

Men As Trees Walking

Mark 8:22-26 ²² Then He came to Bethsaida; and they brought a blind man to Him, and begged Him to touch him. ²³ So He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the town. And when He had spit on his eyes and put His hands on him, He asked him if he saw anything. ²⁴ And he looked up and said, "I see men like trees, walking." ²⁵ Then He put His hands on his eyes again and made him look up. And he was restored and saw everyone clearly. ²⁶ Then He sent him away to his house, saying, "Neither go into the town, nor tell anyone in the town."

Not too long ago I sat in an optometrist's chair as he dimmed the lights and began projecting his chart of letters. I read what was clear and then squinted and squished my eye to make the blurry letters clear. I remembered when as a teenager, I could read the smallest letters without squinting, and probably even the copyright and date of publication on the bottom right-hand corner. I remember how strange and frustrating it was when my eyesight slowly began weakening, and how I could no longer see objects clearly without glasses.

Many of you have experienced that, and far worse than my experience. Eyes are our windows onto the world, and when we have problems with them, it affects our whole experience of life. It's no wonder then, that the Bible makes the eye a symbol for understanding, for spiritual insight, and awareness of ultimate realities. People who cannot see spiritual realities at all, are called blind. People who understand are said to have had the eyes of their heart enlightened.

But there is a condition halfway between blindness and clear sight. In fact, it's a condition that all Christians go through. Instead of going from blindness to perfect, 20/20 vision overnight, we find that we see, but we do not see everything clearly. Instead, the day of our conversion begins a lifelong process of learning and seeing truth clearly.

Spurgeon said, "As the eye is the emblem of the understanding, it is very possible, nay, it is usual, to heal the human understanding by degrees. The will must be changed at once; the affections must be turned instantly; most of the powers of human nature must experience a distinct and complete change; but the understanding may be enlightened by a long course of illumination. The heart of stone cannot be gradually softened, but must instantaneously be made into a heart of flesh; but this is not necessary with the understanding."

What we have here is an extraordinary miracle. All miracles are extraordinary, of course, but this one stands out from all the other miracles in that it is the only miracle in which Jesus healed gradually, through stages. The end result was perfect sight, but the way that Jesus did it was through two stages.

And since we know that Jesus could heal blindness instantaneously, we know there is significance behind His choice of method here. We know that the miracles were often more than blessings to those who received them, they were also lessons, acted out parables, packed with spiritual truth. Jesus had done two feedings of several thousand, and expected the disciples to learn the lesson of the loaves.

Here, the only people witnessing this miracle are the twelve. And though the result of this healing is the same as every other time Jesus healed blindness, the way He did it illustrated three kinds of people. It showed three spiritual states that one can be in. The disciples, as they watched, saw a picture of what they had been, what they were, and what they could be.

It can be the same for us. As we watch this healing, we can see the difference between closed sight,

clouded sight and clear sight.

I. The Closed Sight

Mark 8:22 ²² *Then He came to Bethsaida; and they brought a blind man to Him, and begged Him to touch him.*

Jesus is in Bethsaida, the town that had already rejected His witness to them. Bethsaida was a village/city on the east side of Lake Galilee, a Jewish town that Jesus denounced for their rejection of His Word. This is the last miracle Jesus will do in Galilee. The next phase of ministry will be the road to Calvary.

Nevertheless, while He is in the town, some people bring a blind man to Jesus and beg him to heal the man. To be blind in Israel meant to be blind in a world without Braille, without guide-dogs, without keyboards that speak the letters out while you type them, without slopes and ramps with rails to make it easier. It typically meant being destitute, useless to society, and condemned to begging. It meant a life filled with dangers and discouragements.

The Bible sometimes calls blindness *walking in darkness*. The experience of walking in darkness is the same as being blind. You do not know what is really there. As Jim Berg points out, being blind is dangerous and discouraging. It's dangerous because you can't see what is really there – you might step on a skateboard lying on front of you. You might walk into an open manhole. You might walk onto a slippery path. It's discouraging because you don't always understand what is going on around you. You need to expend more effort to make sense of things and get by.

A spiritually blind person faces danger and discouragement. He faces danger because he doesn't see what is really true about reality. He doesn't see that this life is a short testing period before we enter eternity. He doesn't see that there are real enemies in this world, evil spiritual forces trying to tempt him to destroy himself. He doesn't see the great danger of his own heart, twisted, fallen desires that will lure you in and enslave you. The spiritually blind man doesn't see the wrath of God looming over him, with only mercy sparing his life.

The spiritually blind are also living a discouraging life. They try to get by without God in a world made by God and for God. Things don't always make sense. Life seems frustrating, meaningless and pointless. They come to the conclusions of Ecclesiastes – vanity, vanity all is vanity. How does a person become spiritually blind? Blindness comes from three sources.

1) Adamic blindness.

Ephesians 4:18 ¹⁸ *having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart;*

Every human being born in the world inherits from Adam a sinful nature. And part and parcel of that nature is a darkened understanding, an alienation from God, a wilful ignorance. This condition is one of spiritual blindness. We do not, and we cannot, once in this condition, see spiritual realities.

Consider yourself. Did you naturally, without anyone telling you, understand that God is the Three-in-One Creator of this world, who is holy and loving? Did you know instinctively that you needed a Saviour and that Christ died and rose again so that you might have life in Him? No – you didn't know that, because you are blind before salvation. Spiritual realities are not apparent.

2) Satanic blindness

2 Corinthians 4:4 ⁴ *whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.*

Satan works deliberately to keep unbelievers from focusing on the Gospel, from seeing its beauty, its reasonableness, its centrality. He keeps people deceived with lies, distracted with amusements, intimidated and anxious about the future; fearful of man, obsessed with their own desires, all of which keeps people from believing.

There is a third way spiritual blindness comes:

3) Judicial Blindness

There is a kind of blindness that does not come to all, but does come to some. It may sound contradictory at first – but the Bible teaches us that God blinds people's minds when they keep rejecting the light that God sends.

The nation of Israel, considered as a whole, is under this judgement.

Romans 11:7-8 ⁷ *What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded. ⁸ Just as it is written: "God has given them a spirit of stupor, Eyes that they should not see And ears that they should not hear, To this very day."*

2 Corinthians 3:14-15 ¹⁴ *But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. ¹⁵ But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart.*

Why would God do this? Because when man rejects the light God gives him repeatedly, God may judge him by making him less capable of receiving light. Pharaoh first hardened his own heart to God's Word, and having done that – God judged Pharaoh, by allowing his heart to harden further.

It is a very serious thing to hear what God says. Because what you do with it, may affect how much you understand or see the next time God speaks. Here is the warning we must all receive from Israel's blindness: You can be very religious and be blind. Do you know what Jesus called the religious leaders of his day? Blind guides! Blind leaders of the blind! Six times Jesus called the Pharisees blind.

Jesus called a whole church blind. The church at Laodicea was doing very well financially –they had much in the way of goods – but Jesus says – you are blind. You can be in church, be baptised, take communion, say all the right things, pray everyday, read your Bible, try to be generally moral and upright, give money to the Lord, and say certain things and even mean them, such as, Jesus is the Son of God. But you can still be blind – if the reality of God's truth has never come into sharp focus for you. If it is still confusing, and nonsensical, and strange, but you still partake in it – you may well be spiritually blind, but no one who is blind will find his way to the Saviour. In the case of this man, how did he arrive before Jesus? "They brought a man to Jesus". A person does not at first come by himself, he is brought. Who brings him? The Holy Spirit of God brings a person. He draws you through others speaking to you. He draws you through your own conscience accusing you. Above all, He draws you through the Word of God that is preached. And He draws you as an individual. He seeks you as an individual. And Jesus deals with you as an individual, as He did with this man. Look at what He does. Again, he takes him aside, out of the town – away from the commotion.

It is probably true that a person is nearer to being saved than ever before when he starts to think of his own relationship with God, and stops thinking of himself as a member of a crowd. Instead of thinking, I am part of a Christian country, or I was raised in a Christian home, or I'm part of a moral, upright circle of people, the person starts to think, am I reconciled to God? Have I ever been forgiven of my debts to God? Have my eyes opened to see and know God as a Person and as my Saviour and Lord.

Here is the difference between this man's blindness and spiritual blindness. This man's blindness was a physical defect. Spiritual blindness is a refusal to see. It is a refusal to see our sin for what it is. It is a refusal to see God dying on the cross in our place. It is a refusal to look at Him and recognise your sin and your need and cry out to Him for salvation.

John 3:19-21 ¹⁹ *"And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ "For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. ²¹ "But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God."*

What must you do? Believe! Stop closing your eyes to the truth. Look and Live – John 3:14-16

The Bible says to the blind person in Isaiah. *"Hear, you deaf; And look, you blind, that you may see. (Isa 42:18)*

God desires to heal our spiritual blindness, as He desired to heal this man's physical blindness.

II. The Clouded Sight

Mark 8:23-24 ²³ *So He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the town. And when He had spit on his eyes and put His hands on him, He asked him if he saw anything. ²⁴ And he looked up and said, "I see men like trees, walking."*

Notice the mercy and kindness of the Lord in dealing with this man. He takes him by the hand. Like He so often did, Jesus touches those He heals, expressing sympathy, compassion and a sharing in their sufferings. He leads him out of the city. Perhaps this was to remove the man from the commotion and noise of the people. Perhaps it was because Jesus wanted to deal with Him in private. It was probably also because Bethsaida had already had its chance. They had rejected Jesus, and Jesus had said hell would not be as hot for the inhabitants of Sodom as it would for the inhabitants of Bethsaida. They had seen what few people in history have ever seen, and yet spurned it. They would not receive any more signs.

And then Jesus does something strange – He spits on his eyes. We don't know exactly why. The Jews sometimes used saliva as a remedy for eye problems, so perhaps he was appealing to this man's understanding from his own culture, saying, I am about to work on your eyes. Jesus did a similar thing with the blind man in John 9. Perhaps the eyes were closed with a secretion, and the saliva was figurative for seeing – I will not only open your eyelids – but your very eyes.

But perhaps there is symbolism here. Where does saliva come from? The mouth. What else can come out of your mouth? Words. Jesus may be giving a symbol here: faith comes by hearing and hearing of the Word. Your spiritual eyes will only open under the sound of the Gospel – the truth of God's Word. Someone's saliva is not usually received well. It is seen as disgusting to spit on someone. But when the Word of God comes and preaches the truth of our sin, or our fallen condition; of the need for the cross; of the need for repentance, it might seem like an offence but we must receive it if we are to see.

Jesus lays hands on the man and then asks him what he can see. The man says, I see men as trees, walking. Perhaps he had not been born blind and had once seen trees and seen men, or perhaps he simply understood the shape of trees and people. Either way, what he can see now are shapes, fuzzy, blurry, indistinct. He knows the twelve men, thirteen around him are men, because they are moving about, which trees don't do, but that's as clear as they are, very blurry vertical shapes.

Since we know the Lord could heal people instantaneously, why was this man healed in stages? Consider who the only other witnesses of this private miracle were – the disciples. The twelve. In so many ways, this man represented them. They had been granted spiritual sight.

"But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; (Mat 13:16).

But how clearly did they see? In the boat, they were thinking that Jesus' words about leaven was a reference to not having bread, but Jesus had rebuked them by saying,

"Mark 8:17-18 *Do you not yet perceive nor understand? Is your heart still hardened? ¹⁸ "Having eyes, do you not see?*

This then is a physical parable of their condition. The man has gone from not seeing at all, to seeing. The disciples can now see spiritually. They understand many spiritual truths. In just a few verses, Peter will make the momentous confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. At the same time, this man cannot see clearly. He is no longer blind, but he also cannot see clearly enough to function. The disciples can see spiritually, but not clearly enough to see the spiritual meaning of the word leaven, to make the connection between miracles and life, and to understand that the Messiah would suffer and die for their sins. They can see spiritually – they know the truth, but they cannot see it clearly.

Partial sight is the most distressing state of all. Blind people do not know what they do not see. Clear-sighted people see clearly all that they see. But people in this state can see outlines and forms, enough to make them curious, but, frustratingly, not enough to give the answer.

This is the Christian who now sees the Bible is true, but sees its truths so unclearly as to make them unrecognisable. This is the Christian without illumination, and without discernment. He knows there are spiritual truths, but they are so out of focus, so incoherent, as to actually frustrate instead of help him. This man could now see shapes, but he could not function like that. The Christian without illumination cannot function as a joyful, peaceful, satisfied, victorious Christian. You cannot live the Christian life with vague, blurry concepts of God and the Christian life.

Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote a book called *Spiritual Depression*, in which he sought to diagnose and point out the remedies for spiritual depression. He speaks on this passage and points out how the Christian who can see, but not clearly, fills his own life with depression.

"I am concerned about these Christians who are disquieted and unhappy and miserable because of this lack of clarity. It is almost impossible to define them. You sometimes talk to this type and you think: "This man is a Christian." And then you meet him again and you are thrown into doubt at once, and you say: "Surely he cannot be a Christian if he can say a thing like that or do such a thing as that." Whenever you meet this man you get a different impression; and you never quite know whether he is a Christian or not. You are not happy in saying either that he does see or that he does not see. Furthermore, the difficulty is that not only do others feel like this about these people, they feel it about themselves. ... [T]hey are as troubled about themselves as other Christians are about them; they feel they are, and they feel they are not Christians. They seem to know enough about Christianity to spoil their enjoyment of the world, and yet they do not know enough to feel happy about themselves. They are "neither hot nor cold."

I think Jesus did this miracle in stages to teach the disciples what they were like at that time. He did it for us to see ourselves and to see how frustrating partial spiritual sight is. He did this to drive us to desire more than restored vision; to desire clarity of vision.

III. The Clear Sight

Mark 8:25-26 ²⁵ *Then He put His hands on his eyes again and made him look up. And he was restored and saw everyone clearly.* ²⁶ *Then He sent him away to his house, saying, "Neither go into the town, nor tell anyone in the town."*

Jesus touches the man's eyes, which makes Him look up to the source of this grace. Immediately he is fully restored. The word for clearly in the original language means 'far-seeing'. He could now see everything, and see it with brilliant sharpness, contrast, depth, and piercing clarity. The Bible says this man was restored – and saw every man clearly.

And once again. Jesus tells the man not to go into the town or publicise this miracle. Bethsaida had already had its signs. Jesus was no longer publicly declaring Himself. He was now entering a new phase of privately preparing His disciples for His death. This was a private, individual healing, for the sake of this man, and for the instruction of the Twelve.

From darkness to partial sight, from partial sight to clarity. That is the sort of spiritual understanding that every Christian should desire now, and is destined for. It is when vague ideas become crystal clear. It is when half-understood notions come into sharp relief, and we see their relevance and reality. It is the difference between living with clichés, and platitudes, and assumptions, and living with life-giving, life-transforming Truth.

Do not be satisfied to either not see, or to see fuzzily. A Christian must desire not only to come out of darkness, but then to see the world as clearly as God wants you to see it.

So what must we do?

Firstly, admit that you don't see as you should. Think of how this man, for appearance sake, could have answered Jesus' questions and said, "Oh, yes, I see! I see!" If he had done this just to seem falsely pious, he would have gone off to a life lived with much frustration. But he answered honestly. He said, "I do see. But I do not see clearly enough." Spiritual clarity and discernment starts when the Christian admits to God, saying – to be honest, my Christian life is blurry. I do see, but I may as well be blind, because what I see doesn't help me understand my life, my God, my future. I know ideas – Jesus died on the cross; the Holy Spirit lives inside me; I am to become like Christ; I am supposed to love God with all my heart; I have a future in Heaven. But these ideas are vague, hazy, opaque. I can't get them into my life. I can't live them out in the rush of life, and I don't know how, because I don't fully grasp them.

Secondly, submit yourself to further treatment by Christ. That is, stay before Jesus, as He ministers His Word to you, until the vagueness becomes specific and the confusion becomes clear. Come to Jesus with a holy curiosity. Do not be satisfied to not know how to love Him more, how to defeat a sin in your life, how to raise your children, or conduct your marriage, or run your business, or influence your grandchildren, or be *that* neighbour. Do not be satisfied to not know the relationships of the Three Persons in the Trinity; of how the gifts of the Spirit manifest today; of how Christ's righteousness is imparted to us and imputed to us, and what the difference is. Do not be satisfied to not know how Christ's humanity related to his deity; how Adam's guilt became ours; how grace operates in salvation. Be curious about eternal security, baptism, and the Millennium, and what true worship is, true fellowship and true discipleship. Do not be a Christian satisfied to live on the mere edges of the Christian life. Do not be a Christian satisfied to parrot the first answer you get on Google. Don't be a Christian who thinks doctrine and Christian practice is a study for Christian professionals and experts. This is the attitude of some. The breaking in of light seems to be enough for them. They are not bothered by how little they recognise of what they see; how little they understand of what they see. They are apparently satisfied with a Christian life of blurry objects and vague ideas – a life of believing things in an indistinct, fuzzy, unclear, hazy and useless way.

But that is not for you! You as a believer must say – Lord, I see men as trees walking, touch my eyes yet again – that I may see clearly. Lord, I do not see you as I ought – illuminate me! Speak to

me in the Word as I meditate on Scripture, open up the Bible to me so that things come into focus.

Seek the answers. Seek them in your own study of the Word. Seek the answers from mature Christians. Seek the answers from spiritual leaders. Seek the answers from the wisdom of the ages – Christian books with sound doctrine and proven judgement. Pursue knowledge, seek wisdom, get understanding. Stand before Christ as His Spirit ministers the Word to you, until truth and truth's application comes with clarity.