



THE GREATEST SIGHT OF ALL

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 Mark 10:46-52
 30th Message
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I. Reflective Images of the Blind Isaiah 40-55

In our last study in the gospel of Mark we saw that for a third time, Jesus poured out his soul to his disciples, telling them in explicit terms what awaited him in Jerusalem. Diligently and with painstaking detail he instructed them that the “way” of the Son of Man and the glory attributed to him (Dan 7:13,14) would come about only through the “way” of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant.¹ In order for this Servant to be crowned king and achieve victory over his enemies he would have to endure betrayal, condemnation, suffering and death. Jesus added that his “way” would be the disciples’ “way” also. As the twelve leaders of the new Israel they would follow in the footsteps of their Master. But, once again, Jesus’ pronouncement fell on deaf ears. The disciples were quick to seize upon the glory of the Son of Man, but blind to the “way” to that glory.

Mark’s story would end as a tragic repeat of Israel’s story were it not for the fact that during Israel’s exile, God in his tenacious love committed himself to restore his people and enact new levels of grace. He promised to do what had never been done before: He would cause the blind to see, and on a massive scale. This is beautifully depicted in Isaiah 40-55.² In those chapters the prophet described Israel as blind and deaf, for “they have seen many things, but do not observe them” (Isa 42:18,19). But days were coming when God would send his people a “servant” who would open the eyes of the blind and lead them in a new “way”:

“I will appoint you as a covenant to the people,
 As a light to the nations,
To open blind eyes,
 To bring out prisoners from the dungeon,
 And those who dwell in darkness from the prison”
 (Isa 42:6b-7).

And as a result...

“And I will lead the **blind** by a **way** they do not know,
 In paths they do not know I will guide them” (Isa 42:16).

Jesus claimed to be this servant who would open Israel’s eyes to see that the “way” of Yahweh’s redemptive wisdom is expressed in Christ crucified (cf. 1 Cor 1:18-25).³

Against this background now Mark includes one final incident before Jesus and the disciples depart for Jerusalem. As they leave Jericho, the author records an

encounter with a blind beggar.

II. The Son of Timaeus and the Son of David Mark 10:46-52

And they came to Jericho. And as He was going out from Jericho with His disciples and a great multitude, the son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar was sitting beside the road [lit. ‘the way.’] And when he heard that it was Jesus the Nazarene, he began to cry out and say, “Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me!” And many were sternly telling him to be quiet, but he kept crying out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” And Jesus stopped and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take courage, arise! He is calling for you.” And casting aside his cloak, he jumped up, and came to Jesus. And answering him, Jesus said, “What do you want Me to do for you?” And the blind man said to Him, “Rabboni, I want to regain my sight!” And Jesus said to him, “Go your way; your faith has made you well.” And immediately he regained his sight and began following Him on the road [lit. ‘in the way.’]

This incident occurs close to Jericho,⁴ the place where, centuries earlier, Rahab, the harlot, became a glowing example of one saved by faith in the God of Israel. Rahab felt no shame in publicly identifying with Israel. In New Testament times there were two Jerichos, one old and one new. “In Jesus’ time the old Jericho was largely abandoned, but the new one extending to the south was an attractive city. It had been built by Herod the Great who had his winter palace there.”⁵ As Jesus is leaving the old and approaching the new, a blind beggar hears that he is coming, surrounded by a large crowd of pilgrims. Bartimaeus is Aramaic for “son of Timaeus.” Gundry notes that, unlike his usual practice of placing the Aramaic expression first and then translating it, Mark puts the translation, “son of Timaeus” first to prepare us for what follows in the cry, “Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me.”⁶

The beggar’s piercing cry is an embarrassment to the crowd. They attempt to silence him, but to no avail. The more they tell him to be quiet, the louder he cries. Upon hearing him, Jesus, to everyone’s amazement, halts the procession and calls for the man. Encouraged by the crowd to go forward, Bartimaeus immediately jumps up, throws his cloak aside and comes to Jesus. Jesus asks him, “What do you want me to do for you?” With-

out hesitating the man replies, “Rabboni, I want to regain my sight.” With but a word from Jesus the man is fully healed and sent on his way. Our text, which began with the man blind and begging alongside “the way,” ends with him seeing, no longer begging, following Jesus “in the way.”

III. A Mirror for the Disciples

Reflecting on this text against the background of Isaiah we see that this incident was designed by God as a mirror to help the disciples understand their own blindness and fan the flame of their faith. O, the amazing grace of God! If the disciples fail to understand what Jesus has taught them “in the ear,” then God will complement that teaching with something they can “see,” until what they have heard in their ear resonates in the mirror of what they “see” with the eye, and a miracle of “insight” occurs in their hearts. This is still a common method for how God teaches us. First he speaks to us directly in the “ear” through the teaching of his word. Oftentimes, of course, we don’t “get it,” because we sleep through the sermon! When that occurs, God designs visual aids for our daily lives, events which are orchestrated to act as divine mirrors to resonate with what he has taught us in the “ear.” How often God interrupts my zealous pursuing of some “pilgrimage” and inserts a seemingly “insignificant” individual to stop me in my tracks! Later I learn that such an occurrence was no interruption, but a mirror through which I saw the face of God.

This is what happened in this incident near Jericho, on the road to Jerusalem. The cry of this blind beggar halts the entire procession and all eyes are focused on him. The dusty road becomes a holy stage of revelation to the disciples. They will see three images reflected in this mirror that is held up before them.

A. A Mirror of Blindness

First, the blind Bartimaeus was a mirror of their blindness. Mark writes that Bartimaeus is “alongside the ‘way’” but not yet “in the ‘way’”. The beggar confesses that Jesus is the Son of David (Messiah), but the man is still blind, groping in the dark. So too are the disciples. Although they have confessed Jesus as Messiah, their sight is only partial. When it comes to understanding the way of the Messiah, they are still groping in the dark. So Bartimaeus is a mirror of their blindness.

B. A Mirror of Faith

Bartimaeus also mirrors faith which breaks through the blindness. Mark gives three characteristics of this faith. First, it is desperate. Bartimaeus cries for mercy. His cry is not drawn out; neither is it rehearsed or repetitive. It is an appeal sprung from helplessness, coming from the depth of his heart. That condition of helplessness gives his cry such intensity: “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Second, it is relentless. Bartimaeus is oblivious to any obstacles. Many in the crowd, however, are embar-

assed by his outburst and harshly rebuke him. I wonder if their rebuke reminded the disciples of Jesus’ earlier rebuke, “permit the little ones to come to be and stop hindering them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God” (10:14). Here is a “little one” coming to Jesus, being hindered by the crowd. But Bartimaeus will not be deterred by embarrassment or protocol; his need is too great. The more they rebuke him, the louder his cry becomes. He knew that this window of opportunity would not be open forever. The time to act was now. His was a desperate, relentless faith.

And third, his faith is reckless. Hearing the good news that Jesus is nearby, he immediately casts aside his cloak to make his way to the Son of David. This outer cloak, probably his sole possession, served as a bedroll or blanket by night and a cushion for begging by day. But he is so overcome with emotion at the possibility of regaining his sight, and seeing Jesus, that its value is diminished to a throwaway. What a contrast to the rich young ruler! When he was challenged to sell all that he had and follow Jesus, he went away grieved, because he owned much property (10:22). Genuine faith casts everything away for the new life. What a testimony this desperate, relentless, reckless faith must have been to the twelve!

C. A Mirror of Mercy

The third image the disciples see in this mirror is that of mercy reflected in the response of Jesus. Notice, first, that when someone makes a cry from the heart, like this blind man, Jesus hears. Despite all the obstacles, and the embarrassment of the crowd, this man’s cry gets through. Jesus hears, stops the procession, and immediately says, “Call him.”

Secondly, once Jesus hears, he takes over and every obstacle now comes under his authority to serve his purposes. The crowd, who once rebuked the beggar, ordering him to be quiet, now encourages him with the verb, “take courage.” This verb, found elsewhere in the New Testament, comes only from the lips of Jesus. ⁷ It may have been a favorite expression of his because it evoked the well known prophecy of Zephaniah 3, found in the Greek translation (the Septuagint: LXX) of Zephaniah 3:

“Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion!
Shout in triumph, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!
The Lord has taken away His judgments against you,
he has cleared away your enemies.
The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
You will fear disaster no more.
In that day it will be said to Jerusalem:
‘Do not be afraid (i.e. ‘take courage’ – *tharsei*), O
Zion:
Do not let your hands fall limp.
The Lord your God is in your midst,
A warrior who saves” (Zeph 3:14-17a).

Now the wondrous greeting expressed by Jesus so many times comes from the voices of the crowd, demonstrating that they, who once opposed the blind man, have now become agents to bring him to Jesus. What a reversal! From “be quiet,” to “take courage, arise!” Hearing those words we are tempted to add, “The Lord your God is in your midst, a warrior who saves (Yeshuah).”

The third thing to notice is that Jesus prompts Bartimaeus with the question, “What do you want me to do for you?” James and John must have been taken aback upon hearing this stinging echo of their previous request (10:35), which Jesus denied. But the blank check he had denied them he now offers to the blind man. The difference is, they had asked for glory but were blind to the “way” of glory. This one asks only to see. If that is what you are hungering for, to see Jesus and him crucified, he will give you a blank check. When Jesus sees genuine faith for the right things, so eager is he to grant our request he prompts us to ask.

Several months ago when I was sick and unusually depressed, God sent me a mirror of faith in the beautiful prayer of a dying woman. I wrote the following in my prayer journal that week:

Sick I lay this week
at times felt old and outdated
inadequate to write or communicate
robbed of any larger purpose
to pull or quake
unfeeling silence –
finally antibiotics kicked in
and the body begins to feel
perhaps the soul will revive soon
I speak with a dying lady
in the hospital
I feel tears again
and in the sweet savor
of her confession and longings
I see you
in the mystery of weakness –

Hospital visits often do that for me as oftentimes I am rebuked by the requests and holy confessions of the sick and dying. Such was the effect of the blind man’s request to the disciples.

The fourth thing to notice is that this man’s faith grants him more than he asked for. He asked only to “see,” but Jesus says, “Your faith has made you well (lit. “saved you)”. This term, which is pregnant with meaning, is taken from of Isaiah 35:4, where the prophet speaks of that great day when Yahweh himself would come to restore Zion; therefore...

“Say to those with anxious heart,
“Take courage, fear not.
Behold, your God will come with vengeance;
The recompense of God will come,
But He will save you.’
Then the eyes of the blind will be opened...”

(Isa 35:2b-5a).

What a day this was for Bartimaeus! Now that he sees, immediately, without hesitating, he follows Jesus in “the way.” With his new vision he not only recognizes Jesus as Son of David (Messiah), he is pictured as following Jesus in the “way.” What a creative miracle which causes us to see Christ and him crucified and makes us willing to walk in that “way.” This is how the apostle Paul described his own conversion : “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). Earlier he had written the Corinthians, “I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2).

This then was the glorious mirror which God orchestrated for the twelve: a mirror of their own blindness, a mirror of saving faith, a mirror of the precious mercy of Jesus. Jesus is the one who hears our cry, gives us immediate access, and grants us more than we ever dreamed, including a willing obedience to follow his “way.”

IV. Do You Want to See Jesus?

Have we stopped to thank God for these mirrors he so carefully places in our lives? They are designed so that we see ourselves, fan our faith so that we see Jesus and long to share in the fellowship of his sufferings. A few weeks ago, I received just such a mirror in a letter from a young Romanian girl. Adriana had recently returned from teaching at a children’s camp. Before leaving for the camp she was experiencing a dark time in her soul. She wrote: “I’m in the middle of the most beautiful birthday of my life. It took a dark night of my soul to notice the stars. Without it I would have never had the epiphany of Yahweh. One night in the camp I saw Yahweh’s face.” The Holy Spirit came over this camp of elementary-age children and impressed upon their young souls the depth of Christ’s suffering on their behalf. The letter continues: “On July 6, thirty-seven children came to Christ. Some of them were crying in my arms, but I was so ashamed because I could see the difference between them and us, the grown-ups. We do not cry so much for our sins. I wish you saw Aluna (age 9) with her face all tears. I wish you heard one of them asking for forgiveness for the mask he wore and imploring God for a new and real face. When they went to bed I turned on the grass where they prayed and, looking at their faces, printed in my heart I saw the face of God and wrote this poem:

Their prayers still float
in the grass, in the dew, in the air.
The flight of pure wings
is touching my new face.
And I wonder:
have I been living all my life
just to taste this one minute
that has just passed away?

I am not worthy
to stay with your little ones today,
I do not dare to kiss the grass
on which their feet walked,
which swallowed their tears
and in which their prayers
are still breathing.
Lord, it is too much
too much for my soul
unworthy am I
to look at them.”

—Adriana Negoï

Adriana saw and understood that these little children were to be a mirror to her. But what she could not foresee was that her letter would become a mirror to me. I have wept often in life, over the loss of children, the loss of friends, or in the presence of sacred love, but I am ashamed to say I have never wept over my sins and the suffering I caused Christ, as these little children did. My prayer is that God may grant me the grace he gave to Bartimaeus: to see Jesus and him crucified on my behalf. Then the words of the prophet shall ring true in my heart,

“And I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over a first-born” (Zech 12:10).

Amen.

1. The Servant Songs are found in Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-13; 50:4-10; and 52:13-53:12.

2. I am indebted to the fine work of Rikk E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Mohr Siebeck, 1997) 243-257, for these thoughts.

3. Watts, 252.

4. D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 435, notes that “Matthew and Mark say that Jesus was ‘leaving’ and Luke that he was ‘entering’ Jericho...many avoid the geographical contradiction by noting that in this period there were two Jerichos—an older town on the hill, largely in ruins, and the new Herodian town about one mile away (cf. Jos. War IV, 459 [viii. 3]). In this view Matthew and Mark, under Jewish influence, mention the old town Jesus was leaving; Luke the Hellenist refers to the new one, which Jesus is entering.”

5. Walter W. Wessel, “Mark,” *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 721.

6. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 593.

7. “Cheer up!” is *tharsei*. It occurs only seven times in the NT (Matt 9:2, 22; 14:27; Mark 6:50; 10:49; John 16:33; Acts 23:11), and six of the seven are from the lips of Jesus. The exception is here.” Wessel, 722.

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