

Mark – The First Gospel

019 – Beginning to See – Mark 8:22-30

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First Thoughts

Mark 8:22-9:1 forms as a kind of hinge between what has just come and what will follow. This section, and particular 8:27-33 serves as the center of the entire Markan gospel account. In these verses the reader is given a dense and packed summary of what Mark finds most important about the gospel and what it is that he wants to communicate to his audience.¹

We will examine this in at least two parts, and maybe three, so that we are allowed sufficient time to explore Mark's words in-depth.

Leading up to these verses we've seen Jesus defying the cultural and religious traditions regarding the Messiah, of Jesus breaking down boundaries and traditions, and of the people wondering who Jesus is. We have seen how the individuals and groups in power and exercising authority – represented by Herod and the Pharisees – trying to force Jesus to fit into their schemes.

We have heard Jesus warn his disciples about the “leaven of Herod and of the Pharisees,” and we have heard Jesus call the disciples blind and deaf. It is in this context that the next verses are to be read and interpreted.

A “Bumbled” Healing

²² And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. ²³ And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, “Do you see anything?” ²⁴ And he looked up and said, “I see people, but they look like trees, walking.” ²⁵ Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. ²⁶ And he sent him to his home, saying, “Do not even enter the village.” (ESV)

Comments

Jesus had tried to get to Bethsaida earlier (6:45) right after the feeding of the five-thousand. But a storm prevented him from succeeding the first time. He now finally makes it. Bethsaida is important as a port city that will take Jesus on the way to Caesarea Philippi (v.27), a seat of Imperial Roman power in this region.

¹ NICNT: Mark, 8:27-30. “Mark has placed at the center of his narrative the recognition that Jesus is the Messiah.”

Rhetorically it is important to recognize that this is the middle of three key “healing the deaf and blind” stories in Mark.² The first is found in 7:31-37, and the third will be encountered in 10:46-52. In both the first and last, the healing takes place immediately. It is only in this middle one where Jesus seems to have some difficulties in healing the blind, and the only such difficulty in any of the gospel accounts.³ These healings of the blind allude to Isaiah 35:5-6, a Messianic passage.

Jesus' display of extraordinary power astonished his countrymen and provoked the question of the source of his authority and wisdom, but his true dignity remained unrecognized (Chs. 1:27; 2:7; 6:2). His association with sinners and disregard for accepted conventions of piety so scandalized the guardians of an inherited tradition that they could think only in terms of the demonic (Chs. 2:15-20; 3:22-30; 7:1-5). The recognition of the demons communicated nothing to the bystanders but frenzied opposition to Jesus (Chs. 1:24 f.; 3:10 f.; 5:7 f.). The disciples raised the question of Jesus' identity but found no categories by which they could understand him (Ch. 4:41; 6:51 f.), and failed to penetrate the veiledness which characterized his words and works (Ch. 8:17-21). By weaving these several strands of the tradition together in the first half of the Gospel, Mark creates a climate of tension which can be resolved only by the recognition of Jesus' dignity. The pointed question of Ch. 8:21, "Do you not understand?" cries for the answer provided in Ch. 8:29, "You are the Messiah."⁴

Discussion

1. What might be some rhetorical reasons Mark draws out the journey to Bethsaida?⁵
2. Compare and contrast the first healing of a man that is deaf and dumb in 7:31-37 with this story involving a blind man.
 - a. Who seeks the healing? What significance might there be in this?
 - b. Where does Jesus heal? Why?^{6 7}
 - c. What does Jesus do as a part of the healing process?
 - d. What is the result of the healing touch?

² NICNT: Mark, 8:27-30. “By arrangement and emphasis Mark indicates the crucial significance which he finds in the events which clustered around the sojourn in the territory of Herod Philip.”

³ Reading Mark, 8:22-26.

⁴ NICNT: Mark, 8:27-30.

⁵ Feasting: Mark, location 8182. “The story resumes in a place called Bethsaida, the bridge to the second half of the Gospel. This is not the first time that Mark has referred to Bethsaida, for it was the destination of an earlier sea voyage (6:45) that ended unsuccessfully and included Mark’s first indictment of the disciple’s blindness. Now the community of blind men arrives at last in Bethsaida, a place where it turns out blindness is healed.”

⁶ NICNT: Mark, 8:23-25. “If it is proper to speak of a tendency in Mark, the sphere of miracle is public rather than secret. The three exceptions to this general observation derive, apparently, from a set of circumstances inherent in the situation itself. This is certainly true in Ch. 5:35-43 where Jesus excludes the scornful, unbelieving group of professional mourners from the revelation of his life-giving power. In Ch. 7:33 the removal of the man from the crowd was an important action in establishing communication with an individual who had learned to be passive in society. This may provide the key to Ch. 8:23 as well. When Jesus took the blind man's hand and led him outside the city he established a personal relationship to him that was an important element in the man's confidence that his cure could be expected from Jesus. Beyond this, the restoring of sight to a blind person among the mixed population of Bethsaida would have led to the type of false veneration that Jesus constantly avoided (Ch. 1:35–39, 45; 3:7–9; 6:45).”

⁷ UBC: Mark, 8:22-26. “With this in mind, it is possible to see that for Mark the removal of the two men from their village crowds in some sense signified the separation from one's past that Jesus' message demanded.”

- e. What does Jesus command?
 - i. There are differences between 7:36 and 8:26.⁸
- 3. Jesus seems to have only partially succeeded after the initial attempt to heal. What do you make of it?^{9 10 11}
 - a. After the initial attempt at healing, the man sees, but not clearly. This is probably an indication that he was not blind from birth.
- 4. In the second attempt, Jesus does not go through “magical” motions but simply lays his hands on the man’s eyes again. After this attempt the man is able to see clearly. What do you make of this?
- 5. Read Isaiah 35. What is it of which this prophecy speaks?
 - a. Seen in light of Isaiah 35:5-6, how do these healings inform the audience about the identity and function of Jesus?¹²
 - b. What about the rest of Isaiah 35 (esp. v.4)?
 - c. What might this tell us about recognizing and understanding the Messiah/Christ?

“Who Do You Say that I Am?”

²⁷ And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” ²⁸ And they told him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹ And he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.” ³⁰ And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him. (ESV)

⁸ NET Notes, 8:26. “tc Codex Bezae (D) replaces “Do not even go into the village” with “Go to your house, and do not tell anyone, not even in the village.” Other mss with some minor variations (Θ Ë¹³ 28 565 2542 pc) expand on this prohibition to read “Go to your house, and if you go into the village, do not tell anyone.” There are several other variants here as well. While these expansions are not part of Mark’s original text, they do accurately reflect the sense of Jesus’ prohibition.”

⁹ Feasting: Mark, location 8240. “Even after Jesus has performed an act of healing, the man is not healed. He sees, but he does not really see. What he sees is distorted. Nothing is said about the faith of the man or the faith of the people who bring him. This healing will take an extra effort by Jesus. The second stage of the healing simply has Jesus laying his hands on the man’s eyes again.”

¹⁰ Feasting: Mark, location 8256. “There is a desire for power over, not power for. They have, to this point, witnessed Jesus demonstrating power over: over demons, over illness, over physical handicaps, over nature, over scribes and Pharisees. They have witnessed triumph after triumph. Only in Nazareth did they see that Jesus could do no mighty works because of their unbelief (6:5–6). Now once again Jesus’ power to heal seems to come into question. Nothing is said in this case about belief or unbelief. Rather, the passage seems to be a clear commentary on the failed perceptions of the disciples.”

¹¹ Feasting: Mark, location 8269. “In this episode of the healing of the blind man, Mark makes Jesus appear weak, in order to say something important about who Jesus is, who the disciples are, and what Jesus is doing to form them into the kind of followers and leaders they need to be... Jesus’ apparent weakness is a vehicle for Mark to convey something that is at the heart of true discipleship.”

¹² Feasting: Mark, location 8207. “It is now evident that for Mark the mission of Jesus is that the blind should see, the deaf should hear, and the dumb should speak. For Mark, sight has emerged as the principal metaphor for faith—to “see things clearly”; in the healing of blind Bartimaeus there is new hope for Jesus’ disciples then and now.”

Comments

These verses echo what Herod and those around him said about Jesus. In fact, the ordering is identical.¹³

6:14 King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him."¹⁵ But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old."¹⁶ But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." (ESV)

But now Jesus asks the disciples directly, "But who do you say that I am?" The "you" here is plural, meaning Jesus is asking all of them. Peter responds as the representative voice.

The other Synoptic gospels record parallel accounts (Matthew 16:13-16; Luke 9:18-20). In Matthew, Jesus can be seen as commending Peter for his response before commanding them to "don't tell anyone." In Luke, there is no mention at all of "don't tell anyone."

The geographic context for this story is significant. Jesus had just been in Bethsaida, the northeast fishing town on the Sea of Galilee that belonged to Philip's tetrarchy. Caesarea Philippi was further north in this territory and was to be distinguished from the much larger coastal city of Caesarea Maritima. Herod the Great had named this inland Caesarea in honor of Augustus. He also had a temple of white marble built and dedicated to Augustus in the city (Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 15.10.3). The imperial overtones underlying the geographic location of the story are clear. Mark has Jesus identified as the Christ, the anointed one, the Messiah, indeed a royal figure, precisely here in a city dedicated to another king, and from Mark's perspective a lesser, earthly king. The eventual irony of the charges against Jesus, that he was the "King of the Jews" (15:26), is already anticipated in 8:27-30.¹⁴

Discussion

6. Traditionally Jesus has been depicted as apolitical. Recent scholarship has been revising that view to some extent. This set of verses contribute toward this revision.¹⁵ In what way might this inform our engagement in today's world and its structures?

¹³ UBC: Mark, 8:27-30. "The answers given to Jesus' first question remind us of the list of the same opinions given in 6:14-15, and this repetition of these varying labels for Jesus intensifies the sense that the question about who Jesus really is must be seen as central for Mark."

¹⁴ Feasting: Mark, location 8425.

¹⁵ NICNT: Mark, 8:27. "The capital was located at the source of the Jordan River on the slopes of Mount Hermon in a region famed for its beauty and fertility. When the area was first given to Herod the Great by Augustus he built a temple in honor of the emperor near a grotto consecrated to the Greek god Pan. In 3 B. C. Philip rebuilt the neighboring village of Paneas as his residence and named the new city in honor of Caesar. The area was thus dominated by strong Roman associations, and it may be theologically significant that Jesus' dignity was first recognized in a region devoted to the affirmation that Caesar is lord."

7. A two-part quiz: "Who do people say that I am?"^{16 17} and "Who do you say that I am?"¹⁸ In what ways to these questions continue to challenge us today?^{19 20}
8. Peter, responding for all of the disciples, declares the answer, "You are the Christ." Is this the correct answer? Explain.^{21 22 23 24}
9. Then why does Jesus command his disciples to remain silent about him, as he does with the crowd and with the demons?^{25 26 27}

¹⁶ *NICNT: Mark, 8:28.* "The conviction that Jesus is John or Elijah indicates that he is nothing in himself but only the eschatological realization of a more recent or more distant past event. The affirmation that he is an ordinary prophet fails to distinguish between Jesus and the messengers of God who had appeared so many times throughout Israel's history."

¹⁷ *Feasting: Mark, location 8445.* "Speculation about the identity of Jesus and the source of his powerful teachings and deeds was something that exercised the minds of those who encountered Jesus, friend and foe alike. At the very least, people concluded that he stood squarely in the prophetic tradition of Elijah and John the Baptist."

¹⁸ *Feasting: Mark, location 8394.* "This exchange is fascinating. It indicates that those who have seen Jesus have apparently concluded that he is a pivotal figure in signaling the soon-to-appear Messiah of Israel. In his preaching about the kingdom, people have begun to anticipate the appearance of Israel's Messiah, but they have not identified Jesus himself as that Messiah."

¹⁹ *NICNT: Mark, 8:29.* "In the first century the crucial question concerned the function of messiahship, and it was precisely at this point that Jesus' teaching concerning his own function stood in radical opposition to contemporary expectations."

²⁰ *Feasting: Mark, location 8375.* "The narratives invite us in, and the text is therefore interactive. We are expected to react, respond, and participate."

²¹ *Reading Mark, 8:27-30.* "Peter, speaking for the other disciples as he often does in Mark, replies, "You are the Messiah" (8:29). This is the first time that the title Messiah (Christ, "anointed one") has been used since 1:1, where Jesus' identity was announced to the audience by the heavenly voice. The disciples' progress from "Who is this?" to "You are the Messiah" is considerable. Peter has given the correct answer. The audience breathes a sigh of relief. At last the disciples have seen the light."

²² *UBC: Mark, 8:27-30.* "Peter's use of the title displays some recognition of Jesus' true significance. The subsequent use of the title in Mark shows that, although Jesus is the Christ, he is not the Christ of popular expectation... Further, in the crucifixion scene, the onlookers mockingly hail Jesus as "this Christ, this King of Israel," and their demand that he come down from the cross illustrates that their definition of Christ (Messiah) does not involve one who suffers and dies in shame."

²³ *NICNT: Mark, 8:30.* "Peter's affirmation was an exultant expression of faith. The subsequent narrative, however, indicates that it was also a reflection of a profound misunderstanding (Ch. 8:31-33; 10:35ff.)."

²⁴ *Feasting: Mark, location 8459.* "Thus far in Mark's Gospel, Peter has witnessed Jesus demonstrating tremendous power in every way. Peter has the right term, *christos*, but not the right meaning."

²⁵ *Reading Mark, 8:27-30.* "But Jesus interrupts the applause with a command to silence: "He rebuked them in order that they should tell no one about him." This surprising response recalls the exorcism stories, in which Jesus rebukes and silences demons (1:25) because they know his identity (1:34; cf. 3:11-12). The audience is dumbfounded. They know that Jesus is the Messiah because the omniscient narrator said so in 1:1. How can the disciples be rebuked and silenced for being correct? Obviously there is more to learn about who Jesus is before the news can be spread."

²⁶ *UBC: Mark, 8:27-30.* "This passage should really be read in connection with the following passage (8:31-9:1), which is given a separate heading in the NIV. Together, the two sections give us an open acclamation of Jesus as Messiah, and the first of three predictions of Jesus' death, which triggers the rebuke of Peter, revealing that his acclamation of Jesus was not based on a full understanding of Jesus' purpose and activity."

²⁷ *UBC: Mark, 8:27-30.* "In the next passage, Peter is rebuked for still being under the influence of incorrect, human thinking. Thus, the confession in 8:29 must be read in its context, where it reflects an insight into Jesus that is only partially correct, resembling the eyesight of the blind man in the preceding story at the first stage of his healing... ¶Thus, the present passage brings into the open the use of the term Christ (Messiah) as a proper confessional term to apply to Jesus. But the following material will show that the term can be used properly only when it is informed

Summary

Reflect upon and discuss the following excerpts from commentaries.

- i. Mark 8:22-26 fits in a larger narrative about the gradual lifting of the disciples' blindness that runs from chapter 8 through chapter 10. "Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?" (8:17-18 NIV). Here the blind man of Bethsaida is healed, which leads to Peter's confession. Finally, Mark 10 recounts the healing of Bartimaeus, who then follows Jesus "on the way" (10:52)—meaning toward Jerusalem and the cross. At the end, however, it is the Roman centurion who acknowledges in 15:39 (NIV), "Surely this man was the Son of God." Peter and the disciples, by contrast, can only muster an accurate though incomplete confession in 8:29.²⁸
- ii. He heals physically so that he may be seen spiritually. From this perspective, faith is not the precondition of miracles; rather, faith itself is the result of God's healing work upon us.²⁹
- iii. The other [healing story] that immediately comes to mind is that of blind Bartimaeus (10:46-52). Mark uses these two stories, which only he of all the Gospel writers tells, to bracket everything that takes place between them. This includes such things as Peter's confession of who Jesus is, with its accompanying rebuke by Jesus; the statements of Jesus concerning his suffering, his death, and his resurrection; the discussion about discipleship and its cost; and the transfiguration. The last of these is of particular significance, since it involves light and sight and seeing Jesus as he truly is. Interestingly enough, in the Eastern Orthodox celebration of the feast of the Transfiguration, it is not Jesus who is transfigured but the three disciples, who see him for the first time as he has always been.³⁰
- iv. If it takes a village to raise a child, it seems to me that it takes a church to nurture and sustain a Christian. That must involve the church in listening to all sorts of people in all sorts of places, in order to hear the truth, even when the truth is painful and difficult.³¹
- v. Jesus is the Messiah that to these disciples looks like a tree walking around. Even more disturbing is the fact that they never achieve clear sight or understanding—not in Mark's narrative. Commentators like to say that the resurrection was the moment that full sight came for the disciples—but not in Mark... This inability of the disciples in Mark to achieve sight is a source tension. It is the same tension that Mark's nonending creates. The rhetorical function of Mark's ending forces the reader to exclaim in horror, "No! It cannot end that way! The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, cannot, must not end in fleeing, fear, and silence!"³²
- vi. The principle question of Mark's Gospel concerns who Jesus is and what it means to call him the Christ. Only as that becomes clear is it possible to understand what it means to follow him and to be his disciples.³³

by a genuine understanding of what it means for Jesus to be God's Christ. That is why in 8:30 Jesus tells the Twelve not to circulate their confession of him as Christ among anyone else. It is not just that others would not understand its proper meaning; even the disciples do not yet know what they are saying!"

²⁸ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8135.

²⁹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8144.

³⁰ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8192.

³¹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8214.

³² *Feasting: Mark*, locations 8291, 8295.

³³ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8376.

- vii. It is easier to believe that a Messiah will come than it is to believe that one has already arrived.³⁴
- viii. Is it not the case that we stand in the same place with the disciples? Like them, we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, but we may be even more confused than they about what that actually means. We are surrounded by two thousand years of the church's very diverse expectations, claims, and explanations about who Jesus is and what he does as God's anointed one. He has been used as a sponsor for conquests, crusades, inquisitions, empires, revolutions, wars, and all sorts of causes, noble and demonic. So what can we teach our children about who Jesus is, and what it means to follow him and to live as his disciples?³⁵
- ix. Those who wish to follow Jesus must walk the way of the cross, which involves self-denial and giving one's life for others. Is Jesus also telling us that, like him, we must surrender thoughts of destroying our enemies and the powers that threaten us, since ultimately our worst enemy is violence itself? Does Jesus' witness of active, non-violent love epitomize what it means to deny oneself and to bear the cross? Does this require the church to teach nonviolence as essential to being a disciple of Jesus? Is it central to the gospel itself? Mark's Jesus would seem to require this. What would that mean for the church's teaching, witness, and ministry?³⁶
- x. The midterm exam ramps into high gear with the second question: "Who do you say that I am?" This is the existential question, a direct address of Jesus to his followers, and it demands that they answer from their core. They cannot rely on hearsay—gossip theology—from politicians or theologians. They must take a personal stand. The answer may or may not reveal who Jesus is, but it will certainly reveal who the disciple is.³⁷
- xi. Peter's "correct confession" is deceptive. It points out an important reality: we can have what appears to be everything in order—words, actions, and so on—and still have it very wrong. ¶Correct confession can be deceptive. It can mask false discipleship, idolatry, and even a perspective that Jesus attributes to Satan. A perfectly correct mission statement does not reveal the true discipleship of either the pastoral staff or the congregation that appears to follow it to a tee.³⁸
- xii. The distinctive theology of the cross and resurrection implied by this announcement dominates the remainder of the Gospel. The recognition that Jesus is the Messiah is thus the point of intersection toward which all of the theological currents of the first half of the Gospel converge and from which the dynamic of the second half of the Gospel derives. In no other way could Mark more sharply indicate the historical and theological significance of the conversation in the neighborhood of Caesarea Philippi.³⁹

³⁴ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8397.

³⁵ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8404.

³⁶ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8412.

³⁷ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8484.

³⁸ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8489.

³⁹ *NICNT: Mark*, 8:27-30.