

Seeing Men Walking as Trees

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Mark 8 tells us of one of the strangest healings in the Bible. Maybe you've wondered about it. It's the time Jesus healed a blind man who then said he saw men like trees walking. Talk about strange! So Jesus laid His hands on him again, and he saw everyone clearly. Why did this happen? Did Jesus fail the first time? Or, did Jesus purposely heal this man in two steps to illustrate an important point for us? If so, what is that point? Let's find out.

First, let's read through the passage. It's found in Mark 8:22-26:

He came to Bethsaida. They brought a blind man to him, and begged him to touch him. He took hold of the blind man by the hand, and brought him out of the village. When he had spit on his eyes, and laid his hands on him, he asked him if he saw anything. He looked up, and said, "I see men; for I see them like trees walking." Then again he laid his hands on his eyes. He looked intently, and was restored, and saw everyone clearly. He sent him away to his house, saying, "Don't enter into the village, nor tell anyone in the village."

Healings Were Typological

It's important to realize that Jesus' healings, while real, were typological. Jesus' earthly ministry was thoroughly didactic. He was always teaching, and, as He used stories or parables as similes of spiritual realities, He also often used physical events as likenesses of spiritual things.

Before God regenerates them, all sinners are spiritually dead so that they are unable to do anything good or understand anything spiritual. But we see from the Bible that we can also understand the specifics of their condition by thinking of them as diseases or injuries. Thus, sinners are leprous and unclean in sin, spiritually deaf so that they cannot hear the truth, spiritually dumb so that they cannot speak the truth, spiritually crippled and withered in their limbs so that they can make no progress or do any good work. And they are spiritually blind so that they cannot see the kingdom of God (John 3:3). When Jesus healed people of these maladies, He was picturing the regenerating

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power of the Holy Spirit who was going to raise the spiritual dead to new life and also heal them of the spiritual counterparts of these conditions. So, when Jesus healed this particular blind man twice, He was teaching us this lesson plus something more.

Jesus Took Him by the Hand

To understand more precisely what Jesus was teaching, let's look at the event more closely. "They" (the Bible doesn't identify them) brought a blind man to Jesus and begged Him to touch him. Obviously, they did this so that Jesus would heal the man. In verse 23, we read that Jesus "took hold of the blind man by the hand." This was very personal. Leading him by the hand, Jesus "brought him out of the village." Why? Part of the reason might have been secrecy, but when we understand that these healings illustrated spiritual truths, we can see more going on.

Some background information: When citizens elect someone, they are choosing the person out of the general community to serve in a civil capacity. God chooses or elects His people. The Bible calls them His elect or His chosen ones depending on the translation. The Greek translated in the New Testament as "elect" or "chosen" is *eklektos*. It means to "choose out." When God calls us to salvation, He elects us out of the world to serve.

The assembly God is forming is the *ekklēsia* (commonly mistranslated "church"). *Ekklēsia* literally means "the called out from." In common Greek usage, *ekklēsia* referred to the people called out from the community to serve in the assembly. Jesus intended the word to refer to the people—the elect—God calls out of the world to serve in the assembly of the saints. What does this have to do with the blind man in Mark 8? I believe that Jesus' taking the blind man out of the village by the hand pictured God's personal calling, His choosing a sinner out of the world. (Notice that Hebrews 8:9 says that God took Israel by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, which was an Old Testament picture of God's election of sinners.) This is reinforced by the fact that at the end of the account (Mark 8:26), Jesus tells the man not to go back into the village but to go to his "house" or "family" (*oikos*).

Jesus Spit into His Eyes

"When he had spit on his eyes, and laid his hands on him, he asked him if he saw anything" (Mark 8:23b). Why did Jesus spit into (the

Greek says *eis*, "into") this man's eyes? In case you wonder whether maybe He didn't really spit, the word is *ptuō*. Since I can find no authority who takes a stab at the origin of this Greek word, I'll assume that, like our English word "ptooley," it simply comes from the sound of spitting. Commentators speak of the spitting as a concrete action to help the man's faith. Maybe so. I believe that since it was a liquid coming from the body of Christ, it represented the Holy Spirit proceeding from God to heal the man's spiritual blindness.

So, Jesus has led the man by the hand, put His spit into his eyes, and then He lays His hands on him. These are all very personal, we could say intimate, actions illustrating God's personal calling and care of His elect. Next, Jesus asks him if he sees anything.

The Man Sees a Confused Picture

"He looked up, and said, 'I see men; for I see them like trees walking'" (Mark 8:24). Despite the strangeness of what this man says, we mustn't miss the basic fact that he has gone from not being able to see to being able to see. This is a miracle even if we have questions about why his vision wasn't perfect.

How did the man who had been blind now realize he was seeing men if he had not seen before and especially if they looked like trees? What's more, how did he know what trees looked like? One answer is that the Bible doesn't say he had never seen before. Perhaps he wasn't born blind. But even if he was born blind, he could have identified things. Philosophical discussions abound about how any of us make sense of anything we see. I believe that we are not born with blank minds but with a God-given template of basic ideas into which we fit what we see. It might also be in this case that, along with the functioning of his eyes, Jesus had also given him a basic understanding of what he was seeing even if he wasn't seeing clearly.

Why did Jesus work this miracle in such a way that this fellow saw men (*anthrōpos*—"humans") walking as trees? After all, that is pretty odd and unexpected. People don't look like trees, and trees don't walk. Typologically, Jesus had now healed this man's blindness, typifying regeneration that heals spiritual blindness. The man could now "see the kingdom of God." Yet, he was seeing a very distorted picture. Do you know anyone like this? I think we all do. These people are born again—you are either born again or you are not born again, there is no partial regeneration. But you can be fully regenerated while having weak spiritual eyesight. These are people who have a sincere belief in

Jesus as their Savior, but who have a very distorted picture of anything beyond that. In fact, maybe some of us were once like this ourselves.

Are there people in the Bible like this? Sure. In Mark 8:27-33, immediately after the account of the blind man, Peter revealed that he understood Jesus' identity by saying that Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (full wording in Matthew 16:16). Jesus responded, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 16:17). Yet, only a short time later, after Jesus spoke of the death He must die, Peter said, "Far be it from you, Lord! This will never be done to you" (Matthew 16:22). Jesus' response this time was very different: "Get behind me, Satan! For you have in mind not the things of God, but the things of men" (Mark 8:33). With these two incidents, Peter became a spiritual demonstration of what Jesus did physically with the blind man: Peter was able to see some things, but he was very unclear on others.

In the account of the Transfiguration of Christ, which also took place after he had identified Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God," Peter made the mistake of equating Moses and Elijah with Jesus and wanting to hold onto them by building tabernacles for them. He saw and heard Jesus daily, and the Father inspired him to see the vast superiority of Jesus. Nevertheless, he still did not make the connection that such information meant that Moses and Elijah (representing the law and the prophets) were inferior and that their time was passing, and that the one to hear now was Jesus only (Matthew 17:5, 8). This was a mistake on a par with seeing people walking as trees. And, in fact, as it would turn out, holding on to Old Testament law and traditions was—and sometimes still is—a common problem with Jewish converts to Christianity. Not understanding Jesus' fulfillment of and ending of the Old Covenant and the New Covenant's superseding it is poor spiritual vision that is not limited to Jewish converts, however.

Although Jesus many times taught that His kingdom was not of this world (e.g. John 18:36), was not a physical, earthly kingdom (e.g. Luke 17:20), His disciples wanted Jesus to take His rightful place as King and come riding into Jerusalem with pomp and circumstance. They hoped He would defeat the Romans and establish an earthly kingdom. Instead, He humbly rode a donkey. For a time, even after Jesus' resurrection, His disciples confused the kingdom of God with the earthly kingdom of Israel (see, for example, Acts 1:6). Again, this was like confusing people and trees. John 12:16 explains: "His disciples

didn't understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written about him, and that they had done these things to him." God had opened their eyes in a limited fashion before Pentecost, but fully opened them afterward. Which brings us to Jesus' next step with the formerly blind man.

Jesus Clears Things Up

Jesus worked on this man's sight a second time: "Then again he laid his hands on his eyes. He looked intently, and was restored, and saw everyone clearly" (Mark 8:25). There is some difference of opinion over whether this verse should say, "looked intently" as in the above translation, or "looked up" as in this literal translation: "Then He placed His hands on his eyes again, and made him look up. And he was restored and saw all clearly" (*LITV*). Personally, I tend to think the man looked up and, instead of seeing men as trees walking, he saw Jesus, and then he saw all clearly ("everyone," as in the translation at the beginning of this paragraph, is an uncalled for interpretation of the Greek *hapas*, which is better translated "all").

Like Jesus' disciples after Pentecost, and like many elect who might spend years as well-meaning but near-sighted Christians, the man could now see clearly. No one suddenly has perfect understanding, but with clear spiritual sight, we can come to understand as we study God's Word.

Jesus did not fail the first time He tried to heal the man. As God, He could easily have restored the man to perfect sight instantly the first time. Jesus had a purpose in healing this man's sight in two steps. He was illustrating a lesson. The context of what Mark recorded right before this incident can help us understand that lesson.

A Lesson for Jesus' Disciples

In Mark 8:1-10, we read that Jesus had fed the four thousand with seven loaves of bread and a few small fish. Later, when Jesus got into a boat with His disciples, they realized they had forgotten to take bread with them. Jesus then said something unrelated to them: "Take heed: beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod" (Mark 8:15). By yeast, Jesus meant the corrupt doctrine of the Pharisees and Herodians. But, in their spiritual nearsightedness, the disciples completely misunderstood Jesus. They thought that because they didn't have any bread with them, Jesus was warning them that

when they went to buy bread, they shouldn't buy it from the Pharisees.

Jesus then chastened them: "Why do you reason that it's because you have no bread? Don't you perceive yet, neither understand? Is your heart still hardened? Having eyes, don't you see? Having ears, don't you hear? Don't you remember?" (Mark 8:17-18). Of course, Jesus fully knew why they didn't understand, but He wanted them to remember their poor spiritual sight so that they could fully appreciate the miracle of their clear vision after Pentecost.

The incident of the double healing of the blind man happens just a few verses later. Rather than being a failure for Jesus, it was a physical demonstration of the disciples' spiritual condition. They were blind when Jesus led them out of the world. He miraculously gave them spiritual sight, but it was only partial and imperfect. Later, on the Day of Pentecost, God would heal their spiritual vision completely.

Lesson for Us

There is no way to know percentages, but some of God's elect receive clear spiritual sight immediately upon being born again. And some people who profess faith are false converts. They may eventually be truly regenerated, but they may also fall away or they may become troublemakers trying to gain followers for carnal reasons. But I think that the person going from being blind to seeing imperfectly to seeing clearly is probably also pretty common.

God will heal some people from spiritual blindness but leave them with very imperfect understanding. They have some knowledge of grace, but look to people, themselves, or works instead of planting their spiritual vision on Jesus alone. They live fearfully, seeing their lives as a series of moral dos and don'ts instead of boldly living in grace and trusting to love and the Holy Spirit to guide their Christian walk. They are easily led astray by false teachings and hoodwinked by supposed political solutions. Then, after whatever time God sees fit, God opens their eyes further. They perceive the kingdom of God more perfectly. Most importantly, they come to understand grace. They may have thought they understood before, but it was really men walking as trees. It was a distorted view of the kingdom.

Blogger Paul Ellis describes his own experience with this in "How well did I understand grace before I understood grace?" (<https://escapetoreality.org/2011/05/27/did-i-understand-grace-before/>). He likens the

experience to those 3D pictures that you hold close to your eyes and stare at. You can stare at it a long time and not see the picture. Then it suddenly pops out at you. "That's how it was for me with grace," he writes. "I now find myself reading old scriptures with new eyes and saying, 'Look! This is speaking of Jesus! This is all about Him – I never saw this before.' Now that I've seen Him once I see Him everywhere. I was saved decades ago and I have always loved God with my whole heart. But when I got this revelation of His amazing grace, it was like being born again, *again*."

This is also the way it was with me. When I entered the Worldwide Church of God nearly forty years ago, I loved God and had a fervent desire to serve Him. But because I was feeding on the aberrational, heretical teachings of Herbert W. Armstrong, it was as if I were a baby born with blinders on. My spiritual sight didn't develop normally. I was still mostly spiritually blind.

About twelve or thirteen years later, God performed my second healing—He opened my eyes to see the Gospel clearly. Instead of men walking as trees, I saw Jesus. I thought I knew Jesus before, but He was hidden in the picture, distorted, black and white, and flat with the law written over Him like graffiti. Now, suddenly, the law disappeared and He popped off the page in full color and 3D. And I saw Him more and more wherever I looked.

For years after I left the Worldwide Church of God, I wondered about my experience. Was I not a Christian in my first years in the Worldwide Church of God? Was I not regenerated? I was willing to accept that possibility, but I also knew the very sincere, long hours of prayer I had before God asking Him to show me the truth (little realizing at that time what that truth was), and asking Him to give me wisdom, and pleading with Him that He would help me to serve Him as best I could. It seemed wrong somehow to turn my back on that. How could I have had those desires if I was completely unconverted? I came to see that the answer is the Bible's teaching of a two-step healing of spiritual blindness. It's not everyone's experience, but it was mine.

Why? Why does God do this to some people and not to others? I can only answer by saying that God knows what is best for everyone. It's probably that He does what suits the person's personality. Personally, in hindsight, I think that what He did was wonderful. That doesn't excuse the actions of the tool He used—the cultic Worldwide Church of

God. Still, the experience I went through was obviously what was best for me.

When I think back on my life as a young man, I remember myself as pretty much of an airhead. If God had simply fully opened my eyes at that time, I might have been temporarily impressed, but I would probably have settled into taking it for granted. That's the way I was. But He led me by the hand along a different and slower course. He opened my eyes enough for me to have some knowledge of and contact with Him and a burning desire to serve Him. At the same time, He led me through a valley of shadows of day-keeping and legalism and other nonsense like British-Israelism. And he gave me some hurts and scars from abusive leadership. What I saw of the Bible was distorted—men walking as trees.

And then God performed the second healing of my vision. He opened my eyes fully to the bright and shining revelation that salvation is a gracious gift we receive by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. And over time, God turned the years of my partial blindness into invaluable lessons I could learn from and use to help others. Our Lord makes no mistakes. He never fails. He knows perfectly what He is doing in each of our lives.