



# BLIND TO HIS WAY

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Mark 8:22-9:1

23rd Message

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Do you believe in miracles? Do you believe that Christ performed miracles? Do you believe that he still does miracles today? This morning we will examine one of Christ's greatest miracles, an event which prefigured the greater miracle he continues to do in the church today. In fact, our text from the gospel of Mark makes it clear that one can't be a true disciple of Jesus unless this divine miracle has occurred in one's life.

We pick up the story of Jesus following the second miraculous feeding of the multitude, this time the feeding of the gentiles. When it had been completed, Jesus solemnly warned his disciples to "beware of the leaven of Herod and the Pharisees," which would spoil this banquet. A thumbnail sketch of Galilee and its environs will help us understand what he meant by this. Bargil Pixner notes that if you were to stand by the sea of Galilee in Capernaum, where Jesus established his ministry, and gaze about you, you would find that Jesus operated between the two opposing political centers of Tiberias and Gamla. To the southwest lies Tiberias, the site of Herod's fortress. The Herodian party cultivated friendship with Rome as the key to peace and prosperity for the Jews. Opposite Tiberias, to the northeast, lies Gamla, the neighboring town to Bethsaida. This site represented a diametrically opposite political viewpoint. Pixner writes:

Like an eyrie, Gamla was poised on a rocky ridge protected on each side by deep sweeping valleys. Jehuda of Gamla, who was a Pharisean scholar, together with Rabbi Tzadok, a Pharisee too, founded the Zealot movement in A.D. 6.<sup>1</sup>

They believed that God alone was the ruler of Israel, not Rome. They forbid the paying of taxes to Rome. They awaited a political Messiah who would lead their troops from victory to victory against Rome, and a number of Jehuda's sons and grandsons led more than one revolt against the Romans in Jerusalem. The Romans countered in A.D. 66 with an attack on Gamla and these hot-headed zealots rather than being taken by the Romans threw themselves down the cliffs in a collective suicide. This dynasty of leaders finally met their end at Masada.

Galilee was filled with these young hotheaded zealots. The setting for our story is Bethsaida, the sister town to Gamla. On one occasion, Andrew, who was from Bethsaida, whispered into the ear of his brother Simon, following his meeting with Jesus, "We have found the Messiah." There is no doubt about what he meant by that term. Peter, Andrew, James and John all came from Bethsaida.

## I. A Miracle of Sight (8:22-26)

### A. Stage One: Partial Sight (8:22-24)

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." (NASB)

Jesus sails between these opposing political centers, Gamla and Tiberias. He steers a narrow course between them, symbolic of a third way. But even in the midst of his signs and warnings the disciples appear dull of heart and unable to grasp the significance of what he has been saying. These men appear to be made out of the same stuff as their forefathers, whom Isaiah described as blind and deaf, for "you have seen many things, but you do not observe them" (Isa 42:20). But the day was nigh when, according to the prophet, the God of Israel would come,

"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)

"What Yahweh had promised to do for 'blind' and 'deaf' Israel, leading them along a path they did not know, Jesus does for his disciples" (Rikki Watts). "Bethsaida was situated on a hill on the eastern bank of the Jordan, which flowed into the lake about one mile further downstream... On landing they passed a rich spring on their way into the town."<sup>2</sup> As they enter that place, Jesus is entreated to heal a blind man. Mysteriously, he leads the man by the hand out of the village, and in company with the disciples only, spits on his eyes and lays his hands on him. Then Jesus asks him if he sees anything. What is extraordinary about this encounter is that, unlike any other miracle in the Bible, this one occurs in stages. The man is ecstatic as the healing begins to take effect. The Greek is a bit awkward, but the construction shows his excitement: "I can actually see people, for they look to me like trees—only they walk!"<sup>3</sup>

### B. Stage Two: Total Vision (8:25-26)

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."

Again Jesus lays his hands on the man's eyes. When he removes his hands, the man opens his eyelids wide and sees everything clearly. His vision even extends to great distances. He has been completely restored. "Not only can the ex-blind man see the people in the village clearly, but nothing at all remains unclear."<sup>4</sup>

Jesus concludes the healing with a stern warning to the man: "Don't you dare even set foot in the village!" He is to go directly home, not back into the public square where he had probably been begging and where everyone would notice him.

With the completion of this miracle it is time for Jesus to be alone with the twelve. He wants to see what has taken place in their spiritual vision. Here we reach the turning point in Mark's gospel.

## II. Partial Sight: The Prophet is King (8:27-30)

### A. The Opinion of the Crowds 8:27-28

**And Jesus went out, along with His disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way He questioned His disciples, saying to them, "Who do people say that I am?" And they told Him, saying, "John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; but still others, one of the prophets."**

Jesus heads due north, to Caesarea Philippi, which had been rebuilt by Herod Philip and named Caesarea. The city was located at the headwaters of the Jordan, beneath the slopes of Mt. Hermon, in the midst of a very beautiful and fertile country. The most exquisite waterfall in all of Israel is situated there. But the lush landscape was scattered with idols whose niches still remain carved out in the rock beside the cascading streams.

In this setting now Jesus poses the question to his disciples: "*Who do people say that I am?*" Popular opinion held that Jesus was some kind of prophet, either John risen from the dead or Elijah or some other prophet. No great revelation was needed for the masses to perceive that Jesus was a prophet, for no one could speak as he spoke nor do the things he did "unless God was with him" (Nicodemus).

Jesus probes further.

### B. The Opinion of Peter (8:29-30)

**And He continued by questioning them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said to Him, "You are the Christ." And He warned them to tell no one about Him.**

By this time Peter has concluded that Jesus is much more than a prophet. He recognizes him as Israel's promised Messiah, the one who, like David of old, would represent Israel, fight her battles and vindicate her from her enemies. In Matthew's account, Jesus adds that Peter's understanding came about by a divine miracle: "*Blessed are you, Simon Barjonas, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven*" (Matt 16:17). Jesus follows Peter's confession with a blunt warning to the disciples to tell no one. Just as he had warned the blind man to stay out of the village, so now Peter also is sworn to secrecy. The reason, of course, is that Peter's vision, just like that of the blind man, is only partial. Yes, the prophet is king, but Peter has no idea what that means, so a second divine touch to his eyes is necessary.

## III. Full Sight: The King Must Die (8:31-39)

### A. Full Sight: The King Must Die (8:31)

**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.**

Yes, this prophet is king, but Peter is without insight concerning the "way" of the king. Jesus picks up the "Son

of Man" image here from the book of Daniel. This was a very significant term to Jews in the intertestamental period. It depicted the "one true Israelite who is able to accept the mission and destiny of his people" (Hooker). That mission would include being given over to suffering at the hands of pagan nations which are depicted as wild beasts (Daniel 3, 6, 7). Then, after faithfully enduring suffering, this "Son of Man" would be vindicated, just as Daniel was when he emerged safely from the lion's den (Dan 6:23). The vision in Daniel which captured the imagination of the Jews in exile was the time when the prophet saw "one like the Son of Man" *coming* on the clouds to take his seat on a throne next to "the Ancient of Days" to rule over the whole earth forever (Dan 7:13-14). This was the vindication for which all Israel was waiting.

Jesus has no qualms about identifying himself with that "Son of Man." He too will be handed over to his enemies to suffer the psalmist's greatest fear, death itself:

**The Lord has disciplined me severely,  
But He has not given me over to death.** (Psa 118:18)

Rather than overthrowing the evil of the world by force, he will absorb it, allowing evil to exhaust itself in him. This is how he will disarm the real enemy, the devil. Then, once he has suffered as Israel's representative, he will be vindicated, and in quick time—just three days. This is the way of the king, vindication through death and resurrection, implying that every promise for vindication which Israel had hoped for would now come through death and resurrection. (This has important implications for hermeneutics and for understanding the prophetic promises made to Israel.)

The revelation of this mystery brings a strong reaction from one of the disciples.

### B. The Human Reaction (8:32-33)

**And He was stating the matter plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. But turning around and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter, and said, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."**

Peter cannot accept Jesus' word, so he draws him aside and rebukes him. The strong verb means to "*seriously censor*" or "*punish*." It is used in the Greek version of the Old Testament (LXX) to describe the reproofing Word of God which calls down destruction on the wicked or dries up the Red Sea (Psa 9:5; 68:30; 106:9; 119:21). The word is employed sparingly in the New Testament. Given the severity of the term it would seem inappropriate for Peter to address it to one whom he had just identified as king. But Peter has no qualms about "getting in Jesus' face," as we say today: "You may be king, but you will not die!" he exclaims. His words reveal an emotional reaction to the "way" of the cross and the stumbling block it presents to true discipleship.

But Jesus gets right back in Peter's face, returning the same severe rebuke to him, in full view of the twelve, not in private. As Gundry aptly observes: "Peter for the moment stops being a disciple; for disciples follow *behind* their teacher at a little distance (see esp. 1:17-18, 20; 2:14; 6:1, 31; 8:34; 10:21, 28, 32, 52) ... Jesus' turning and seeing his disciples points up the fact that they are following *behind* him, as disciples do, but that Peter is not among them

and therefore is not acting as a disciple.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus emphatically warns them that to acknowledge that he is king but refuse his “way” of being king, is to remove themselves from the school of disciples and become the tools of the devil. Bringing about the kingdom of God our way is the way of the devil. The end never justifies the means, of course. Jesus demands that Peter return to his rightful place as disciple and follow “behind” him. How much evil would have been avoided in the history of the church had Christians obeyed our Lord’s rebuke!

### C. Instruction on the Way (8:34-9:1)

**And He summoned the multitude with His disciples, and said to them, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s shall save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.” And He was saying to them, “Truly, I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste of death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.”**

Jesus summons the crowd and delivers a pointed public sermon.<sup>6</sup> Let there be no mistake about what he is saying: If anyone wants to follow behind this king he or she must follow his way. This is not an open issue. And his way means giving up your way, putting your life at risk, and taking up a cross. In those days, the only people who carried crosses (actually the horizontal beam of the cross), were criminals on their way to execution. Many of the condemned were political revolutionaries from Galilee. As they made their way to the place of execution they endured the ridicule, spitting and jeers of the crowds. Jesus is saying, “If you want to be a disciple and follow behind me, you must be willing to endure that kind of shame and ridicule, although you are innocent.”

Why would anyone be willing to do that? Jesus gives four compelling reasons. First, he says, it is the only way to preserve your life. Verse 35:

**“For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s shall save it.**

The house is burning and there is but one exit; there is no other way out. If you stay in the house, like the Herodians with their plentiful investments in Jerusalem, you will lose your life. Following Jesus through the doorway of shame, ridicule, and perhaps even death is the only way to preserve your life.

Secondly, says Jesus, consider the value of your life. Verses 36-37:

**“For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?**

Your life is more valuable than the whole world. If you understand that, you will gladly give up anything in exchange for it. There is a scene in the movie *Schindler’s List*

when the value of each Jewish soul dawns on Schindler. At the end he cries over and over, why didn’t he do more? Why didn’t he sell his car, his ring, everything? The Holocaust had done its work on him. Henceforth he would measure everything in terms of lives. Your life is worth everything. If it were to be threatened, you wouldn’t hesitate to give everything away for it.

Thirdly, the window of opportunity won’t be open forever. Verse 38:

**“For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.”**

The image of the Son of Man coming in glory again goes back to the imagery of Daniel 7:13-14 and speaks not of his coming to earth, but of his “coming”<sup>7</sup> into heaven to receive power, dominion and glory. It refers to his kingly reign over all nations following his resurrection and ascension. And here Jesus speaks of his new role as “high priest” and advocate before the Father (“the Ancient of Days,” Dan 7:13). The exalted Christ is in that role from his ascension through the second coming, and from that throne executes judgment and salvation. So he warns the Jewish nation, which he labels as “this adulterous and sinful generation,” that if they are ashamed of him and his way, then he will be ashamed of them when he enters that majestic reign.

That shame had tremendous implications. In A.D. 70, the Romans leveled and burned Jerusalem, killing 1.2 million Jews in the massacre. Josephus records that there were so many zealots crucified in that year that the Romans ran out of wood and even space to crucify them. But once they had lost their lives there was nothing they could offer to buy them back. They had no advocate in the Son of Man.

That judgment ought to serve as a warning to us as well. Paul exhorts us, “Now is the acceptable time, behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:2). Don’t wait to make a decision. The window of opportunity is open. The time is now.

There are three compelling reasons to follow the king’s way. First, it is the only way with a future; second, your life is worth everything; and third, the window will not remain open forever. These three reasons are followed by a fourth, a glorious promise. Chapter 9, verse 1:

**And He was saying to them, “Truly, I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.”**

Soon, Jesus will select three of the disciples to whom he is speaking and take them up the mountain where they will see and taste the future, a sight beyond anything they had ever experienced on earth. Jesus is telling us as well as the disciples that once our eyes have been miraculously opened to see the way of the cross, then our senses will not only be able to see the way to glory, we will taste it. We will live our lives as the people of the future, even before we die.

Whenever I read these verses about the suffering of the cross and the glory to follow I hear the words of a poet haunting me. In 1988 I met Traian Dorz, a Romanian poet who spent sixteen years in prison enduring the shame of the cross. During that time he composed ten thousand

poems to the praise of Christ. When I met him, he drew my face close to his and said, "You *teach* about the cross. We *live* under the cross." I was stunned by his words. Then he prayed for me, that I would know something of the sweetness of Christ that he knew in prison. I have since met several men who were in prison with Traian Dorz. Without hesitation they told me that those days were the happiest of their lives. It was there, in prison, that they tasted the glory, through the suffering.

#### IV. 20/20 Vision

The ultimate miracle is that in the grace and persistence of God, Jesus is able to take a man as petulant as Peter, the one who insisted on doing things his way, and open his eyes to see the king's way. After witnessing the cross and the resurrection he is willing to take up his cross, endure the shame, and follow Christ. At the end of his life he considered it an honor to die the king's way by being crucified (tradition suggests he was crucified upside down). As it was with Peter, so it would be for every apostle, and for Stephen and Paul, too. They all became the scum of the earth for Christ's sake, and most lost their lives but in so doing saved them.

This is the ultimate miracle, not the opening of physical eyes but the eyes of the hearts of self-centered people so that they willingly accept not just the king but the king's way.

Does God still do miracles? Yes. I see evidence of it right here within our congregation. I see a young athlete who wants to glorify God with her body and fails, but then sees a greater glory through her tears. I watch a couple lay a six year-old son on Moriah's alter and give thanks to God for his life and not grow bitter. I see a couple lose twins at nine months, and through his tears the father composes two songs of praise to remember them forever. I see other couples grieve in their barrenness and yet embrace a multitude of spiritual children. I see a friend's reputation de-

stroyed in a wicked lawsuit and many brothers picking up their crosses to identify with him in his shame. In the end he writes a poem of praise because he has discovered a new spiritual father. I see a husband accept Christ and willingly endure the shame of a wife who left him for the world's way. I see a couple who willingly adopt AIDS infected children lest they be left in the shame of loneliness. And I see a young man stand up to the oppressive work atmosphere in a company that gives no time for family and announce, "I'm not doing it your 'way' anymore." He chose to quit rather than have riches the world's "way."

My heart is warmed, not when people say, "I see Jesus," but when, after that second touch, they cry, "I see everything clearly now." That is when they see the king's way, the way to plant the kingdom here on earth, and rejoice in the way of the cross. It is then that the words of prophet ring true,

"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)

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1. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus Through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin Publishing, 1992) 91-93.
2. Pixner, 94.
3. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (Cambridge University Press, 1959) 265
4. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 418.
5. Gundry, 432.
6. Gundry, 434, points out the chiasmic structure of the sermon: (a) 8:34, (b) 8:35, (c) 8:36, (c') 8:37, (b') 8:38, (a') 9:1.
7. See N.T. Wright's excellent discussion of this in *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 512-519, 624-625, 632, 635-636, 640-641, 651.