

**Mark:  
Lord, I Was Blind, I Could Not See**

**Mark 8:22-26**

**By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)**

*November 24, 2004*

Please turn in your Bibles to Mark's Gospel once again. We have been working our way through Mark's Gospel. We're about half way through the Gospel, in chapter eight, and we come this evening to a little story...it's very short, it's somewhat strange. It's been something on my mind ever since last Wednesday when I realized I would have to speak on this tonight. It's a wonderful, wonderful story of Jesus' healing a blind man in the region of Bethsaida.

Now before we read the passage together, let's come before God in prayer. Let's pray.

*Gracious Lord and Heavenly Father, we want with all of our hearts to see none but Jesus only; Jesus only in Your word; Jesus only in our lives. And we ask for the help of Your Spirit: Holy Spirit, come and grant us the grace of illumination, that we might read, learn, and inwardly digest all that You have caused to be written. Help us to mark the truth, and to apply it to our lives for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

This is God's holy word. We find it in Mark chapter eight, and beginning at verse twenty-two and reading through to verse twenty-six.

And they came to Bethsaida. And they brought a blind man to Him, and entreated Him to touch him. And taking the blind man by the hand, He brought him out of the village; and after spitting on his eyes, and laying His hands upon him, He asked him, 'Do you see anything?' And he looked up and said, "I see men, for I am seeing them like trees, walking about." Then again He laid His hands upon his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and began to see everything clearly. And He sent him to his home, saying, 'Do not even enter the village.'

Amen. And may God add His blessing to the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

Now as we have seen in these past few weeks as Jesus calls these disciples of

His, they have been brought to faith and trust in Jesus Christ, and their birth is meant to issue in growth. They're meant to grow; they're meant to become mature in their understanding and in their profession of what it means to be a Christian.

Paul would write to the Thessalonians and say how thankful he was because "your faith is growing more and more." And Peter, in both of his epistles, seems to be preoccupied with the issue of growing. In I Peter he says that memorable passage: "Like newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that you may grow thereby." And in II Peter, almost at the end of the epistle, he gives that exhortation: "Grow in grace." Grow in grace. And it's interesting to me that Peter should be so preoccupied with the issue of growing, because perhaps he's recalling how difficult for him in particular, and for many of the other disciples, to grow. Maybe Peter is thinking of this particular incident that's before us this evening.

Whatever we make of this story and whatever we make of what Jesus does on the one hand, in the actual life of the one who is healed the fact that Jesus did it in two stages: He heals him of his blindness so that he can see men, but like trees walking; and then, in a second stage restores his sight fully. Whatever we make of that—and my instinct is that we make almost nothing of that—the real lesson is not what Jesus was doing in that man: the real lesson is in what Jesus is trying to teach His disciples by illustrating it in what He was doing in that man.

I want to acknowledge that I can't think of this passage without thinking of a particular sermon that I must have read when I was a student at the University of Aberystwyth in Wales, when I was in a former life studying mathematics. And somebody gave me this book (it wasn't this copy; this is a brand new copy and actually belongs to the bookstore), but this is Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones' *Spiritual Depression*. And in it Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has a very famous sermon on this passage: "I See Men Like Trees Walking."

Now, I deliberately did not read this sermon before I prepared this sermon, because otherwise I would never have prepared another sermon except the one Dr. Lloyd-Jones preached. But I still remember bits of this sermon from my head. I think this is one of the sort of "top twenty" books in my favorite books of all time: *Spiritual Depression* by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

Now, this miracle: it takes place in Bethsaida. Bethsaida is to the north and slightly to the east of the Sea of Galilee. You remember, Jesus has just been in Decapolis, which is to the south, and depending on who you're reading, maybe fifteen or twenty miles away from the coast of the southern coastline of the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus had healed a man who was deaf and partially dumb. They have fed four thousand people bread and some fish, and then they have had this interchange

with the Pharisees, and they've made their way northwards toward Bethsaida.

In the boat journey heading towards Bethsaida, you remember there breaks out amongst the disciples this argument. They suddenly realize as soon as they get into the boat that they haven't got any bread. It's amusing...it's funny. Mark is recording this, and Peter is probably whispering this in Mark's ear. Imagine! We've just been feeding four thousand people with more loaves than we could count, and we got into the boat, and they've only got one loaf. And they're accusing each other, and they're quarreling amongst each other. They're distressed; they're thoroughly and completely occupied with themselves.

And now falls this miracle in Bethsaida: an unusual miracle; Jesus does it in an extraordinary way. He doesn't usually perform miracles in this fashion, by half healing a person and then fully healing him; and the only thing that we can conjecture is that He's doing this for a very deliberate reason. He's doing it in order to instruct the disciples about something. And He's saying to the disciples, this is where you are. This is what you are like. You've been partially healed, but you don't see clearly. You see men, but you see men like trees walking.

Some of you, if you took off your spectacles, (or took out your contact lenses, in my case)...I couldn't see further. I couldn't see the front row. Well, I don't think there is anybody in the gallery, but if there was I wouldn't see them! That's the issue that Jesus is teaching these disciples. They are His disciples, but they don't see clearly. They don't see clearly.

What exactly was Jesus suggesting when this man says, "I see men like trees, walking"? Let me suggest three things.

### **I. His disciples have no clear understanding of certain truths.**

Let me suggest first of all that His disciples have no clear understanding of certain truths. These disciples were on the verge of making one of the greatest pronouncements in the Gospel. It will fall in the next section, but as far as you and I are concerned it's going to be January.

In the next section, it's the turning point in the Gospel. It's the occasion further north, again in Bethsaida, in Caesarea Philippi; it's that moment when Peter will say, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." And it's a blinding, revelatory moment. "Flesh and blood hasn't revealed this unto you, but My Father which is in heaven," Jesus says. It's one of those heart-stopping moments when Peter (and don't you love that it's Peter?) ...Peter makes this astonishing, marvelous declaration as to the identity of Jesus.

It's a transition in the Gospels. Jesus will ask the question, "Who do men say that I am?" And there are all kinds of answers. 'Some say You're John the Baptist,

come back to life again. Some say that You're Elijah, *redivivus*. Some say that You're one of the prophets... There were all kinds of ideas and speculations and half-formed thoughts as to who Jesus was; but these disciples, they had some apprehension as to who Jesus was. They'd left everything; they'd become His disciples. They'd left their homes, they'd left their jobs. They were embarking on what would be a three-year missionary journey with Jesus. They'd begun to see who He was: a great man, certainly; a great leader of men, certainly; a great teacher and prophet, certainly; but, much more than that. But how much more?

Who exactly was Jesus, that He was a mouthpiece for God? That He was a great prophet? That He talked with astonishing clarity, and sometimes with great profundity the things of God? But they were constantly being stretched in their levels of understanding and comprehension as to who Jesus was. They saw Him, but as trees walking.

It shows us that in the experience of these disciples, clear-sightedness came only gradually. It came only gradually, and just in these past few weeks at the seminary—it's that time of the year when I'm teaching the Doctrine of the Trinity—and the astonishing way in which it takes centuries for clarity of that doctrine, a core doctrine, a central doctrine, a central affirmation that defines who God is: that God is one God, and yet there is more than one Who is that one God; that God—in the immortal words of our senior minister from the pulpit here one Sunday morning—that God is not an undifferentiated monad: that the Father is God, and the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and yet you don't have three Gods: there is only one God. The astonishing way in which a man like Athanasius, *Athanasius contra mundum*, Athanasius against the world, Athanasius against the Arians and the Semi-Arians—little children who'd been taught to sing in the streets that there was a time when the sun was not. And Athanasius, coming out in clear, affirming tones that Jesus was as much God as the Father is God.

You all know that little expression, “not an iota of a difference” —but Athanasius...and it comes from this particular controversy, because an iota makes all the difference in the world. It was the difference between two Greek words: *homoiousios* and *homoousios*<sup>1</sup>; and the difference between them is one letter, the letter *iota*. And one says Jesus was ‘like God’, and the other says that Jesus ‘was God.’ And Athanasius, affirming with absolute clarity that Jesus was God... God raising up a man like Tertullian in North Africa to bring to us the language, the vocabulary that we still employ: words like *person*; a word like *Trinity*: that God exists, and within that essence there are three subsistencies: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And the language of the Nicenal-Constantinopolitan Creed of 387 A.D., that Jesus is “God of God; very God of very God, begotten, not made; being of one substance with the Father, by Whom all things were made.” And yet the

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<sup>1</sup> *homoiousios* (“like substance”) vs. *homoousios* (“same substance”)

suspicion even within those very words that Jesus is God of God—as though perhaps the church was affirming that Jesus was deriving His godhead, His deity from the Father, and actually coming down to the sixteenth century to John Calvin, to affirm without any equivocation the absolute deity of Jesus: that Jesus' deity is underived in any way, in any fashion; that there's no subordination of the deity of Jesus to the Father; that He is equal with the Father. It took fifteen hundred years for the church to see that in all of its clarity. Amazing...about the deity of Jesus....

The same could be said about the doctrine of justification by faith. Of course, the church had affirmed it to some degree before Luther in 1517; of course, the Hussites and the Waldencians and Wycliffe and others had affirmed the language of justification, but it took fifteen hundred years for the church to express that truth in all of its clarity. I'm saying they saw these things, but they saw them like trees walking.

And Jesus is saying to these disciples of His, 'You see, yes, you're not blind; you're not what you once were.' They'd been brought to sight, but their sight is partial. They don't yet fully grasp who Jesus is. They don't yet fully grasp all the implications of the truths that come together as a consequence of Jesus' coming into the world. "I see men like trees, walking," this man said. And Jesus is saying to His disciples, 'You know, that's just like you.'

## **II. Secondly, they had no clear engagement of faith.**

They had no clear engagement of faith. They're in the boat. They realize they only have one loaf, and sitting with them in the boat is Jesus, the Lord of glory, the One who has just enabled them to be part of that miracle of feeding the four thousand, and before that the feeding of the five thousand; the healing of that deaf and partially mute man. And what were they doing? They're not saying, 'Lord, do you know, we're so silly. We forgot to bring bread, but You're with us, and we need not be concerned about what we're going to eat in the next few hours, because You're with us! If You can multiply loaves and fishes to feed four thousand and five thousand, You can do it for the twelve of us here in this boat.'

But that's not what they're doing. They're arguing. They're quarrelling. They're wrapped up in themselves. Did they believe? Of course they believed! Had they exercised faith in Jesus Christ? Yes, of course they had exercised faith in Jesus Christ! He had called them; and they had followed Him, and they'd given assent to what He had claimed; and they had trusted Him. But there are degrees of faith, and their faith is weak, and their faith is fragile. And sometimes their faith is as thin as a spider's thread. Now, Spurgeon said as long as that spider's thread is lodged in the very heart of Jesus, it is saving faith; but it is still a spider's thread, it's weak faith. It's small faith.

Jesus would say to them in a story in Luke 8, "Where is your faith?" You remember, in the storm—on a boat again in the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus is sleeping in the back of the boat, and they wake Him, and they're all concerned and flustered; and Jesus says to them, "Where is your faith?" You believe, but where is your faith now? "I see men, but I see them like trees, walking."

In the very next chapter, in Mark 9 a man comes to Jesus whose son is sick, and he comes to Jesus and says, "If you can, You can make him whole." And Jesus says, "If I can? All things are possible to him who believes." And Jesus heals the boy, and the man cries out, "I believe! Help my unbelief!" And isn't that our experience all the time? 'I do believe, Lord; I do believe the promises of the gospel, that they're yes and amen in Jesus Christ. But You put me in situations and I find myself not believing them. I find myself running to self-help methods. I find myself not recalling, and not resting, and not trusting in those promises.'

Haven't you come here to this very prayer meeting, some of you, and you've come weighed down with a load of care: problems in your family, problems in your children, problems in your place of work. And you've come, and in this very prayer meeting as you've listened to brothers and sisters praying, and as you've listened to the word being read and expounded, as you've sung the great hymns of faith, Jesus has come beside you and said, 'Where is your faith? Where is your faith? Trust Me. Put your trust in Me.'

Lack of faith, weak faith, makes our affections cold. It's like a marriage in which a relationship isn't being fed and nourished. "I see men, but I see them like trees, walking." My love for Jesus sometimes doesn't excite me as it should, as once it did. My love is grown weak and cold and faint. Lack of faith makes us look to ourselves, like these disciples in the boat were doing, because there's this gravitational pull towards self-justification within each one of us. We lose sight of Toplady's great words,

Nothing in my hand I bring;  
simply to Thy cross I cling.  
Naked, come to Thee for dress;  
Helpless, look to Thee for grace.  
Foul, I to the fountain fly.  
Wash me, Savior, or I die.

Unbelief makes us weak when Satan is prowling about, seeking whom he may devour. What piece of armor, what piece of armor protects us from the fiery darts of the evil one? It is the shield of faith. It's the shield of faith. Faith weans us from all forms of self-sufficiency and self-reliance, and self-absorption. Faith is the eyes that see; faith is the ears that hear; faith is the hands that embrace...and all directed to Jesus Christ. "I see men," this man says, "but I see them like trees, walking." And there's a third thing here.

### III. They have no clear perception of the nature of their calling

They have no clear perception of the nature of their calling. What's going to happen next, in the Gospel of Mark? It's the incident at Caesarea Philippi. What is Jesus going to say to His disciples? He's going to give the clearest pronouncement yet that He will be betrayed; that He will be handed over to sinners; that He will be executed; that He will be crucified; that He will die. And you remember what Peter did? Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. Imagine that! The arrogance of it! Peter takes Him aside and says to Jesus, 'Lord, You must be mistaken!' And you remember what Jesus says to His disciples? "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me." And I think that Jesus here in Bethsaida is saying to His disciples, 'You don't see that yet. You think you see what it means to be a Christian; you think you see what it means to be a disciple; you think you see from all of the blessings of feeding five thousand, and seeing people having their hearing restored and their eyesight restored, and dead people coming to life again...'

But there's another side of suffering, and what Dr. Flood referred to in his prayer this evening is persecution, and you don't see that yet. "I see men, but I see them like trees, walking."

We're called, you and I, to be soldiers. Let your mind think of some of those images of Fallujah, that hand-to-hand, street-to-street, house-to-house combat in all of its ugliness...in all of its ugliness. And my friends, that's what we are called to be: soldiers engaged in hand-to-hand conflict. Hand-to-hand conflict. It's as though Jesus is saying to Peter, 'You will die in Rome and be crucified upside down.' It's as though Jesus is saying to Andrew, 'You will go to Greece, and you will be martyred there.' It's as though Jesus is saying to Bartholomew, 'You will go to Armenia, and you will become a martyr there.' And to James, the son of Alphaeus, 'You will go to Syria, and they will club you to death there.' And to Matthew (according to some), 'You will go to Ethiopia, and you will be stabbed to death.' And Matthias, who took Judas' place, and Andrew along with him, 'Together you will go to Syria, and you will be burnt to death. And Philip, You will die a cruel, cruel death in Carthage. And Simon the Zealot, You will go to Persia, and because of your refusal to worship the sun god, you'll be killed. And Thomas, "doubting Thomas", You'll go to India, and four soldiers with spears will kill you.'

You think you see what it means to be a disciple, but all you see, Jesus is saying, is trees walking. Let me fill you in little by little on what it really means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. A strange little story is Jesus' way, I think, of teaching His beloved disciples that they need to grow. They need to grow if they are to face what is coming to them.

And my friends, do you think they saw any of this? No, of course not. But what

about you? And what about me? And I wonder tonight if you're saying, 'Well, that is me. That is me. I see, I do see, I do see...but I see men like trees walking. I don't have a clear understanding of certain things. I don't have a clear engagement of my faith. I don't have a clear perception of the nature of what it is Jesus has called me to.'

Then go to Him, my friend. Go to Him. He doesn't want you to be half-sighted. He wants you to grow, and He wants you to see, and He wants you to see clearly. He wants to be able to say to you, "I will be with you." He wants you to say, 'I want to be out-and-out for Jesus Christ, no matter what the cost. I don't want to live my life with one foot in this world and one foot in the church. I want to walk in Your ways. I want to be a disciple wholly committed to Your cause.' Jesus is saying, 'Then you need to grow. You need to grow, and I will help you grow.'

It's a marvelous, marvelous little story, but it's a story that reflects so very much where we are. Let's pray together.

*Gracious God and ever-blessed Father, as we look at this story tonight we see a glimpse of ourselves. We see, we truly do see; we're no longer blind as we once were, but we don't see clearly, and we don't express our faith as we ought to express it. And we're only half engaged in the business of being a disciple, and we pray, O gracious God, give us hearts and give us eyes that desire to see You and what You have called us to, clearly. Grow us, we pray, because we don't want to be children forever. And forgive us our sins, for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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