

# SEEING EVERYTHING CLEARLY

MARK 8:1-26

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Because of the striking similarities between the two miracles, many scholars have assumed that Jesus' feeding of the four thousand is some sort of duplicate account of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand. But a careful observation of both of these stories reveals some notable differences that confirm this was in fact a separate miraculous event for a very specific group of people distinct from the other group he fed. Some of these notable differences include:

- There are different numbers of loaves and fish recorded
- There is actually a drastically different number of people – one accounted for only the five-thousand men, but the other accounts for four-thousand people total.
- In this story, the crowd had been with Jesus three days (8:2) rather than just listening to him for one day as mentioned in the other story (6:35).
- There are different numbers of leftover baskets recorded
- Jesus directs the events of the feeding of the four-thousand (8:2-3) rather than simply responding with action like he did with the feeding of the five-thousand (6:37).
- And perhaps the most notable difference between the two miracles is that the feeding of the four-thousand was in a predominately non-Jewish region whereas the feeding of the five-thousand was in a predominately Jewish region.

And so our observations may lead us to rightly conclude that these are two different stories of the same type of miracle performed for two very distinct groups of people. And maybe that fact alone reveals some of the underlying significance of why this miracle is repeated. It was a type of miracle that seemed to foreshadow the fact that Jesus is the true 'Bread of Life' for the non-Jewish people just as much as he is for the Jewish people. Jesus is the Messiah and Lord of all tribes, tongues and nationalities.

Now, as we've discussed previously, typically in Mark's narratives the *crowds* around Jesus are usually portrayed in a more negative light. But here in the feeding of the four-thousand, this crowd is portrayed with a much more positive characteristic and description. Mark goes out of his way to mention that this particular crowd had been with Jesus for three full days.

This is a strong but yet still kind of subtle continuation of Mark's theme concerning *outsiders* where he describes the way in which Jesus seems to experience a more positive reception among the non-Jewish crowds than he did among many of the Jewish crowds.

Now, after multiplying the bread and fish in much the same way that he had done before, we are told that the crowds ate and that they were satisfied (8:8). It's interesting to note that the word used here for *satisfy* at the end of the miracle is the same word used in the disciples' question that preceded the miracle (8:4). Their question was basically this, "For who in this remote region possesses the ability to satisfy such a large number of people with bread?"

By intentionally recording and repeating the Greek word for *satisfied* here at the end of this miracle, Mark is declaring that Jesus is the solution and answer to the question concerning, "Who is able satisfy the needs of so many people?". Jesus alone is the one who possesses power and ability to truly satisfy anyone and everyone who needs true satisfaction. Mark is demonstrating how Jesus indiscriminately offers the non-Jewish people in this world the same source of renewed life and satisfaction that he offers his own Jewish people. And so, Jesus' journey through Tyre and Sidon and into the Decapolis proves that although the Gentiles have been largely rejected by God's people, they have not been rejected by God himself.

What is our attitude towards the non-Christian world around us that has no claim in or association with the church or the things of Christianity? Do we possess any concern for their salvation and true satisfaction? And if so, what is our approach to love them and serve them? Are we recklessly storming the gates of the non-Christian world with a sword of condemning comments or are we radically serving the hearts and minds of the non-Christian world with the spirit of grace and truth? Truth must be heard, but it is grace that opens ears.

And as James Edwards puts it:

"There is a lesson here for the people of God in every age, that its enemies are neither forsaken by God nor beyond the compassion of Jesus."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 232.

Who are the non-Christian crowds gathered around us on a regular basis? And what are the ways that we ought to be intentional in being with them and giving them what they need?

Jesus' ministry and miracles within this Gentile region conclude his outward journey that is being described throughout the first half of Mark's account (1-8). Now, as we enter into the second half of Mark's account, Jesus is set to begin his inward journey back into the heart of Israel which will culminate within the city of Jerusalem and around the area of the Jewish temple (8-16).

As Jesus and his disciples sail away from the predominately Gentile regions, it's somewhat startling to see the dialogue that begins to take place within the boat immediately following the miraculous feeding of the four-thousand. The disciples had forgotten to bring some bread for the journey, and as Jesus is teaching them in the boat (and actually using yeast as a metaphor in his message) all the disciples can think about is the fact that they forgot to bring some bread.

And so being aware of their distracted minds, Jesus says:

"Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" They said to him, "Twelve." "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" And they said to him, "Seven." And he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?" (8:17-21)

Jesus is warning his disciples that their failure to contemplate and comprehend who he really is and his purpose here on earth can subtly produce a heart condition that is much like the religious leaders and even Herod if they are not careful. They must never assume that their privileges as disciples of Jesus automatically grants them favor with God. This was the error of the religious establishment. The religious leaders had always assumed that the privileges of their Jewishness automatically guaranteed them favor with God.

Association with Christianity must grow into a deeper understanding of Christ and a stronger faith in Christ or else we are in danger of being infected with hard hearts, blind eyes, deaf ears and forgetful minds. Our faith in Jesus can never be separated from truly understanding who he is and what he has done. It is this understanding that makes real faith possible.

And so, in light of what has taken place on this journey across the sea with the disciples, it's no coincidence that the next event that takes place in this narrative is a miracle by Jesus in which he heals a blind man. The healing of a blind man at Bethsaida immediately follows Jesus' warning to the disciples about their own blindness and lack of understanding. An invaluable lesson is about to be taught. Jesus reveals the way in which he plans to heal the disciples' spiritual blindness through the way in which he heals this man's physical blindness.

When we look at this story and observe Jesus' interaction with this blind man, we notice that unlike most of his other miracles Jesus doesn't speak a healing word or pronounce a declaration of his authority. Instead, he asks this question, "Do you see anything?" It's an interesting echo of what he has just asked his disciples in the boat – "Do you still not see?"

The blind man responds that he is now able to see vaguely but still not vividly. This seems to suggest that Jesus failed on his first attempt at healing this man. Did Jesus need to use more of his power than he used the first time? Why would he partially restore this man's sight instead of fully healing him right away? In comparison to all other miracles, this is the only miracle of Jesus that progresses through stages rather than just happening instantaneously.

So why does he heal this man like this and not right away?

Well, it's important to remember and realize that Jesus' miracles were always meant to validate who he was, why he was here and what he was doing in human history. The specific stages described in this healing of this blind man provide us with a clue about these things. Just as this man progressively gains his ability to see, the disciples, without realizing it, were also experiencing the first stage of Jesus' healing of their own spiritual blindness. And we begin to see this in them as Peter is about to declare to Jesus, "You are the Christ" (8:29).

This ought to encourage many of us to know that spiritual revelation is not always a 'Damascus Road Experience' (Acts 9) where our lives are radically changed right away. Often times, Jesus changes our lives progressively and the very nature of being a follower Jesus is a progressive spiritual journey.

As the apostle Paul writes, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now we know in part; then we shall know fully" (1 Corinthians 13).

Praise God that a day is coming where we will throw off our dusty lenses and be given pure eyes and a renewed vision that allows us to appropriately gaze upon the beauty and majesty of God. One day, we will be able to see and perceive our glorious Creator as he truly is.

There's a lesson for all of us in the midst of this miracle: Spiritual blindness is only healed through the grace and work of God through His Son and His Spirit. In the story, the man's faith is not once mentioned as any sort of asset to his healing. The man is simply healed through the intimate touch and progressive work of Jesus himself.

And so, are we looking for the quick-fixes in our own transformation or in the way that we seek to help transform others? Or are we committed to the progressive journey with Jesus?

As we've mentioned before, we see the initial healing touch of Jesus upon his disciples through Peter's declaration that he believes Jesus is the Messiah – the promised Savior-King sent by God to restore his people (8:29). The disciples are no longer totally blind, but as we will see, they are still unable to see and understand Jesus and his work perfectly clear. Only after the cross, resurrection and final touch of Jesus in the giving of the Holy Spirit will the disciples finally see everything clearly.

Our faith in Jesus can never be separated from truly understanding who he is and what he has done. It is this understanding that makes real faith possible. May we seek to grow in our understanding of God by embracing the truth about who Jesus is and experiencing the progressive work of the Holy Spirit who will renew and enlighten our hearts and minds.