a time of seeking out the will of God; regardless of the result, earnest prayer brings the person praying into the presence of God. Worthy of note is that Jesus allowed three disciples to come close to where he was praying at the garden of Gethsemane; however, he still prayed in solitude.

The first half of Mark's gospel presents three more instances of mysticism. Each of these moments occurs around the performance of a miracle by Jesus. The first of these moments occurs after Jesus heals a paralyzed man who had been lowered through the roof of a house by his four friends (2:1-12). The people “were all amazed and were glorifying God”. This is an instance when the healing act of Jesus forced those witnessing the act to recognize God at work around them.

The second and third instances are moments when demons proclaim Jesus to be God. In 3:11 the author writes, “Whenever the unclean spirits saw Him, they would fall down before Him and shout, ‘You are the Son of God!’” and in 5:7 a demon possessed man says, “What business do we have with each other, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore you by God, do not torment me!” In each of these cases those witnessing the events would have the opportunity to have a glimpse of the reality of God.

However, it could not be argued that just because the opportunity for mysticism presented itself, those witnessing the moment were necessarily able to experience the moment. Twice in chapter 8 the disciples have the opportunity to gain a new insight into the reality of God, but they fail. In 8:14-21 Jesus warns the disciples about the “yeast of the Pharisees” but the disciples mistakenly think that Jesus is talking about bread. Then in verses 31-33 Jesus begins to teach the disciples that the Son of Man must be killed and rise again. However, rather than gaining insight, Peter begins to rebuke Jesus. Both of these examples are times when a mystical experience could have occurred but did not. It is interesting that sandwiched between these two passages is Peter’s confession of faith (8:27-30). Jesus asks Peter “who do you say I am?” and Peter answers, “You are the Christ.” It seems to be doubtful that Peter had a true grasp on what this proclamation would mean.

The ultimate mystical even in Mark occurs at the half way point of the gospel; this event is the Transfiguration (9:2-13). Just after Peter rebuked Jesus for saying that the Son of man must die, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a high mountain. On the mountaintop Peter, James, and John see Jesus, Moses and Elijah talking with one another; and Jesus transfigured into dazzling white clothing. It seems that Peter, James, and John did not understand what was going on at the time, but this would surely be an event they would look back on as witnessing the glory of God.

Two mystical events surround the crucifixion of Jesus in Mark’s gospel. The first is the realization by Peter that he has indeed denied Jesus just as Jesus predicted he would (14:72). The text says that Peter began to weep when he realized what he had done. In this moment Peter fully saw the truth of what Jesus had said. The second mystical occurrence comes upon the death of Jesus (15:39). The centurion overseeing the execution says, “truly this man was the Son of God!” In this moment the centurion fully saw the truth of what Jesus had been.

Finally, in Mark 16:5-8 there is an unidentified young man dressed in white who delivers the news to Mary, Mary and Salome that Jesus is not dead, rather he is risen. In this moment these three women experienced a new reality of who God was. It is this new reality that the author of Mark tells his readers he is trying to share in 1:1; “the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

Throughout the gospel of Mark the author is painting pictures of moments when Jesus is revealed as the son of God. In these moments the original witnesses were given a glimpse of the reality of God. It is not insignificant that the first person the author presents as having glimpsed God is Jesus himself. It would seem that the revelation to Jesus that he was God’s son was necessary before Jesus could serve as the Son of God to the world.

Revelation of who God is seems to prepare people for future events. The baptism prepares Jesus for his temptation in the desert. Peter was prepared for the transfiguration by his pronouncement that Jesus is the Christ. This would seem to suggest that glimpsing the reality of who God is allows a person to build their faith in God. It would seem that God builds up an individual's faith prior to allowing their faith to be attacked.

Ultimately, the author of Mark is trying to present Jesus as the Son of God. In order to do this he must, to some extent, establish who God is. Through brief glimpses by witnesses we are given an account of the reality of God so that we might believe in God's son.

Throughout my life there will be times when I will be given a glimpse of the reality of God. During these times I need to praise and glorify God as the paralytic man and his friends did in 2:1-12. When those opportunities come I need to be aware that this is a time for God to strengthen my faith, and I also need to prepare for that strengthened faith to be tested. When I fail a test I need to weep as Peter wept and return to Jesus.

Mystical events are times for me to recognize that Jesus is the Son of God and that God is being revealed to me so that I might worship God all the better. However, I do not have to wait for a mystical moment to happen. I have the opportunity to go and earnestly pray any time I choose. Through times of prayer I can enter into the presence of God and fortify my faith.

There will times that I will look back on and realize that God had revealed himself to me. I should treasure those moments up and glorify God for them, even if they occurred long ago. To recognize the reality of God is a special event that will sustain the soul.