

Seeing Clearly

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[0 : 0 0] I discovered recently that there is a World Sight Day. It's an annual day of awareness to focus attention on blindness and vision impairment. For example, worldwide 36 million people are blind, 253 million people are visually impaired, and yet around 75% of vision impairment is avoidable.

And so we know that a failure to see physically can be problematic, but a failure to see in a spiritual sense is also problematic.

And we get both in this Bible reading from the Gospel of Mark, because we see Jesus restore the sight of a physically blind man, but we also see Jesus help his spiritually blind disciples towards seeing.

So this takes us to the great turning point in the Gospel of Mark, is the climax of the first half, as the disciples eventually begin to see the true identity of Jesus.

And so failure to see who Jesus is, is problematic. Not just for the disciples, but for every one of us.

And yet the great news that we find in this text is that blind eyes can be opened by Jesus.

[1 : 1 8] And so what I'd like to do is to consider this passage under three headings. First of all, blindness. Secondly, partial sight. And thirdly, how to see. Blindness, partial sight, and how to see.

First of all, blindness. This miracle of Jesus healing the blind man is unique to Mark. Listen to it again. They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him.

He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spat on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, Do you see anything?

He looked up and said, I see people. They look like trees walking around. Once more, Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

Now, this is a very similar miracle to another miracle in Mark, when Jesus healed a deaf and mute man. That's in Mark chapter 7.

[2 : 2 7] And in both these miracles, the people bring the person to Jesus, begging Jesus to touch them. And in both these miracles, Jesus takes the person away from the crowd, and he deals with them in private.

And actually, in both miracles, Jesus spits as part of the miracle. So he spoke to the deaf man in a way he could see, and he spoke to the blind man in a way he could feel.

And so there's a connection, because both miracles reveal the identity of Jesus. In fact, Jesus is fulfilling Old Testament prophecy, because he's performing the kind of miracles that will accompany God's final salvation.

Because each miracle alludes to what the prophet Isaiah says in Isaiah chapter 35 and verse 5, where we read, Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

And that's exactly what Jesus was doing. And yet this is a very unusual miracle. Because normally, when Jesus performs a miracle, he does it immediately and completely.

[3 : 3 5] But he doesn't do that here. Jesus heals this blind man in two stages. So, there's stage one. Stage one is, he's brought to Jesus. Jesus takes him away from everyone.

Jesus spits on his eyes and puts his hands on him. Then Jesus asks, do you see anything? To which the man replies, I see people. They look like trees walking around. So he was blind and couldn't see anything.

But with the touch of Jesus, he could see something. Yet he couldn't see everything. Now I wonder how he felt, because it doesn't seem very satisfactory, does it?

Had Jesus lost his healing touch? Was this just such a tough miracle to pull off that Jesus needed another go? No. No. This was a deliberate two-stage healing.

So Jesus hadn't finished with the man yet. And that's clear from Jesus' question. When he asks, do you see anything? Jesus wasn't expecting him to see clearly just yet.

[4 : 35] Jesus was deliberately restoring his sight in stages. So we've had stage one. What's stage two? Well, once again, Jesus puts his hands on his eyes.

And this time, his eyes were opened. His total blindness had been emphasised before by Mark. And now his clear vision is emphasised. And Mark emphasises it in three different ways.

He says his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Jesus restored him from blindness to partial sight to full sight, from seeing nothing to seeing something to seeing everything.

And notice that the man didn't do a single thing. Jesus took him by the hand and in two stages gave him perfect sight. It's an amazing miracle, but Jesus didn't want anybody to know about it.

And so we read, Jesus sent him home saying, don't even go into the village. So the miracle wasn't done for the benefit of other people.

[5 : 41] And it seems the miracle wasn't even done just for the benefit of the man. It sounds like it was done this way for the benefit of the disciples of Jesus.

And so that's the answer to the question, why does Jesus heal the blind man in two stages?

Because just before this, Jesus had pointedly asked his disciples in Mark chapter 8, verse 17 and 18, he'd asked them, do you still not see or understand?

Are your heart still hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see and ears but fail to hear? And so following this up with a man who's got eyes but can't see isn't accidental.

The blind man's healing comes in the context of the blindness of the disciples because the blind man perfectly illustrates them. His story is like an enacted parable of their own blindness coming towards sight.

And that's why it's the only miracle where Jesus doesn't heal immediately and completely. Because what Jesus did with the man physically was going to happen with his disciples spiritually.

[6 : 51] Jesus was going to open their blind eyes to help them see. And so the two-stage healing of the blind man connects with what's gone before, but it also connects with what comes after as the disciples begin to see.

It's like Jesus is saying to them, see the blind man, that's what you're like, but I'm going to help you see. They needed to see more clearly who Jesus is and why Jesus came.

And so that's our first point, blindness. Second is partial sight. So until now the disciples were blind. And so Jesus questions them on his identity.

And so we read, Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi on the way he asked them, who do people say I am?

Jesus kicked off with a safe question. Who do people say I am? He's asking, what's the word on the street about me? What are other people thinking? What are other people saying?

[7 : 54] Now just imagine if we were to ask people on the streets of Glasgow, who do people say Jesus is? I guess some people wouldn't really care. Others would probably have some opinion.

Perhaps he's a great teacher. He's a prophet. He's a miracle worker. He's a myth. He's a son of God. There are loads of answers that people could give. And actually it was the same in Jesus' day. There were plenty opinions about Jesus. And so his disciples answered him and we read, they replied, some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and still others, one of the prophets.

So even if people didn't understand the true identity of Jesus, they certainly agreed that Jesus was somebody special if he ranked among all these other great men. But Jesus forced his disciples to give their answer to his question.

But what about you? He asked. Who do you say I am? It is a direct and personal question. Jesus puts them on the spot and asks if they know his true identity.

[9 : 00] So Peter answered, you are the Messiah. He is making a big claim here. And so the question, who is Jesus, is being answered. Now, this is the climax of everything that Mark has said so far in his gospel.

He said at the start in Mark chapter 1 and verse 1, the beginning of the good news about Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. And here we reach the moment when the disciples finally see the true identity of Jesus, the one that they've been following.

Now, Messiah is a word that we still hear and may use today. I actually heard it recently in context of football, where Jurgen Klopp, the Liverpool manager, was described as the Messiah of Merseyside.

And I guess we get what that means. It means that the Liverpool fans have put their hope in Jurgen Klopp. He's saved Liverpool. He's restored their fortunes.

He's got them reigning at the top of the Premier League table. And so we can get the basic meaning of the term. But Messiah literally means anointed one.

[10:12] It refers to the anointing of kings with oil. But it had come to take on a special significance where the Messiah was no ordinary king, but God's chosen king.

The king to end all kings. The one that God would send to deliver his people and to establish his reign on earth. And so the Messiah would come to save his people, to end all evil and to put everything right.

And so when Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, he's saying that Jesus is the one that everybody's been hoping for and everybody has been waiting for. And so this is a massive moment of recognition for Peter and for the disciples.

They're moving from blindness to a clearer vision. And yet their sight was still partial. So from now on, Jesus would have to teach them the kind of Messiah that he would be.

Because Jesus wasn't the kind of Messiah that they were expecting. And that's why Jesus responds by telling them to keep it secret. And so we read, Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

[11:19] The disciples still needed another touch from Jesus, just like the blind man did, so that they could see more clearly. And so straight after this, from Mark chapter 8, verse 31 onwards, Jesus goes on to tell them why he came.

Because they needed not just to see who Jesus is, but they needed to understand why Jesus came, to understand what it meant for him to be the Messiah.

Because it would involve Jesus being rejected and killed before he would rise again. But the suffering and death part of Jesus' mission wasn't on the radar of the disciples at all.

And so while they could see that Jesus was the Messiah, they had no idea what this really meant. They still had partial sight. And yet Jesus wasn't going to leave them with their blurred vision.

Jesus was going to help them to see more clearly. And so before we move on to how to see, the question Jesus asked his disciples is also one that he asks us too.

[12:24] When Jesus asked them, who do you say I am? We also must give our answer to that question. Because if Jesus is the Messiah, if he is God's chosen king, who came to save and rule the world and put everything right, then how we respond to him couldn't be more important.

So we see blindness. We've got partial sight. And let's think thirdly and finally about how to see. So just like Jesus healed the blind man in stages, so he's moving his disciples from blindness towards sight.

Now, I guess a light switch would be a good illustration of this. Not the kind of light switch that you switch on and off. More like a dimmer switch where you can turn the light on gradually.

Because that's what happened to the blind man. And that is what was happening to the disciples. And it can also happen with us. So how do we see three things?

We're spiritually blind. Jesus gives sight. And sight comes in stages. So first of all, we're spiritually blind. Whether we're aware of it or not, we're blind.

[13:38] Spiritually blind, that is. So physical blindness is tragic. But so is spiritual blindness when we fail to see who Jesus is and why Jesus came.

The blind man knew he was blind. And yet we can be so unaware of our blindness, thinking that we can see when actually we can't.

Like believing we've got life sorted and we've got the resources to cope with anything. And yet we can still be blind when it comes to what matters most in life, despite our knowledge or our intellect. And our blindness is usually revealed when tragedy strikes, perhaps like the coronavirus pandemic. And then we discover that we don't really have the resources to cope.

And so spiritual blindness is the default human condition. But the good news is that Jesus gives sight. Only Jesus can help us see.

[14:36] And if you follow Jesus, then you're well aware of this. It is only by God's grace that our blind eyes are opened. Because it was Jesus who gave the blind man sight.

And it was Jesus who enabled the disciples to see. And so it's only Jesus who can open our eyes too. And that's why no follower of Jesus can ever think that they're superior to anyone else. We don't become a Christian because we are smarter or better. We become a Christian because Jesus gives us sight. He opens our eyes. And so if you're tuning in and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian or you aren't sure what you believe, don't keep scrambling around in the dark trying to see.

Go to Jesus for help. Jesus comes to blind people like us. But the qualification for that is to know that we're blind. So we're spiritually blind.

Jesus gives sight. And sight comes in stages. To the blind man, to Peter, to the disciples, they all illustrate that sight comes in stages.

[15:45] Spiritual sight often isn't instantaneous. Moving from blindness to seeing who Jesus is and why Jesus came happens in stages. Most of Jesus' followers would describe their experience like this, where there was once a time when we couldn't see.

We didn't have a clue about Jesus, either who he is or why he came. But our eyes were opened in stages. And so we moved from blindness to blurriness before coming to see Jesus more clearly. And then we reached a point when we could acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, just like Peter did. But then, like Peter and the disciples, whilst we were able to see and had spiritual sight, we still needed to see more clearly.

Because believing in Jesus Christ is just the beginning of clear seeing. Just listen to what Paul prayed for the Ephesian Christians, who already had spiritual sight.

This is what he says in Ephesians chapter 1, verse 17 and 18. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

[16:59] I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people.

So when we believe, the eyes of our heart still need to be enlightened. In other words, our sight becomes clearer until one day it will be perfect.

And Paul reminds us of this again in 1 Corinthians chapter 13. And he says there, 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. And so we need God to reveal more to us by his spirit, through his word, until we fully see.

So as we close, can you see? When Jesus asks, who do you say I am? How would you answer? It's like a free eye test, because our answer indicates our spiritual sight.

[18:08] In the story, I just love the way the blind man had some friends who brought him to Jesus. He needed help, and he was willing to receive help.

And so if you don't feel that you're there yet, in terms of seeing who Jesus is, or why Jesus came, then don't just settle with visual impairment, or worse, blindness.

And don't expect everything to become clear in an instant. And don't even expect that you'll get there on your own. Because coming to believe in Jesus comes in stages.

And often with a little help from your friends who want you to meet Jesus. So why does it matter that we see who Jesus is and why he came?

Well, it matters because everything depends on our response. Our life, our death, and our eternity depend upon our response to Jesus Christ.

[19:05] How do we know? Well, we said earlier that this is the great turning point in Mark's gospel. The turning point for the disciples as they move from blindness towards sight. But it's also a turning point for Jesus.

Because from here on, Jesus explicitly teaches about his death, and he moves towards it. Jesus was going to die in darkness on a cross.

And as he died, we read later on in Mark chapter 15, these words. At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.

And at three in the afternoon, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, lemma sabachthani, which means, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

On the cross, Jesus was plunged into darkness as he absorbed God's anger against our sin. Jesus felt forsaken by God as he experienced hell in our place.

[20 : 09] The ultimate isolation. And Jesus has gone through the ultimate darkness for us so that we never have to. And he has come out the other side and promises as the Messiah that he is going to put everything right.

That's why it's so important that we see who Jesus is and why he came. And so important that we respond to him by putting our faith in him, by believing in him, by recognising him as our saviour and our Lord.

And when we do so, when we discover that we need him to open our eyes and help us see, when we discover that, then we realise that we are no more than one blind beggar who wants to help other blind beggars know where they can find food.

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