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Salvation's Plan

Hosted by Lizzie

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**QUESTIONS THAT WILL COME UP:** 1. Why does Jesus cross Galilee just to speak to the Pharisees and then return again? 2. How are the disciples different to the Pharisees here? 3. Why did Mark include the healing of the blind man at this point in his gospel?

## Outsiders and Insiders

### The Pharisees Seek a Sign Mark 8:11-13

Mark 8:11–12 “11 Then the Pharisees came out and began to dispute with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven, testing Him. 12 But He sighed deeply in His spirit, and said, “Why does this generation seek a sign? Assuredly, I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation.””

Dispute means to argue vehemently. It can mean confusion and not necessarily opposition.

There appears to be a contradiction here if you look at the passage in Matthew, where the sign of Jonah will be given to this generation. But what is the sign of Jonah? There's little doubt the Pharisees know Jesus can do miracles - they're not asking for a miracle. So what do they mean by a sign? 'heaven' is just another word for God, which of course for the Jews they don't name. It could be a period of catastrophic judgement, or they could be asking that God personally steps in to confirm Jesus' credibility.

The word for miracle in Mark is usually 'dynamis', not the word for sign. According to Guelich in WBC, nowhere in Matt, Mark or Luke does 'sign' refer to a miracle. The Pharisees wouldn't have denied he performed miracles - but of course they attributed them to Satan. Cranfield suggests they are looking for 'outward compelling proof of divine authority.'

Matthew 16:4 “4 A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.” And He left them and departed.”

Remember how in Nazareth in chapter 6 Jesus marvelled because of their unbelief? It's the same here - we know from

Hebrews 11:6 “6 But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently

seek Him.”

So the Pharisees, who ought to be living by faith, are failing to accept their Messiah.

Where it says ‘he sighed deeply in his spirit’ this is a very powerful emotion. It’s the only use of the word *anastenazō* in the NT. It indicates grief and disappointment, a groaning or a sighing. It’s similar to Mark 6.6 where it says he marvelled - strong emotion due to his unbelief. In Mark 1 when the leper says: If you want to, you can make me clean, one interpretation of Jesus’ emotion is ‘deep anger’.

The reference to ‘generation’ almost contains that adjective ‘wicked’ that Matthew throws in. We think of the generation before the Flood, whom God gave up on except for Noah. Or in particular the generation of Israelites wandering the wilderness for forty years. It’s a chastening message Jesus is giving here.

Remember this verse:

John 12:37 “37 But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him,”

The miracles only demonstrate Jesus’ identity for those who are already believing or well-disposed towards him. As Guelich remarks, ‘Signs are not a divine antidote for unbelief.’ You only have to watch the news or documentaries to see how ready the unbelieving are to discredit the miraculous or the catastrophic.

Mark 8:12 “12 But He sighed deeply in His spirit, and said, “Why does this generation seek a sign? Assuredly, I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation.””

It’s emphasized by the ‘assuredly’. This phrase ‘Verily’ in the AV, or ‘I tell the truth’, appears 14 times in Mark, and this is the third time so far. Jesus becomes more emphatic as he moves towards the Jerusalem ministry.

R.P. Martin: ‘There is no legitimating sign - save the ambiguity of the humiliated and crucified Lord; and to see in his cross the power and wisdom of God is to be shut up to the exercise of faith, which by definition can never rest in proofs or signs, or else its character would be lost.’

This section and Jesus’ sudden leaving by boat signals His rejection by the Galilean Jewish authorities - and later on it will be followed by His rejection by the Judean (Jerusalem) authorities.

## **Disciples Do Not Understand Mark 8:14-21**

Mark 8:13–16 “ And He left them, and getting into the boat again, departed to the other side. 14 Now the disciples had forgotten to take bread, and they did not have more than one loaf with them in the boat. 15 Then He charged them, saying, “Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” 16 And they reasoned among themselves, saying, “It is because we have no bread.””

Matthew 16:8–12 “But Jesus, being aware of it, said to them, “O you of little faith, why do you reason among yourselves because you have brought no bread? 9 Do

you not yet understand, or remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets you took up? 10 Nor the seven loaves of the four thousand and how many large baskets you took up?

11 How is it you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread—but to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” 12 Then they understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

**Question: 'How are the disciples different to the Pharisees here?'**

Ideas: **Don't they seem to be as blind as the Pharisees to who Jesus really is?** Guelich says that the blindness of the Pharisees which is total and permanent is contrasted by Mark with the partial and temporary blindness of the disciples. The disciples are in danger of becoming outsiders, or succumbing to the leaven of the Pharisees.

Just to give a little context, again from Guelich, for this:

“the story connects with the two Feeding accounts, one of which has just taken place and the other which is at the beginning of a series of stories that underscore the disciples' lack of understanding. And the reader may recall that Mark's narrative sequence had been interrupted just prior to the first Feeding by the story of Herod's execution of John the Baptist, a story introduced by a reference to Herod's awareness of Jesus' 'miracles' that had given rise to the question about Jesus' identity. Thus Herod's interest in Jesus' 'miracles' and the Pharisees' demand for a 'sign' enclose the two Feeding accounts. This story refers to both Herod and the Pharisees as well as the two Feedings.” *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 34A: Mark 1–8:26, p.419*

v.14 the word for bread is plural, making sense of the 'only one loaf'. Is that one loaf Jesus? One small loaf among 13 men is clearly not enough, not going to keep them going. Perhaps they only realised when one of them - Peter? - started getting hungry.

What about leaven?

**Leaven** is a fermentation agent, in the Bible always leftover dough (sourdough) mixed with new dough to facilitate rising. Yeast has replaced sourdough today, so some translations replace “leaven” with “yeast” yet retain “unleavened (bread).” *Eerdmans dictionary of the Bible. Edited by D.N. Freedman, A.C. Myers, and A.B. Beck. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.*

Unleavened bread is associated with Passover, where the Hebrews had to leave in haste. Leavened bread could be a thank offering but never a burnt offering.

Leviticus 2:11 “11 'No grain offering which you bring to the Lord shall be made with leaven, for you shall burn no leaven nor any honey in any offering to the Lord made by fire.”

This would suggest that leaven is evil -

J.C. Ryle talks of 'the small beginnings of false doctrine....and the deadly power with which it changes the whole character of his Christianity.'

There is a strange link between Herod and the Pharisees here - in Matthew it's the Sadducees, not Herod! But we did have them linked together if you recall:

Mark 3:6 "6 Then the Pharisees went out and immediately plotted with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him."

The fact these two very diverse groups are prepared to conspire together shows the incredible hold that Jesus' ministry had over the crowds.

Mark 8:16 "16 And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "It is because we have no bread.""

Morna Hooker in her commentary speaks of the incredibly stupid anxiety about the small amount of food they have with them. Barnett describes Jesus being 'exasperated by their vacuity'. It seems that boats and the disciples in Mark are connected with failure! The first boat story, they were terrified and rebuked for their lack of faith: the second, Jesus joined them halfway in the storm and their hearts were hardened - again this time they appear to have forgotten who they have with them.

Don't feel condemned if you worry that you are slow to grasp the things of God. Jesus is patient with the disciples, and he uses teaching gifts to prompt them, as well as Mark using them to encourage the persecuted church who may be struggling in their faith:

Mark 8:17-18 "17 But Jesus, being aware of it, said to them, "Why do you reason because you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive nor understand? Is your heart still hardened? 18 Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember?"

There is a series of rhetorical questions here. The references to eyes and ears reminds us of Mark 4: 'Let he who has ears to hear!' etc. These repeated questions echo passages in Jeremiah 5:21 and Ezekiel 12.2 as well. He is inviting the disciples to recall the evidence of their senses.

And also their memories. Notice too the reminder back to the verse Gilbert drew our attention to:

Mark 6:52 "52 For they had not understood about the loaves, because their heart was hardened."

Mark's version of this discussion is much more interactive, more 'learner-friendly', than Matthew's. If you want someone to remember, you've got to 'activate prior learning', and that's what Jesus does now:

Mark 8:19-20 "19 When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many

baskets full of fragments did you take up?" They said to Him, "Twelve." 20 "Also, when I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of fragments did you take up?" And they said, "Seven.""

A word about the baskets: the Greek has different words - for the 5000 and for the 4000. Some scholars argue that Jesus only performed one feeding miracle and that the accounts got doubled. But Jesus' use here of 'spyris' for the 4,000, more like the basket Paul was lowered from the wall of Damascus in Acts 9.25. And then 'kophinos' for the 5,000 - the more familiar Jewish wicker basket you would carry food in while travelling. This also supports the argument that the 4,000 were Gentiles, as opposed to the 5,000 being Jewish.

Personally, I found the reminder that Jesus himself 'broke' the bread each time was powerful - the breaking of bread in Acts is not only table fellowship, which is a symbol of being one in Jesus, but of course also communion and remembrance of Him. Mark does not take it that far, but we see profound reflections on bread in John 6:26-59, and I think it would be a very interesting spin-off Bible study to make comparisons with the passage we have today! It's in that passage that Jesus tells us he is the bread of life, and the living bread.

John 6:51 " I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world."

Mark 8:21 "So He said to them, "How is it you do not understand?""

| Mark 8:21 (NIV)

| <sup>21</sup> He said to them, "Do you still not understand?"

Also remember that Jesus is putting the disciples to the test.

Psalm 7:9 "9 Oh, let the wickedness of the wicked come to an end, But establish the just; For the righteous God tests the hearts and minds."

Paul Barnett says this:

We, the readers, sense the quickening pace of the story. A climax has been reached. But we are also challenged. From the first sentence of Mark's book, we have been told who this man is (see 1:1). We have watched the Twelve groping hopelessly to identify Jesus, and all the while Mark has made his identity known to us. But do we know who he is? Or have we 'eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear'? Jesus is asking us the question he asked the Twelve: '*Do you still not understand?*' Barnett, P. (1991) *Mark: The Servant King*. Sydney, South NSW: Aquila Press (Reading the Bible Today Series), p. 148.

## **A Blind Man is Healed Mark 8:22-26**

Mark 8:22–26 "Then He came to Bethsaida; and they brought a blind man to Him, and begged Him to touch him. 23 So 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 on him, He asked him if he saw anything. 24 And he looked up and said, "I see men like trees, walking." 25 Then He put His hands on his eyes again and made him look up. And he was restored and saw everyone clearly. 26 Then He sent him away to his house, saying, "Neither go into the town, nor tell anyone in the town.""

**Question: Why did Mark include the healing of the blind man at this point in his gospel?**

**Ideas: Does this healing go beyond the other miracles he has done so far?**

Remember there are NO accounts of blind eyes being opened in the OT. It was seen by the Jews as possibly being a harder miracle than raising the dead. There have been no mentions of the blind being healed in the gospel, and certainly no actual accounts up to this point - we'll get one more blind person being healed, which is the last miracle in the gospel (apart from the resurrection).

Mark 8:22 Then He came to Bethsaida; and they brought a blind man to Him, and begged Him to touch him."

Notice that while we had 'they' in the last pericope, here we have moved to 'he'. A few times in Mark you get 'they' to 'he'. So what, I hear you ask! It's not so common in Matthew and Luke. This is a reminder that we are hearing the account of an eyewitness (i.e. Peter, via Mark!).

In NT times those who are blind are reduced to begging. Ironically, after the Pharisees asking for a sign (and they aren't there!), Jesus fulfils a prophecy showing the coming of the messianic age:

Isaiah 35:5 "5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped."

Mark 8:23–24 "So 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 on him, He asked him if he saw anything. 24 And he looked up and said, "I see men like trees, walking.""

Paul Barnett observes that in Mark many other men's hands were instruments of crime and violence, but Jesus' hands were sensitive instruments of healing. He would have been quite assertive with the man. The blind are accustomed to being led and have to trust others.

Why does he lead him out of the town? To avoid the clamour? To make personal contact with him?

Mark is a Gospel about relationship. It makes no sense outside the relationship that the writer and the potential reader may have to its central figure. And of course you cannot have a relationship with sheer arbitrary power. A saviour who walks through Galilee and Judaea healing and doing wonders 'at random' would not be somebody who invited relationship.

Such a saviour might invite wonder, awe, admiration or bafflement—but not

necessarily trust. Mark is treading a delicate line here, with much subtlety: he wants us to start from the two basic insights that it is not miracle that is the unique or special thing about Jesus, and that miracle itself, when it occurs, involves trust and relationship. It is never a kind of magic, a display of power and control. Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark*

Just imagine that man's experience! The spittle could have helped to build the man's faith. There were other itinerant healers in Jesus' day and Rabbis did cite the use of spittle to heal. Saliva is recognised to have curative qualities. From a medical article published in 2019 I found the following quote: "Saliva amasses an infinite wealth of beneficial protective and healing properties". Of course, saliva was seen as unclean as a bodily fluid by the Jews. The healer who used his saliva to heal would soon be spat at by others. To spit in someone's face was seen as the grossest of insults.

**QUESTION: Why was the healing of the blind man gradual?**

'do you see anything' is the only time in the gospels where Jesus asks if the healing is working or not! And the second laying on of hands is unique in Jesus' ministry.

The fact he knows what trees look like shows that he was not born blind, unlike the man in John 9.

Of course the disciples only see dimly. Peter will confess Jesus as the Messiah soon, but he doesn't understand (yet!) that Jesus must suffer and die.

The gradual nature of the healing, as well as the spittle, could be why it was omitted by Matthew and Luke - suggests Jesus is limited.

Mark 8:25-26 "Then He put His hands on his eyes again and made him look up. And he was restored and saw everyone clearly. 26 Then He sent him away to his house, saying, "Neither go into the town, nor tell anyone in the town.""

In other translations you can see there are three clauses in v.25: 'his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.' NIV. The Message emphasises the meaning of the original - he had perfect, 20:20 vision.

This is not the only time already - although it seems it's the last moment - where Jesus asks for secrecy. Rowan Williams suggests the messianic secret is Jesus way of saying 'I know I do miracles, and it doesn't matter. How often do I have to tell you? It doesn't matter.' Perhaps Jesus told him not to go so that the disciples could move on before the word spread. Remembering they would have known him well in that region.

'Men like trees walking' is such a vivid image. If we put this healing alongside the wonderful account in John 9 of the healing of the blind man, there is no better picture of coming to Jesus, coming from darkness to light, than this visual picture. Ryle says how at first when converted you can't see the new world properly:

"They are like the man before us who at first saw men as trees walking. Their vision is dazzled and unaccustomed to the new world into which they have been introduced.

It is not until the work of the Spirit has become deeper and their experience has been somewhat matured that they see all things clearly and give to each part of religion its proper place. This is the history of thousands of God's children. They begin with seeing men as trees walking; they end with seeing everything clearly." *J. C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on Mark's Gospel.*

"Mark's deep scepticism about relying too much on miracles, his careful coolness about including too much teaching that might distract us into having interesting discussions about Jesus' interesting ideas, shows us a Jesus who not only brings about 'regime change' in the world in which we live, but a Jesus who changes for ever what we can say about God." Williams, R. (2014) *Meeting God in Mark*. London: SPCK