

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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God's Servant in Mark's Gospel: Mark 8

Good morning and welcome to this week's *Truth for Today*, where we are completing our series on the middle chapters of the Gospel of Mark. Today we shall be looking at Mark 8 which opens with an account of the feeding of four thousand men in the wilderness. Owing to its similarity with the feeding of the five thousand, in chapter 6, some commentators consider it to be a repetition of the same event. Often those same commentators state that there was no increase in the bread and seek to explain the miracle in rational terms. Here, at *Truth for Today*, we believe that the two are separate miracles with distinctive differences. In fact, there are a series of events, in chapters 6 and 7, which are paralleled in chapter 8, as Mark seeks to reinforce the call to spiritual understanding that the Lord Jesus made in 7:14-18: "When he had called all the people unto him, he said unto them, Hearken unto me every one of you, and understand: there is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man. If any man have ears to hear, let him hear. And when he was entered into the house from the people, his disciples asked him concerning the parable. And he saith unto them, Are ye so without understanding also?"

We have already noticed that the feeding of a multitude occurs twice, but, if you look carefully, you will notice that crossing the sea, conflict with the Pharisees, a conversation about bread, healing and a confession of faith are all brought into chapter 8, as well as being mentioned in chapters 6 and 7. I wish to emphasise here that I am convinced that all of these events actually happened, but that Mark's placing of them is to symbolise the disciples' lack of understanding of spiritual truth.

This, I believe, is extremely important for us, because it is impossible for us to grasp the real significance of the biblical revelation, apart from the Spirit of God. We do not leave our mind, or intellect, behind when we open the pages of Scripture, but really to grasp the wonder of the divine revelation we are compelled to rely upon the Spirit making that revelation real to us, and God, in His grace, will do just that.

We must move now to a consideration of 8:1-9. These deal with the feeding of the four thousand, an event that was played out on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. I have not sufficient time this morning to discuss the miracles in detail, though I recommend that after this broadcast finishes you draw up a list of the differences and similarities in these miracles. Pen and paper, or in these days a PC, are often useful tools in Bible Study.

One of the differences that I wish to pursue is the compassion that motivated both miracles. In chapter 6 the reason for the compassion of the Lord Jesus is found in verse 34: "And Jesus, when he came out, saw much people, and was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd: and he began to teach them many things."

The feeding of the multitude is almost an afterthought at the insistence of His disciples. His compassion was shown in teaching them. In chapter 8 the reason for His compassion is recorded in verse 2: "I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now been with me three days, and have nothing to eat."

Here we notice that the Lord Jesus meets the need of the multitude by feeding them. As we consider the Lord's actions, performed in this world so many years ago, let us learn that He would be a shepherd and teacher to us and feed us with divine food as we travel in company with Him and His people.

One other point that I wish to take from these 'feeding' miracles is from the similarities. If you look carefully you will notice that on both occasions the Lord involved His disciples in the administration of the miracle. Similarly, we, also, are in the service of the Lord in making known His blessings and the dignity and glory of His person as the Son of God, and also the greatness of His salvation. The miracle of conversion is a sovereign act of God, yet the herald of the Gospel must be you or me.

Another point I wish to make from the disciples' response to the perceived need was that they turned to the Lord as the only One who could help. Through these events the Lord was teaching them a vital truth about Himself that eventually was brought to light, later in the chapter we are studying, when Peter made the great confession that Jesus

was the Christ. This knowledge is crucial, for I am persuaded that it is at the very heart of what it means to believe in Jesus.

We must now move on to the second section of Mark 8:10-13, where the Pharisees are seeking a sign from the Lord that would prove that He was from God. This is refused because the request originated in the unbelief and hostility of the Pharisees. At other points in His ministry the Lord refers questioners to the sign of Jonah, or His miracles. Here His response was: "And he sighed deeply in his spirit, and saith, Why doth this generation seek after a sign? Verily I say unto you, There shall be no sign given unto this generation."

I wish to quote here what a Bible teacher wrote about this passage, some years ago, as I think it will better help us to understand this incident. "In verse 34 of the previous chapter, when He was confronted with human weakness and disability of a bodily sort, He sighed: here confronted with blindness of a spiritual sort, He sighed deeply in His spirit. Spiritual incapacity is a far more serious matter than bodily incapacity. They were blind leaders groping about for a sign."

The same writer goes on to state that sometimes we can be troubled thinking that God has not acted when all the while He has, but we have not the eyes to see.

Verses 13 and 14 contain two thoughts which provoke comment, so I shall read them to you from the King James Version that I have used previously: "And he left them, and entering into the ship again departed to the other side. Now the disciples had forgotten to take bread, neither had they in the ship with them more than one loaf."

The first point is the stark fact that the Lord left the Pharisees and departed to another shore. How significant this is, for it tells us again of the dangers of unbelief. The incident with Pharisees, recorded in verses 10 to 13, ends with this action of abrupt departure, indicating that the Gospel remains hidden from unbelief.

The second matter that I wish to highlight, from the quoted verses, concerns the bread that they had forgotten to take with them. This is the third time within two chapters that Mark recalls an incident concerning loaves. The previous two have been demonstrations of the greatness of the power of the Lord Jesus in multiplying the provision. Sadly, they were no more capable of resting in peace, even after the mighty feeding miracles that they had witnessed previously. If they had grasped that even one loaf was sufficient in the Lord's hands to feed them all they would not have questioned and reasoned together as they did.

The Lord answered their mutterings with a string of questions, all of which sought to remind them of the meals that had already been provided with very few resources. They were still bound in their minds to the earth, rather than perceiving the significance of the person who was leading them. How slow and insensitive they were to the teaching of the Lord Jesus, yet is it not the same with us? When the testing time comes are we not also slow of heart to believe, and to step out boldly in faith?

Before we leave this incident, we must briefly discuss the teaching of the leaven. The disciples had to be aware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod. Here, the leaven of the Pharisees is their unbelieving desire for a sign, at other times it could also be hypocrisy. Herod's pernicious influence was worldliness and, as Harold St. John remarks, in his commentary on Mark's Gospel, a batch of loaves baked with Herod's yeast of Pharisaic leaven would indeed be infected, poisoned bread!

Verses 22 to 26 catch our attention with a unique miracle which, at first sight, appears to be a partial failure. It will be beneficial to read all of the five verses: "And he cometh to Bethsaida; and they bring a blind man unto him, and he took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the town; and when he had spit on his eyes, and put his hands upon him, he asked if he saw ought. And he looked up, and said, I see men as trees, walking. After that he put his hands again upon his eyes, and made him look up: and he was restored, and saw every man clearly. And he sent him away to his house, saying, Neither go into the town, nor tell it to any in the town."

Much has been made, by some commentators, as to why this was only a partial healing instead of the usual instantaneous cure. Some would suggest that the cause was the man's lack of faith, with the Lord only moving as far as the man's faith allowed. What is certain is that Mark gives no clue. Perhaps Calvin was right when he stated that the Lord was demonstrating His full liberty to heal as He wished and not in fixed ways.

I believe that this healing miracle is also a parable to teach the disciples a lesson they were finding difficult to learn, yet one that ends, as we shall read, with Peter's confession in verse 29. The blind man here is indicative of the band of apostles who were blind to the identity of the Lord Jesus. He had to take the blind man by the hand and lead him out of the town. A similar action was performed by Ananias on Saul of Tarsus, when he was struck down, on the Damascus road. The disciples needed to hand over the control of their lives, including their minds, to the Lord. He alone could open the eyes of their understanding.

The original action of the Lord would seem to be only partially successful, as the man could see 'men as trees walking'. His still affected eyes considered men to be bigger than they actually were. Is not this the ailment that affected the disciples? They still considered man to be greater than he was. They needed to have a true appreciation of themselves and a true appreciation of the Lord. Just as the blind man was touched a second time, to enable him to focus correctly, in like manner the Lord patiently continued to instruct the disciples until they, too, received their spiritual sight.

Even if we have been Christians for some time, it is still possible for us to suffer from spiritual eye disease. In 2 Peter 1, Peter instructs his readers to add to their faith such features as virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance and godliness and also warns; "For he who lacks these things is short-sighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins." Let us make sure that we walk a faithful pathway in obedience to the will of God.

We shall, in a few moments, be considering the declaration of Peter that marks great progress in the education of the disciples, but before we do so we must glance at the instructions to the man to go home and to keep away from Bethsaida. As it happened, Bethsaida was a place of unbelief, as we can read from Matthew 11, so it would, obviously, be better for him to be absent from such an environment.

We must, also, notice the link between the healing of the deaf and dumb man in Mark 7, and the healing miracle we have just studied. It is probable that Mark considered them to be a pair, just as he considered the feeding miracles to be a pair. Some commentators suggest that they both concern the type of healings promised in Isaiah 35:5-6. Such actions were those of Messiah.

This brings us neatly to our next section that concerns the recognition of the Lord Jesus as the Christ. As it is central to Mark's Gospel, and of critical importance, we must read the account as Mark sets it out, in verses 27 to 30: "And Jesus went out, and his disciples, into the towns of Caesarea Philippi: and by the way he asked his disciples, saying unto them, Whom do men say that I am? And they answered, John the Baptist: but some say Elias: and others, One of the prophets. And he saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Peter answered and saith unto him, Thou art the Christ. And he charged them that they should tell no man of him."

This section brings us to the declaration of a truth that Mark stated in Mark 1:1: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Despite that opening claim there has been no confirmation of this, from the lips of man, until this statement of Peter's. There had been many instances, recorded by Mark, of displays of authority and power; there had also been enquiries and questions as to the source of His authority, but nobody, until this moment, had recognised and acknowledged the full dignity of His person.

The answers to the first question, asked by the Lord, all reveal a defective understanding of Him by the people at large. Their answers were similar to the identities given in chapter 6, where Herod, having heard of Jesus, identified Him with a resurrected John the Baptist, while others claimed He was Elijah, or one of the Prophets. In all these cases we must note that each was only a man, a notable man maybe, but still only a man. The Lord goes on to ask the most pertinent question, "Who do you say that I am?" I would like each one listening to me this morning to answer that question, as it is the most important question we can ever answer. For the complete reply of Peter, I want to quote from Matthew 16:16: "And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

I pray that each of us can answer the same question with the assurance, clarity and faith of Peter, as this is the very essence of the Christian Gospel. I emphasise that the important question is not what other people think about the Lord Jesus, but what each one of us thinks in his or her mind.

We must move on quickly, noting as we do so that the Lord instructs the disciples to remain silent and not to tell anyone the secret, for as yet they do not fully understand the implications of Jesus being the Christ or Messiah, nor of the requirements of being His disciple. Such matters are the theme of the last portion of Mark 8, and it is to the last 6 verses of the chapter that we must now turn.

Owing to shortage of time I can only read verses 31, 34 and 35: "And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again ... And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it."

The first of these verses tells us that the Son of man will have to suffer. Incidentally, this is a title that the Lord uses of Himself over eighty times in the Gospels. Why has the Son of man got to suffer? There are at least three reasons that could be given to this question, though I shall only concentrate on the one that is the central purpose of His incarnation, namely His redemptive death upon the cross.

The children's hymn succinctly describes this:

*"He died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven
Saved by His precious blood."*

Along with the disclosure of His death, the Lord also announced that He would rise again on the third day. So within these verses we have the main elements of Christian belief, the identity of Jesus as the Son of God, His atoning death and His resurrection. The all important question I make at this point is: Do we truly believe these three statements? I pray that we do.

We now come to the closing verses that hinge upon our response to the previous question. If we do believe, what difference does it make to our lives? From these verses we see that there are two imperatives for the believer. They are denial of self and taking up the cross. Both of these are, and always have been, anathema to us as people of our time. We like to make sure that we are comfortable and have everything we want. Taking up the cross would indicate that we are serious in our desire to follow the Lord and hand over our lives to Him.

To be a Christian is not an easy option for those who cannot cope with the rigours of life. Before we follow Him we should be aware of the cost, but the cost of not following is to lose one's life. It is easy to settle for an occasional attendance at a church on a Sunday morning. To be a Christian should include being involved in Christian activities and living a Christian lifestyle. Let us be like the Apostle Paul who counted all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus his Lord. To Paul there was nothing better in the whole world than being a Christian and accepting all that it involved, even to the point of denying himself and taking up the cross. May we all follow his example.

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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