

“A Miraculous Sign”

The Twenty-Fourth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 8:1-21; Deuteronomy 13:1-5

Although he is Israel’s Messiah, Jesus has been preaching the gospel to the Gentiles in the region of what is now southern Lebanon. His mission to bring the good news of God’s kingdom to both Israel and the Gentile nations has also taken him to the east into the Decapolis, where he is about to re-enter Galilee and Jewish territory. While the people of Israel are struggling to understand who Jesus is and why he has come, Jesus continues to go about his work of preaching the gospel of the kingdom and summoning people to faith and repentance. But as Mark’s account of Jesus’ messianic mission continues to unfold, we are about to come to a major turning point in Jesus’ ministry. Jesus’ own disciples must believe that Jesus is the Christ, sent by God to save his people from their sins. They must see *and* perceive. They must hear *and* understand.

We return to our series on the Gospel of Mark. We come to the eighth chapter of Mark, which includes a critical turning point in Jesus’ messianic ministry, especially as it concerns his own disciples and how they understand Jesus’ person and work. In many ways, this section of Mark’s Gospel seems to largely repeat the events of Mark 6:31-7:37, including the feeding of the multitude, the crossing of the Sea of Galilee, the continuing conflict with the Pharisees, a discussion about bread, healing, before culminating in a profession of faith.¹ The repetition found in these two sections of Mark has given critical scholars much fodder. They lamely argue this is but one series of events told twice, supposedly undercutting the factual nature of the account. What gives this critical speculation some weight is the fact that the disciples have so quickly forgotten the lesson from the miraculous feeding of the five thousand as recorded in Mark 6:31-44. Here in Mark 8, how could the disciples act as though the first feeding never happened? Doesn’t this mean that this is a mere legend, or the same story told twice?

On the contrary, there is a much better and simpler explanation. Not only are there a number of factual differences between the events of Mark 6 and 7 and what we find here in Mark 8, but the reason as to why Jesus’ disciples repeat their sinful unbelief is also given to us by Mark. Even though they have witnessed Jesus do things we can but imagine, the disciples still do not understand what these miracles truly mean, even when a miracle happens a second time. As Jesus himself will tell them, “your hearts are hardened.” The disciples don’t understand, because they do not yet believe! On two separate occasions, Jesus feeds a multitude of people and still these guys don’t get it. The reason is that they are hard of heart—they don’t yet see things through the eyes of faith. Unless and until their hearts are changed, they cannot truly understand what they are witnessing. Yes, they see the miracles and they know that something of biblical proportions is going on in Jesus’ ministry. What they do not yet understand is that Jesus is doing all of this to secure our salvation from sin. And this is the very thing that the disciples must realize.

But lest we think this applies only to them, this is the exact same challenge we face each week as we work our way through Mark’s Gospel. We must not allow our own hearts to become hardened to things with which we have become so familiar. We may hear, but do we understand? We may see, but do we perceive what is going on? As we work our way through Mark chapter 8, we see that the disciples still

¹ See the chart in, Lane, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 269.

do not truly understand their master's ministry, because spiritual understanding is still being granted to them. They are a work in process. Remember that Jesus has already healed a deaf man in Mark 7:31-36 and he will heal a blind man in Mark 8:22-26. Why these particular miracles? Why didn't Jesus heal cancer, or diabetes, or even baldness? The miracles of restoring hearing to the deaf and sight to the blind serve very dramatically set the stage for what will happen in Mark 8:27-30, when it becomes clear that Peter has been given spiritual sight and understanding as seen in his dramatic confession that Jesus is the Christ. When Jesus restores sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, we are given a very graphic picture of what is required for any one of us, including the disciples, to see these matters through the eyes of faith. God must give us faith, so that we see and perceive, so that we hear and understand. Only through the eyes of faith do we grasp the fact that Jesus did all of this not to wow or amaze us, but to save us from our sins.

To set the context for what follows, recall that in chapter 7 of Mark, Jesus had gone to Tyre and then to Sidon, before heading east and south, passing through the region of the Decapolis, before circling around and heading back toward the Sea of Galilee from the southeast (you can consult the maps of Palestine during the time of Jesus to follow his route). While Mark doesn't specifically say so, the reference to the Decapolis (in the previous chapter), along with the time reference in Mark 8:1, seems to place this series of events on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee (the opposite shore from Capernaum). This was an area in which both Jews and pagans lived in large numbers. This also fits with Jesus' stated purpose, which is to preach the gospel of the kingdom to the multitudes (including Gentiles) who were then following him everywhere he went.²

As we turn to our text, the scene is located somewhere on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee after Jesus has returned from the Decapolis. Jesus' ministry is now many months, if not a year or more old.

As is his customary style, Mark describes this account giving but a few necessary details. "*During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat.'*" While Mark does not tell us much beyond the basic details, the very fact that people have been with Jesus out in the wilderness for three days, indicates that at the very least, Jesus was engaging in an extensive teaching ministry during this phase of his messianic mission.³ As in the earlier account of Jesus feeding the 5000 in the wilderness, the imagery of a new Exodus and Jesus serving the messianic meal in the wilderness are in view, only not as prominent in this second feeding. If the people are wondering who Jesus is, once Jesus has fed them, they seem to grasp the messianic significance of this miracle, because earlier, we are told that they tried to make Jesus king. So far so good. But what the people of Israel failed to see is that Jesus' messianic mission was not focused on political matters and the defeat of Rome. Instead, Jesus' miracles pointed to God visiting his people (both Jew and Gentile) with his long-promised salvation. Since the people were looking for the deliverance from Rome and a return to a national greatness, they will quickly reject Jesus when they figure he's come to save them from their sin and not to led a revolt or restore Israel to its former fame and grandeur.

The fact that these people were so hungry and that there were so many of them created a significant

² Lane, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 272.

³ Lane, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 272.

problem. These people have followed Jesus out into the wilderness because he taught them. They are now miles away from provisions and what little food they had was running out. Those who choose to be fed by Jesus from God's word, will now experience Jesus miraculously meeting their physical needs when he provides them with bread to eat. In verse 3, we learn that Jesus is aware of the growing problem. *"If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance."* Once again, we see our Lord's great compassion upon his people. In the feeding of the five thousand, it was the disciples who interrupt Jesus, concerned about the well-being of the people. In this instance, it is Jesus who takes the initiative in providing for the crowds. Since the sheep are without a shepherd Jesus has fed them by teaching them. Now he must provide for their physical needs. Once again, he will provide them with earthly bread, to prove that he also gives his people heavenly bread, which is the word of the gospel.

That Jesus involves his disciples in these miracles indicates that Jesus is creating a new Israel, having summoned his people out into the wilderness. But his disciples still do not grasp the significance of what was about to transpire even though they had previously witnessed and participated in the feeding of the 5000. Here, they ask exactly the same question they did before. *"His disciples answered, 'But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?'"* And once again, Jesus gives them the same answer. *"How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked. 'Seven,' they replied."* In effect, Jesus is telling them, "I will do the very same thing that I did before, create enough earthly bread to feed all those who had gathered for heavenly bread" (Jesus' teaching). We will see in what follows that the disciples still do not understand that the physical bread points to Jesus as the heavenly bread, given by God to his people through his word and sacrament.

As Mark recounts what happened next—probably told to him by Peter—Jesus does the same thing that he had done on the western shore of the sea when he fed the multitude there. This time there is no mention of green grass, nor does Jesus group the people along the line of the twelve tribes as he had done earlier. If the multitude which had gathered reflects the actual population of the region, then these people were a mix of Jews and Gentiles and would not have been present for Jesus' earlier miracle when he fed the 5000.⁴ And so, as we read in verses 6-7, [Jesus] *"told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people, and they did so. They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them."* Having given the traditional Jewish blessing for the food, Jesus now miraculously feeds all of them from seven loaves of bread and but a few fish.

Even in the wilderness where there was nothing to eat, and where 4000 hungry people had gathered to hear Jesus teach and preach, Jesus provides for their physical needs. Mark simply tells us, *"The people ate and were satisfied."* Lord willing, this is how we feel each Lord's Day after we hear the word preached and receive the sacrament. And, once again, there was so much food that the disciples had to pick up the leftovers. *"Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. About four thousand men were present."* Like the first time, this is a large group because the total does not include woman and children. While some have tried to find significance in the number of people present, it is more likely the case that Mark is simply reporting how many people were actually present. But there may be some significance to the fact that the first feeding was directed toward Israel (since the messianic symbolism was emphasized), and this one toward Gentiles (since none of these things are emphasized). Perhaps it is better to emphasize that since there were both Jews and Gentiles

⁴ See the discussion in; Lane, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 274.

present in the wilderness, this second feeding of the multitude may serve to prefigure the church as an institution composed of Jew and Gentile, even as the first feeding focused upon the New Israel in messianic terms.

Having provided physical bread for those seeking heavenly bread (his teaching about the kingdom of heaven), we read in the last part of verse 10, that it was time for Jesus to move on to Dalmanutha—the precise location is now lost to us some two thousand years later.⁵

According to Mark, “*and having sent them [the crowd] away, [Jesus] got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha.*” Apparently, it was not long before Jesus’ adversaries show up to test him yet again. As we read in verse 11, “*The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven.*” Very likely, the Pharisees were tracking Jesus’ every move. Here are the very men who accuse Jesus of being a false prophet, or even an agent of Satan *because* Jesus had performed miracles, now trying to trick Jesus into doing some miraculous sign. And this right after Jesus had just feed over 4000 people out in the desert from seven loaves of bread and a few fish!

While the biblical mandate for such a sign is found throughout the Old Testament, such as in Deuteronomy 13:1-6 (our Old Testament lesson), this request as put to Jesus by the Pharisees, actually amounts to Jesus doing something to prove that he is not a false prophet and that he has God’s favor. Such a demand is not only a personal insult of the first order, it is the clearest proof yet that the Pharisees are absolutely blind to the truth. They have seen the miracles Jesus has performed, and have been more than willing to attribute the source of them to Satan rather than to God. In fact, there’s a trick behind their question. If Jesus performs yet another sign for them, they will use it to invoke the sanction of Deuteronomy 13:2-5 against Jesus that he is a false teacher, and they will attempt to put Jesus to death. But Jesus knows what is in their hearts. He will not do what they want. Besides, what on earth could Jesus do now to convince them that he is, in fact, who he claims to be? Even after Jesus rises again from the dead, these same men will continue to reject him. If this is not proof of the old adage, “none are so blind as those who will not see,” I don’t know what is.

Jesus has given them all the evidence they need to come to faith. The Pharisees are without excuse. They cannot plead ignorance, nor can they say that God did not give them sufficient information to believe. The problem is not a lack of evidence. It should also be clear that when these men demand a sign, even if Jesus performed a million signs, they would not believe and only seek all the more to put Jesus to death. It is not as though these men are unintelligent rubes who don’t know any better. On the contrary, these are brilliant men who refuse recognize their own messiah despite the evidence he has given them. The issue is that Jesus calls them sinners and they don’t like it. Jesus acts without seeking their approval and this offends them. Jesus eats with people the self-righteous Pharisees regard as unclean. Jesus preaches to and heals Gentiles. It is not that Jesus failed to give them reason to believe. He has. It is that Jesus summons men who think themselves to be righteous to repent, exposing them to be sinners just like the rest of us. And it is this call to repent which infuriates them. How dare Jesus speak of the Pharisees as sinners!

That the ground beneath their feet does not open up and swallow them alive, is indicative of Jesus’ great patience and long-suffering mercy. Mark simply recounts that “[Jesus] *sighed deeply and said, ‘Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it.’*” Jesus is

⁵ France, The Gospel of Mark, 309.

not some performer or magician who will stoop to their level and give them a sign just to keep them happy and lower the tension level. Exasperation is clearly implied in Jesus' response. What more can he do? What else can he say to these men? Why do these people who will not believe, still claim that they seek a sign when all the while they are trying to trap him? Just as Moses faced this stiff-necked and hard-hearted people in the wilderness, so now Jesus must face them, since he is the new Moses. Jesus' final response is given in verse 13. "*Then he left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side.*" If the Pharisees will not believe, Jesus will now turn his attention to his own disciples. Jesus simply gets in the boat and leaves them without giving them what they demanded.

What follows in verses 14-21 takes place in the boat while the group is out on the Sea of Galilee. The whole account recalls to mind Mark chapter 4, when Jesus had spoken of outsiders (in this case, the Pharisees) and insiders, those who have been given insight into the meaning of Jesus' words (the disciples). Only the disciples don't yet understand.⁶

As Jesus got into the boat and left the Pharisees behind, his focus now turns to the disciples, who, in their haste to get away from the Pharisees had forgotten to get provisions for the trip. Jesus will use the circumstances to make a point about both the Pharisees and Herod which, apparently, has been lost to the disciples. According to Mark, "*the disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. 'Be careful,' Jesus warned them. 'Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.'*" Having just witnessed the encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees, and having just witnessed Jesus get in the boat, set sail, and leave the Pharisees behind, you would think that the disciples would understand that Jesus was about to explain to them what was behind the dispute with the Pharisees. But that was not to be the case as the following discussion among the disciples indicates.

"*They discussed this with one another and said, 'It is because we have no bread.'*" Amazingly, the disciples thought that they were in trouble because they didn't bring enough bread. They completely missed Jesus' whole point about the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod. To a Jew of Jesus' day, leaven (yeast) was symbolic of the evils of a human heart. The disciples knew this. A small amount of leaven had a drastic effect upon the whole, just as a small amount of yeast causes a whole loaf of bread to rise. That the Pharisees asked for yet another sign, when Jesus had given them plenty of signs, shows how deeply the evil in their own hearts has effected them. The same holds true for Herod, who was probably in Jesus' mind since he had just traveled through the Decapolis, which included Tiberias, the site of Herod's capitol. While Jesus warns them about the evil they have just witnessed, they are bickering with each other about why they forgot to provision the boat and who was at fault because they were down to only one loaf of bread. Their propensity to worry about such trivial matters, when Jesus was teaching them about important matters of sin and grace, showed just how hard their hearts really were. They too were seeing, but not perceiving. They were hearing, but they were not understanding.

Jesus now rebukes them for their foolishness, getting to the very root of the human predicament, namely the effects of sin upon our understanding of spiritual things. "*Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: 'Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember?'*" They had witnessed Jesus heal. They had witnessed Jesus cast out demons. They had witnessed Jesus calm a storm. They had watched Jesus confound the Pharisees while welcoming tax-collectors and sinners. They had heard Jesus preach about the kingdom. They had even preached the gospel of the kingdom

⁶ France, The Gospel of Mark, 314.

themselves as Jesus instructed them to do. But when Jesus warns them about the leaven of Herod and the Pharisees, instead, they fight about who forgot to go to the grocery store!

In verses 19-20, Jesus brings them back to his main point. *“When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?”* *‘Twelve,’ they replied. ‘And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?’ They answered, ‘Seven.’*” The disciples have no problem recounting the facts at hand. They even remember how many basketfuls of leftovers there were. Yes, they grasp the basic facts, but they have no clue as to what these facts are telling them. The irony is that the disciples are no different from the crowds who ate and had their fill. They saw the miracles. They knew that Jesus had supernatural power. They knew he was a miracle worker and that he had God’s blessing. They had witnessed all the signs Jesus had given. But they had failed to grasp the very thing to which those signs had pointed—the forgiveness of their sins. And so Jesus leaves them with the following question. *“He said to them, ‘Do you still not understand?’”* Obviously, they do not. But soon they will.

What does this encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees say to us? How do Jesus’ words to his disciples apply to us?

It is easy for us to read this account and think, “these disciples are really a bunch of nimrods.” “How dumb can these guys be?” But if we are thinking that way, we’ve really missed the whole point of Jesus’ words. Yes, these men were called by Jesus to be his disciples before the cross and resurrection. There is a sense in which at this point in redemptive history there was no way they could fully understand what Jesus was doing. And for this, we must cut them some slack. But they are also missing the whole point.

The problem is that they are hard of heart. They see and hear what Jesus is doing but they fail to make the connection between Jesus’ words and deeds, and therefore they can’t see true purpose of his mission. Jesus came to save his people from their sins. Because they were hard of heart, this is the fundamental thing they were not understanding. Jesus mission is not just to fulfill prophecy. His mission is not just to restore Israel and draw the Gentile nations to worship Israel’s God. If Jesus is bringing God’s long-promised salvation, then he is bringing it to people who can do nothing to save themselves, because they are dead in sins. To fully understand why Jesus came, you need to understand that he came to save sinners. And if he came to save you, it is because you are a sinner who needs to be saved. This is what the disciples don’t yet understand. They can do nothing to save themselves. Everything that Jesus had said and done pointed to this. But not seeing themselves as helpless sinners, what Jesus says and does, doesn’t really make sense. Why did he cast out demons? Why did he heal certain illnesses in these public settings? Why does he challenge the Pharisees as to their self-righteousness and unbiblical distinction between clean and unclean? He did it to expose the very thing for which they hated him. He called them sinners. Instead of repenting, they ask for yet another miraculous sign. The disciples have not yet connected the dots.

Therefore, the application for us is not to make the same mistake. Every person here is a sinner. And if you hear this account but don’t grasp the fact that Jesus is doing all of this to save you from your sins, then you’ve missed the whole point. You are just like one of those people in the crowd who ate, had their fill, and said, “wow, this is pretty amazing.” “This guy should be our king.”

It is only through the eyes of faith that we understand that Jesus miraculously produced earthly bread, because he alone can give us heavenly bread, which is the promise that he will save us from our sins. While we may think that spiritual sight and spiritual hearing involves some great mystical experience,

then you need to know that it really doesn't. If you know yourself to be a sinner, and if you believe that Jesus was doing all this so that you might be forgiven of your sins and if you desire to live a life of gratitude before him because of what he has done for you, then you get it. You have spiritual understanding. It has been granted to you..

But if you think, "I need one more miraculous sign, and then I'll believe." If you think, "this is all very interesting, but . . ." Or if you think, "I can gain understanding of spiritual principles by observing what Jesus did and then do what he did . . ." Or, even if you think "its all a load of dung," then you don't get it. And unless God grant you understanding, you never will get it.

But there's one prayer God always answers. It's not "please Lord, give a miraculous sign!" It is "Lord I believe, help my unbelief!" If you haven't already, now is the time to pray that prayer. If you know that Jesus was doing all of this for you, then come to this table this morning and receive the same thing the disciples did, living bread from heaven. Receive this heavenly bread with both joy and understanding. For Jesus did all of this to save us from our sins.