

From Dimly to Clearly

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a three-part series

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Isaiah 35:5-6 (NIV)

⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.

Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.

Mark 7:31-37 (NIV)

³¹ Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. ³² There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him.

³³ After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. ³⁴ He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "*Ephphatha!*" (which means "Be opened!"). ³⁵ At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.

³⁶ Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. ³⁷ People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

Mark 8:22-26 (NIV)

²² They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. ²³ He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?"

²⁴ He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around."

²⁵ Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. ²⁶ Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't even go into the village."

What does it take for us to see the truth? Does God cure our blindness in an instant, or does the full vision of our Savior come to us in stages, a step at a time?

What are your expectations when you come to the gospels? Do you expect to find a straightforward telling of what happened chronologically? Do you expect to learn something about God, about Jesus, or about yourself? Both?

In the early second century AD, the Bishop of Hierapolis, a man named Papias, wrote a five-volume history of what Jesus said and did. He began this work when he was a much younger man, only about fifty years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had a copy of his books. Alas, none have ever been found. We have only bits and pieces, some of which are found quoted in the writings of others.

Papias's research led him to believe that Mark was an associate of Peter's and that the gospel written by Mark was largely Peter's eyewitness testimony. He also believed that Mark's gospel was not a chronology of Jesus' life and ministry. Rather, Papias held that Mark had fashioned Peter's testimony into a presentation of Jesus that would enable the reader to grasp the significance of Jesus, a proclamation of the Good News. Interestingly, Papias felt that Mark had not done a very good job of crafting an artistic and coherent account.

Each of the gospels is an account of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection that is meant to be a proclamation, not mere reporting, nor some sort of ancient biopic. Further, the gospels and the rest of the Bible are written according to the conventions of their time and their cultures, not ours. Today's passages are a good example of Mark's effort to help us see clearly the nature of his proclamation.

The Isaiah passage was written 700 years before Jesus and looks forward to the coming of God's kingdom, what was sometimes called the Day of Righteousness. Jesus, in Mark 1:15,

announces that the time had come, the kingdom of God was at hand – the blind would see, the deaf would hear, and the mute would speak.

Mark gives us two strikingly similar stories, separated only by another miraculous feeding and Jesus' reflection on the inability of the disciples to understand what was happening.

Alan Culpepper has prepared a helpful chart for us comparing the two:

Mark 7:31-37

Geographical location noted:

The Decapolis

Unnamed friends bring the man

to Jesus and beg Jesus

to lay his hand on him

He took him aside in private

He spat

and touched his tongue

Details of the healing follow:

Jesus looked up

Command to secrecy:

Jesus ordered them to tell no one.

Mark 8:22-26

Geographical location noted:

Bethsaida

Unnamed friends bring the man

to Jesus and beg Jesus

to touch him

He took the blind man . . . and led him

out of the village

He put saliva on his eyes

and laid his hands on him

Details of the healing follow:

the man looked up

Command to secrecy:

“Do not even go into the village.”

The combined effect of the two stories, each powerful in its own right, is to reassure the reader that in Jesus the kingdom of God was truly arriving, for he was giving sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. Jesus was fulfilling the messianic promises of Isaiah 35. These miracles, like the others, were not merely acts of compassion, they were enactments of the kingdom of God.

What do these stories mean?

First, as we've seen, each story proclaims the arrival of God's kingdom.

Second, the story in Mark 7, takes place in the Decapolis, an area populated by Gentiles. Mark wants his readers to grasp that the Good News of Jesus is not only for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles and, hence, for the whole world. In this story, Jesus heals the man's

Bethsaida

(from *The Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*)

Town NE of the Sea of Galilee. Bethsaida was the home of three of Jesus' disciples: Andrew, Peter, and Philip (Jn 1:44; 12:21). Jesus announced that calamity would come upon Bethsaida because of its unbelief in spite of the mighty works he had done there (Mt 11:21, 22; Lk 10:13). A blind man was healed in Bethsaida (Mk 8:22–27), and nearby over 5,000 people were fed by the miracle of the loaves and fish (Mk 6:34–45; Lk 9:10–17).

Bethsaida is mentioned in several ancient sources, chiefly the writings of Josephus, a 1st-century A.D. Jewish historian. Two Bethsaidas, one on each side of the Sea of Galilee, were once postulated because the reference in Mark mentions the feeding of the 5,000 as happening across the lake from Bethsaida, whereas in Luke it seems to have taken place near Bethsaida. One solution is that the miracle occurred in the district surrounding Bethsaida, but that the quickest way to reach the city itself was to cross part of the lake. Such an interpretation questions the traditional location of the miracle (et-Tabgha on the west shore, nearer to Capernaum), but is preferable to the proposal of two Bethsaidas so close to each other.

Bethsaida was merely a fishing village until it was enlarged and beautified by Philip the Tetrarch (4 B.C.–A.D. 34), son of Herod the Great, after the death of Caesar Augustus. Philip was later buried there, according to Josephus. Bethsaida's name was changed to Julias in honor of Julia, daughter of Augustus. That city was defended by Josephus when he was its military commander during the first Jewish revolt against Rome (A.D. 66–70).

ears and, as a consequence, his tongue is loosened; the man becomes able to speak. It seems that Mark's point is that by the grace and power of Jesus, our hearts are healed and we can genuinely believe in the Good News. Consequently, the Spirit loosens our own tongues so that we may proclaim the gospel to the whole world. Here is how Alan Culpepper¹ understands the embedded messages in the first of the two stories:

- 1) Jesus worked among Gentiles also, therefore the Gentile mission is a legitimate extension of the church's mission;
- (2) the Gentile mission fulfills the redemptive purposes of God that are clear even among the Old Testament prophets (such as Isaiah); the mission of the church is to declare the glory of God to all people;
- (3) just as God empowered Jesus to heal the deaf mute, so God empowers the church on mission to bring hearing and speech to those who have never heard the gospel or worshiped the Lord;
- (4) be zealous in sharing the good news of God's goodness and the gospel of Jesus Christ, in spite of opposition, prejudice, and efforts to silence you; and
- (5) sharing in God's mission in the world brings great joy when one sees ears, hearts, and minds opened and tongues loosed.

We do pretty well at the "hearing," but how well do we do at the "speaking"?

The second story, Mark 8:21-26, is of a strange two-stage healing, as if Jesus couldn't get it right the first time. But Mark helps us to grasp Jesus' point by placing this story between two other stories, two bookends.

Before the two-stage healing Mark shows us Jesus' frustration that the disciples don't understand what is happening – they are as blind as the man in Bethsaida.

Then Mark gives us the story of the two-stage healing – the man sees dimly before he sees clearly.

Finally, we get the story of the first time Peter "gets it," at least somewhat, in that he tells Jesus that he actually is the Messiah. Peter doesn't grasp the whole truth about Jesus nor is his heart all the way there, but he sees it a bit – like the man in Bethsaida. The disciples' journey to faith and understanding will be a halting one; the light will come on them slowly and in stages. Here's James Edwards on this:

This story brings us to the continental divide of Mark's narrative. By the gradual healing of the blind man, Jesus shows how the disciples, in particular, may come to faith. Like the blind man, the disciples, who "have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear" (8:18), can also be made to see and hear. But it will not happen on their own. The ability to see, both physically and spiritually, is a gift of God, not of human ability. We hear nothing of the man's faith or behavior in the present story. There is no hint that as his faith grew his healing progressed. His healing from failed sight to partial sight to complete sight comes solely from the repeated touch of Jesus. His healing exemplifies the situation of the disciples, who move through the same three stages in Mark, from nonunderstanding (8:17–21) to misunderstanding (8:29–33) to complete understanding (15:39). The first "healing touch" for them will come on the road to Caesarea Philippi (8:27ff.) when Peter declares that Jesus is Messiah. The disciples will be no longer blind, but their vision will remain imperfect and blurred, for they do not understand the meaning of Messiahship. Only at the cross and resurrection will they, like the man at Bethsaida, see "everything clearly" (v. 25).²

You'd think it would be easier for us to come to the point of truly placing our full faith and trust in Jesus. We are, after all, living post-Easter. Yet, for us too, the journey of faith is often halting; we too see dimly. As Paul put it: "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

¹ From Culpepper's commentary on Mark in the *Smyth & Helways Bible Commentary*, 2007.

² Edwards, J. R. (2002). *The Gospel according to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (244–245).

² Edwards, J. R. (2002). *The Gospel according to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (244–245). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos.

Blindness in the Bible

(from *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*)

Some of the most vivid pictures of the Bible center on blindness, including the Sodomites' groping about Lot's house, the dim-eyed Isaac tricked by his son, Samson's eyes gouged out, a troupe of blinded Syrian warriors being led from their intended destination to Samaria, the drama of the man born blind healed by Jesus to the consternation of the Pharisees, the blind beggars who cried out pathetically to Jesus as he passed by and the temporary blindness of Paul at his conversion. The characters in the Bible who are physically blind are a moving spectacle of human misfortune. However, in a spiritual sense, blindness is congenital for all humans, who inherit the tendency simply by virtue of belonging to the human race. In both physical and spiritual instances, blindness is an image of terror, helplessness and despair unless reversed by God's miraculous intervention. . . .

The imagery of sight and blindness is especially prominent in the account of Jesus' earthly ministry. The high incidence of physical blindness in the world of the Gospels is attested by the frequency with which Jesus performed miracles of giving sight to the blind. It is, in fact, one of the most vivid signs of Jesus' supernatural power. Spiritual blindness is no less prominent in the Gospels. Jesus described the religious leaders and teachers of his own generation in terms of blindness (Matthew 15:14; 23:16-17, 19, 24, 26). The irony of their situation is that in their spiritual ignorance they assumed that they understand perfectly. Jesus remedied spiritual as well as physical blindness (Matthew 13:17; John 9:39). Those who rejected Jesus' words came under a judgment similar to that of Israel—a state of permanent blindness (John 12:40; cf. Rom 11:7-10).

Although metaphorically blindness may describe mere ignorance (Rom 2:19), it usually carries the overtones of an unwillingness to face up to the truth (Jas 1:23-24); and in the case of those who do not believe in Christ, this is the work of Satan (2 Corinthians 4:4). As such it requires a miracle in order to become aware of the significance of Christ. Similarly, Christian believers who revert to their pre-Christian ways are described as blind, not perceiving the contradiction expressed in their behavior (2 Pet 1:9; 1 John 2:11). Blindness describes the fact that they are unaware of the gravity of their condition (Rev 3:17).

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In the first of the two stories, the emphasis is on the Good News being carried to the Gentiles. Jesus heals the man's deafness, thereby enabling the man to speak. He can now hear the Good News and tell it to others.
 - a. How well do you think you have heard the Good News? How would you explain the Good News to others? Christianity is on the wane in the U.S., at least so far as the numbers are concerned. How much of this is a "hearing" problem?
 - b. Are you willing to "speak" the Good News to others? How would you go about it? Do you have any tips that you could offer the others in your group?
2. In the second story, the emphasis is on the strange two-stage healing. Mark helps us to grasp Jesus' analogy to the halting progression of the disciples toward the truth.
 - a. Take a few minutes to share the stories of your own journeys toward Christ? Perhaps some of you had a intense one-time experience that reshaped your life. Others may have had a winding and varied journey of faith.
 - b. Why do you think the disciples have so much trouble grasping the truth about Jesus? Why, still, do so many people reject Jesus and his claims? Even more to the point, why does the faith of so many Christians seem to lack any real commitment or passion?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

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| <p>Monday, Mark 8:27-9:1 Peter confesses that Jesus is the messiah; Jesus predicts his death; the way of the cross</p> | <p>Tuesday, Mark 9:2-14 The transfiguration of Jesus</p> |
| <p>Wednesday, Mark 9:14-50 Jesus heals a boy; Jesus predicts his own death for a second time; Jesus warns his disciples</p> | <p>Thursday, Mark 10:1-31 Jesus teaches on divorce, children, the rich, and the kingdom of God</p> |
| <p>Friday, Mark 10:32-52 Jesus predicts his death a third time; the request of James and John; blind Bartimaeus</p> | <p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p> |

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.
This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.
On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Genesis

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall on Tuesdays.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Philemon (Feb 11)

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall on Monday evenings.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current Series: *Glittering Vices: the seven deadly sins*

Feb 10 – Gluttony: Feeding Your Face, Starving Your Heart

Feb 17 – Lust: Smoke, Fire, and Ashes

Beginning Monday, February 18:

Another all-church Bible Study in Wesley Hall taught by Scott Engle

A three-week series on Monday evenings at 7pm

What Christians Believe

There will even be "can't-miss" music to start our evening!

The series will be suitable for youth and adults.

Childcare available – make reservations at www.standrewumc.org

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes
