

THE TURNING POINT

by Ray C. Stedman

The passage we come to now in Mark's Gospel involves one of the strangest and most remarkable miracles of Jesus. It is the only one he ever performed in two stages, the only one which involved a process instead of immediate healing. Mark is the only one who records this miracle for us, and for that reason it is rather obscure. Nevertheless it is a very significant miracle, and it has direct bearing on the startling change in the message of Jesus which follows this incident.

This account brings us to the turning point in the book of Mark, the place where the message of Jesus takes a new direction. It marks the halfway point in the teaching of this book. I hope it will be the turning point in many of your lives, as well.

Let us look together now at Mark 8, beginning with Verse 22:

And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man, and begged him to touch him. 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 upon him, he asked him, "Do you see anything?" And he looked up and said, "I see men; but they look like trees, walking." Then again he laid his hands upon his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and saw everything clearly. {Mark 8:22-25 RSV}

Two things are of particular interest in this account: One is the process our Lord followed in this healing, and the other is the prohibition he imposed on this man. The process is unique. No other miracle is like this one. In a sense that is not strange, because Jesus never did two miracles alike. We tend to fall into patterns and habits. And when a change is made, it takes people abruptly unaware. But our Lord was not that way. He did things according to what the situation demanded, and so no two miracles are really the same. But this one is very remarkably different, because of two unusual aspects.

The first that captures our attention is that he spit on the eyes of this man. This may seem unhygienic to some of us, but in three of our Lord's miracles he employed spit in this way. We saw in our last study that, in the healing of the man who was deaf and dumb, Jesus spit upon his own fingers before he touched the ears of the man. And in John's Gospel we have the account of the healing of the man who was born blind. There Jesus spit on the ground, mixed clay with it, and used that to anoint his eyes. Now he spits directly on the eyes of this blind man. So there is some continuing use of spit in this way.

It is difficult to know exactly why. Many of the commentators have wrestled with this problem. William Barclay suggests that this was done as an accommodation of the people's belief that there is something therapeutic about human saliva. People do immediately put to their mouth a finger that is cut or burned to soothe it. That may well be where this belief arose, and there may be some weight to the suggestion. But it does not explain fully what our Lord was doing.

It seems to me -- and you can regard this as a Stedmaniac version, if you like -- that what our Lord does is symbolic, as were all of our Lord's miracles. They were parables in action, pictures of the truth he was attempting to convey. And in this case, spit becomes a symbol of the Word of God. It is the visible form of that which issues from the mouth. Our Lord was perhaps awakening the faith of this blind man, who could feel but could not see. And through the application of spit to his eyes, he sensed that something was going to happen which would involve the power of the spoken Word of God. At any rate, Jesus was certainly teaching his disciples this lesson. It is the Word which is the creative agency in God's work, always. The author of the letter to the Hebrews tells us that we understand it is by the Word of God that the worlds were framed out of things which do not appear {cf, Heb 11:3}. This is what I believe is symbolized here.

The second unusual aspect of this miracle is the incompleteness of the healing. We have no other account in Scripture of anything like this, of there being a process involved in our Lord's healings. In every other circumstance he spoke the word, and instantly the person was made whole. He leaped, if he were lame; opened his eyes and saw, if he were blind; or rose from the dead. But for this miracle alone a two-stage process was involved. Again, many have wondered about this. Some commentators suggest that this represents a weakening of Jesus' powers, that he had reached a stage in his ministry where opposition was so intense, hostility so increased, that his power was not quite adequate, and it took a double dose in order to accomplish the healing.

I cannot subscribe to that "double-whammy" school of thought. Our Lord always had adequate power to deal with any situation because, as he tells us so frequently himself, it was not his power; it was the power of God the Father at work in him. And, again and again through the pages of the Scriptures, God teaches us that nothing is impossible to him. It was thus he challenged the faith of Sarah, the wife of Abraham, when he told them she would have a child, after her body had long since passed the age of childbearing. Sarah laughed in disbelief. And God said to her, "Is anything too hard for God?" {cf, Gen 18:14}.

Some commentators have suggested that perhaps this was a very stubborn case of blindness here, much more difficult than the usual. But that is saying the same thing -- that Jesus' power was not adequate to deal with it.

Rather, we must see this as a deliberate act, done for the benefit of the disciples. Jesus is teaching them again. This incident falls in that section of Mark which deals with our Lord's attempts to instruct the disciples. He is teaching them lessons by what he does and what he says. Here he deliberately does this in a two-stage fashion, because he wants these disciples to see that they are like this blind man -- they, and we who read this account -- and that we need our eyes opened in two stages, as this blind man did. Therefore this miracle is symbolic of the developments which follow this account. If we read it this way, we will see it as a very accurate introduction to what follows.

But before we continue, look briefly at the prohibition our Lord laid upon this man:

And he sent him away to his home, saying, "Do not even enter the village." {Mark 8:26 RSV}

The village was Bethsaida. Our Lord had done many miracles there. But now he keeps the man from entering. This surely is in line with what we have seen many times. Jesus frequently said to people, "Don't say anything about what happened to you." The reason was clearly that he did not want to encourage the love of the miraculous which was so easily awakened among these people, as it still is in our own day. This explains why miracle workers gain such large crowds, and attract so much attention. People long to see these supernatural activities happen right before their eyes. But Jesus continually played that down. He did heal physically, and there were miracles, but he was never happy with the reaction of those who simply wanted to see miracles. Now he exerts an even stricter control. He will not even let the man go into the village, lest the man should break his charge, as others had done before him, and tell what Jesus said he should not tell. So he limits this man in order to play the miracle down, for he always sought to strike at the real need of man -- the spiritual hurt within -- and to heal that.

This is followed immediately by the account of the questions our Lord put to his disciples on the way to Caesarea Philippi, beginning at Verse 27:

And Jesus went on with his disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others one of the prophets." And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." And he charged them to tell no one about him. {Mark 8:27-30 RSV}

We must take due note of what Mark tells us here as to the location of this event. It was on the way to Caesarea Philippi This was in the northern part of the Holy Land, north of the sea of Galilee, at the foot of Mount Hermon. It is evident that our Lord was on his way to Mount Hermon, deliberately, in order that the

Transfiguration (which follows immediately) might take place on that high mountain. He understood that this was about to happen. He knew he was to be transfigured before several of these men, and they were on their way. We must link this, then, with the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop.

On the way, Mark tells us, he asked two questions of the disciples: one concerning the view of the people regarding himself, and other concerning the disciples' own view of him. The question concerning the view of the people elicited the answer that some people thought he was John the Baptist, risen from the dead. Or, others thought he was Elijah, the prophet, because there are Scripture references in the Old Testament which say Elijah is to come before the great and terrible day of the Lord, and they were looking for him.

It is still true today in orthodox Jewish ceremonies that a chair is set out for Elijah at the Passover feast. So some said, "This is Elijah; he has arrived." And some said, "No, he is one of the other prophets -- Jeremiah, perhaps, or Isaiah." Or perhaps some meant when they said, "He is one of the prophets," that they thought he was a new member of the great line of Hebrew prophets.

The people were saying these same things about Jesus back in Chapter 6, where Mark records how aroused Herod the king was because of this stirring popular movement. Then people would ask, "Who is he?" and some would answer, "This is John the Baptist, raised from the dead. That is why these powers are at work in him." But others said, "No, it's Elijah!" and still others would say, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old."

So it is evident that the view of the multitude had not changed in these intervening eight months of ministry. They still thought he was one of the great Hebrew prophets. This indicates that they held him in very high regard, for these were the great names of Israel. But never once is it recorded that the populace had even the slightest inkling that this is the Messiah. They thought of him as one who was looking for another yet to come, and there is no indication that they ever got beyond that view.

Before we leave this I would like to make one observation aside. Notice that the expectation of the multitude was not centered in what is called today "reincarnation." We hear a great deal about reincarnation these days. Many feel that the Scriptures teach reincarnation. Such is not the case. These people were not suggesting a reincarnation when they said "He's Elijah, or John the Baptist, or Jeremiah." Reincarnation means appearing in a new body, or even as a different form of life, and leading a different life than the one you originally led. We sometimes hear startling accounts of people who have been taken back by some kind of hypnotic trance into a "previous existence," in which perhaps they were of a different sex, even, and who recount all kinds of strange things happening to them. Many people, even Christians, are misled by this, and think that the Scriptures suggest this may be true. Some have claimed that a passage such as this supports the doctrine of reincarnation. No, it does not. There is absolutely nothing at all in Scripture that ever supports the notion of reincarnation. In this case it was not a matter of the people's thinking the old prophets had appeared in a new form. They thought it was the same old prophets back again -- not a reincarnation, but the reappearance they were expecting of the same individuals who had lived hundreds of years before. This account, therefore, lends no support to the idea of reincarnation. Reincarnation, I make bold to say, is one of those "doctrines of demons" {1 Tim 4:1b RSV}. Paul speaks of, taught by lying spirits who deceive men and make them believe this kind of thing in order to gain control over them.

But let us go on to the question Jesus asked the disciples themselves. He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" That was the important question to him. Peter's reply is immediate and definite: "You are Messiah, the Christ." We need to remember that the word "Christ" is simply the Greek form of the Hebrew word "Messiah". They mean exactly the same thing. And it is not a name, but a title. Many people seem to think that Jesus was his first name, and Christ was his last name -- sort of like John Smith. But Christ is not a name. Christ is the title of the office he holds. Jesus is his name, Christ is his office. And, in either the Greek or the Hebrew form, it means *The Anointed One*, the One anointed by God.

In the Old Testament there were two offices which required anointing: king, and priest. When Peter answered with the words, "You are Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One," he meant, "You are the One whom God has anointed King. You are the King, the coming One predicted of old to rule over the people of God, and over the nations of earth. You are the Priest who is coming, the Anointed One."

Matthew records that Jesus said immediately to Peter, "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you," {Matt 16:17b RSV}. That is, "You did not come to this by simply reasoning it out, by normal human methods. Rather, it was revealed to you by my Father who is in heaven." Our Lord recognized that these disciples were being taught by the Holy Spirit, that as they read the Scriptures, saw the things that were happening, and observed what he was doing, their eyes were being opened to the significance of these events by the Holy Spirit. This teaching ministry of the Spirit is still going on.

We must link this with the account in Chapter 4 of the stilling of the storm. On that occasion, some eight months before this, Jesus stood in the boat in the midst of the storm and spoke to the wind and the waves. He said to the one, "Peace," and to the other, "Be still!" {Mark 4:39b}. And there came an immediate great calm over the whole lake. It wasn't a gradual subsidence of the wind and waves. It was immediate. It was as though a huge hand had pressed down upon the water, and a great calm, from the north to the south and the east to the west, came upon the lake. And the disciples said to themselves, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the waves obey him?" {Mark 4:41 RSV}.

That question needed to be answered. And all the intervening events which followed were used by our Lord as teaching situations, that he might instruct these disciples as to who he was. Now the test has come: He asks them the question, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter's answer was clear and sure: "You are the Christ. You are the One we have been looking for. You are not Elijah; you are not Jeremiah, or John the Baptist. You are not one who is looking for another; you are the Other for whom all men have been looking." It must have been a startling realization to these disciples that here indeed was the One of whom all the Old Testament Scriptures spoke. Peter expressed their faith -- they had arrived at it that very moment -- when he said those words: "You are the Christ." Now, this is what Jesus wanted them to know. He had been working with them toward this end. He knew they needed to come to this knowledge, and all he had done up to that point had been designed to lead them to this understanding of who he was, that they might then answer their own question.

But now, once they know, he does a strange thing. Mark tells us he charged them, laid it on them heavily, to tell no one about it. Is that not strange? Would you not think, now that he has brought them to this place and they know who he is, that this would be the time he would say to them, "Now I want to send you out again. Go into every village and hamlet in Galilee and tell them who I am. This is why I have come, that men might understand." But instead, he lays it upon them not to tell anyone what they have just learned. This is one of the puzzling developments in the ministry of Jesus. And yet we can see why he did this, in the light of the story of the blind man just preceding. This is that first touch, which opened their eyes to a part of the truth. They saw him, but not clearly. They saw him "as a tree, walking." They saw his greatness and his glory. But they did not understand the secret of it. So they still require the second touch, and this is what our Lord goes on to give.

Looking back on this now, we can see how wise his actions were. The disciples, at this point, had great misapprehensions as to what the kingdom of God was like. And though they had come to a recognition of who he was, they had no idea how he was going to accomplish this work. They were astounded by him, amazed and dazzled and fascinated, but not comprehending of what he really was like. They did not see him very clearly.

In Houston, Texas, a few weeks ago, I heard Major Ian Thomas give a series of splendid messages on the person of our Lord. He was commenting on this scene and the one that follows -- the Transfiguration. I remember his saying that if the disciples had gone out now to tell what they knew about Jesus, if they had spread the word all over the land that here was the One the Old Testament had predicted was coming -- with their superficial and shallow concepts of what this involved -- they would have created a tremendous emotional reaction among the people, a popular following after Jesus, but one based upon very inconclusive and incomplete evidence. Major Thomas said that undoubtedly they would have stirred up the people to such a degree that all over Israel you would have seen donkeys with little stickers on their tails which said "Snort if you love Jesus!"

Well, I am not sure that is what would have happened, but it does indicate how little these disciples really understood of him, even though they knew he was the Christ. So our Lord moves immediately, as with the

blind man, to a second touch. Verses 31-33:

And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God but of men." {Mark 31-33 RSV}

I am sure Peter expected to be commended for this. Matthew tells us that our Lord did commend him for saying, "You are the Christ." But then our Lord had begun to do a strange thing in these disciples' eyes: he described to them the death that would come. This is what Paul later calls "the word of the cross," {1 Cor 1:18a RSV}. You notice that both Matthew and Mark specifically tell us that it was at this point that he began to teach them. He had hinted at it before. There are several accounts of it in the gospels before this. And the event was known to the Lord from the very beginning. In John's Gospel we are told that, in his earliest ministry in Jerusalem, Jesus said to the Jews "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up again," {cf, John 2:19}. He had said to Nicodemus, who came to him by night, "The Son of man must be lifted up, even as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness," {cf, John 3:14}. He had said to these disciples "The friends of the bridegroom will fast when the bridegroom is taken away," {cf, Mark 2:19-20}. And just a few days earlier, as Matthew records, he had said there would be given the sign of the prophet Jonah: "As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth," {Matt 12:40 RSV}. But these allusions were in the nature of riddles, and the disciples did not understand them.

But now Jesus began "plainly" to declare this. The tense of the Greek verb in Verse 32 is such that it should be translated, "he continued saying this plainly." Over the course of several days, perhaps, he taught them what would happen. He named the enemies they would face when they came to Jerusalem -- the chief priests, the scribes, the Pharisees -- and described what they would do to him. Other accounts tell us that he detailed this: the scourgings and beatings, and the rejection that would be involved. He plainly told them all that was going to happen.

I do not think Peter's reaction was immediate. Evidently, after several days of listening to Jesus talking this way, finally he could stand it no longer. Speaking for all the disciples, he took Jesus aside and rebuked him. Imagine! Peter rebuking Jesus! He said, "Lord, you mustn't talk this way. Why, this is terrible!" What he literally said was, "Spare yourself."

We can understand how he felt, I hope. Imagine what the reaction would be here in the United States if, on his inauguration day, a popular young President detailed for this nation all the things he hoped to accomplish in his administration, injected a new note of hope among the people, and captivated us all by what looked like a tremendously successful program he intended to launch, but then, at the close, announced that he was suffering from terminal cancer and would be dead within a week. Can you imagine the reaction? People would be astounded, shocked, incredulous: "How can he even hope to accomplish what he has outlined, if that is the case?" This is the reaction of the disciples here. They find his words unbelievable. They are startled, amazed, mystified. So finally Peter rebukes the Lord.

And in that rebuke of Peter, according to the words Matthew gives us, you find the basic philosophy of the world stated very precisely: "Spare yourself. Spare yourself, Lord! Nothing is more important than you." Is this not the way men live? "I'll give up anything except my own interests. Nothing is more important than I am." And when Peter uttered these words, Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan! You're an offense to me, for you do not understand the things of God, but of men," {cf, Matt 16:23}. This is the way men live. We all feel the pressure of this philosophy upon us. Think of yourself first. Take care of yourself. Provide for yourself -- nobody else is going to do it. How that attitude underlies everything we see on television, in magazines, and all the other media The whole advertising system of our day is built upon it. "You deserve the best. You deserve this vacation. You deserve all that we are offering to you. Think of yourself." But Jesus said this is Satan, offering that which leads to despair and emptiness and death, even though it seems to offer fulfillment and satisfaction. And so he rebukes Peter in turn, with this stern rebuke, withering in its directness and bluntness: "Get behind me, Satan! I recognize that voice. It came to me in the temptation in the wilderness

"There's another way to get all that God wants for you. Think of yourself."

In concluding this message, I want to set before us what the word of the cross really is, the elements which make it up. For this is what the apostle Paul, in Galatians 6, tells us is the glory of the Christian message:

But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. {Gal 6:14 RSV}

"Christianity" without the cross is not Christianity at all, but a shabby, slimy substitute. The word of the cross is what makes it Christian. What does it mean? Three elements, which will come out as we continue our study in Mark, and are found all through the gospels and the epistles as well:

First, it means the end of the natural, the end of what we call "self-sufficiency," "self-reliance." That is the philosophy of the day, and how the world despises this message that it must be done away with! Not only does it not understand it, it literally despises it! Anyone who preaches it is regarded as preaching nonsense. As Christians, we are called upon either to believe our Lord or the voices that whisper in our ears -- one or the other. Which is right? The word of the cross means the end of all our reliance upon ourselves. As the little jingle puts it,

Your best resolutions must wholly be waived,
Your highest ambitions be crossed.
You need never think that you'll ever be saved
Until you've learned that you're lost.

Somehow there lingers in each one of us a desire to have a part in our salvation, to offer something to God that he can use, and that he would not have if we did not give it to him, i.e., to make God our debtor in some degree. But the cross ends all that wipes out everything that is of the natural.

When the musical program, *The New Covenant*, was presented here the other night, somebody told me that, among the many messages of praise and gratitude for the teaching of this wonderful music on the New Covenant, made in the blood of Jesus, there were some from people who said they liked the music, thought it was great, but they didn't like the emphasis upon dying, upon death to self.

No, we do not like it. But that is the word of the cross. It means the wiping out of the natural life. Nothing that we have by virtue of being born is ever worthwhile or acceptable in the sight of God. A cross wipes a man out. It does not improve him, does not better him in any way; it wipes him out. It does not send him out to be reoriented; it cuts him clear off.

Furthermore, the second element, it involves pain and hurt. It always does. Because we do not like being cut off.

That is why people do not like some of the words of the old hymns. Sometimes I hear Christians saying, "I don't like to sing those old hymns that talk about how vile and full of sin I am." or, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." People say, "I'm not a wretch, I'm not vile and full of sin!" That means, of course, that they have never stood before the greatness and the glory of God and seen themselves as did Job, who said, "I repent in dust and ashes," {cf, Job 42:6}. But that is what the cross does, and it hurts. It means all our trust in ourselves is reduced to nothing, to ashes.

Which of us, if allowed to choose the program by which we serve God, would ever include in it defeat and disaster and despair and disappointment and disillusionment and death? Yet these are the very elements, the Scriptures tell us, that God finds absolutely essential to working out his plan for us, his redemptive program. Difficulty, and danger? Yes, we would put them in. They challenge the flesh and make it appear to be something when it surmounts these. But defeat? Never! Dishonor? Never! Disaster? Disappointment? No! Death? Inconceivable! But they are what God chooses. And so the way of the cross always hurts, causes pain, brings us to the end of ourselves.

Jesus put it exactly when he said, "that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God," {Luke 16:15b KJV}. What is highly esteemed among men? Prestige and status, success, wealth and money, influence and fame and power. They, Jesus says, are abomination in the sight of God. His standard of values is entirely different. The cross is the most radical idea ever to come into human knowledge. We have never understood Christianity until we have understood the cross. Like these disciples, we have never seen Jesus until we have seen him as one who was headed toward a cross. So our Lord begins to touch their eyes again that they might see him as he really is.

But the third element of the way of the cross, one that is always included, is that it leads to a resurrection. Is it not strange that the disciples never seemed to hear Jesus when, every time he spoke of the cross, he said that after three days he would rise again? It never dawned on them what that meant. Never did they get to that point. They seemed arrested by the cross and could never get beyond it. They rejected it, refused to listen to it, and so they never came to an understanding of what the glorious event of the resurrection would mean, until it actually happened. They never asked Jesus about it, never questioned him as to what it would mean. But the way of the cross always leads to a resurrection, to a new beginning, on different terms. It leads to freedom, to being set free from natural catastrophe and disaster, to having your spirit peaceful and at rest, despite what is happening to your body or your person. That is what a resurrection provides -- a new beginning on different terms entirely.

This is what men really want. How we long for and dream of being free, whole, wholesome people, adequate, able to handle life, able to cope with whatever comes, undisturbed at heart.

We project the images of Superman, Batman, and all the other sudden superstars of our day. But how can we get there? How can we make the image become reality? By the very thing we do not like to hear: the announcement of Jesus that it must be by way of the cross.

We need a second touch, don't we? We all struggle with this. Every Christian must be taught this by the Spirit of God. Jesus himself said there would be these two stages: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," {Matt 11:28 RSV}. There you learn who he is, in the fullness of his power to give rest to a struggling, weary, laden heart. Ah, but that is not all: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart [having lost all my pride, all my prestige and status], and you will find rest for your souls," {Matt 11:29 RSV} -- two stages.

That is what our Lord has illustrated for us in this healing of the blind man, and now he begins to bring into our knowledge the second stage, by which we will understand and see clearly who he is.

Prayer:

Our Father, we ask that you will open our eyes as you opened the eyes of Peter, not only to see our Lord Jesus as King among men, ruler of the events of history, director of all the affairs of life, "master of ocean and earth and sky", calmer of the storms and healer of the hurts of life; but also that you will help us begin to understand that he himself is in the hurts, in the disappointments, in the disasters, that he is leading us on, setting us free from that which is shackling us -- all our "self-sufficiency" and "self-reliance", all our desire to be exalted, to be made much of -- that he is freeing us from this, and opening our eyes that we might see him as he is. We pray that you will continue to do this, in his name, Amen.

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