



“Seeing Clearly”

Isaiah 35:5–6; Mark 7:31–37

Can we see clearly the truth that we are all one in Christ?

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 and to the 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 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

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

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).

We may see in part now, but we can surely grasp that all believers are brothers and sisters in Christ, rising above our superficial differences and embracing, together, our new life in the Spirit.

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).

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