

Can't See Jesus For The Trees

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[0:00] So I meant to say earlier, I remember asking the boys what they think mum and dad do.

And so the boys said, well, mum cleans toilets and dad is a priest.

So we've got the Catholic school to blame for that. But they think I'm a priest, yet they've still to come and confess to me. So I don't know what's going on. Let me just reiterate what Stephen said about that bill.

It's a really, really important bill because it will affect a loved one or even you personally. And the places in which we've seen something like assisted suicide being introduced in somewhere like Canada, it's just gone awry real quick.

And it's just really, really dangerous. And so this is something that will affect every one of us. And so it's really important. I think the church should be a prophetic voice in the nation that they're in.

[1:23] We should speak out truth against injustice and evil. And we should be light to stay the darkness and salt that holds back corruption.

And so we need to be at the forefront of these things. And so if you're able to get a hold of that, you don't even need to read a lot of it. But certainly update yourself on it and engage with it the best you can.

So we're in Mark's Gospel, chapter 8. And we are near the end of chapter 8, but we're at the midway point. So chapter 8, verse 22. Mark 8, verse 22.

Lord, as we come now to your Word, we pray that you would, by your Spirit, illuminate your Word to us.

Give us understanding, for we are slow of heart to believe and understand these things. Help us in our dullness and our unbelief.

[2:26] Help us in our hearts to know you, to know who you are, and to understand the truth of your living Word.

Speak to us now. Open our hearts. May we encounter you and see who you are, for your glory and for our good. In Jesus' name, amen.

Mark 8, verse 22. And they came to Bethsaida, and some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him.

And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village. And when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, Do you see anything?

And he looked up and said, I see people, but they look like trees walking. Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again, and he opened his eyes.

[3:25] His sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. And he sent him to his home, saying, Do not even enter the village. And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi.

And on the way he asked his disciples, Who do people say that I am? And they told him, John the Baptist. And others say, Elijah.

And others, one of the prophets. And he asked them, But who do you say that I am? Peter answered him, You are the Christ.

And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him. Amen. This is God's word, and we pray he blesses the reading of it.

Well, I want to tell you a little story that will help us understand something about what's going on in this text. A couple of weeks ago, I was away on an overnight to Arbroath. Anyone ever been to Arbroath?

[4:28] Yep, there you go. I was away for an annual Bonner training conference. It was a Monday to a Tuesday. Normally this thing is in Pitlokry.

But this year it was in Arbroath. The second day on Tuesday, we finished around 2 p.m. And I was wondering if I would book myself a later train to get home.

And maybe give myself an hour or so. Normally when I went to Pitlokry, I wouldn't get the train straight away. I would give myself an hour or so and get a later train home. And so that I can have a wee look around some of the places.

There's a few places in Pitlokry that I would like to visit before I get the train home. I would check the place out, go for a coffee, go for a walk, do a little study, and then get the train. And so I'd never been to Arbroath before.

And I wondered about getting a later train so that I could check the place out. But the weather forecast was looking horrendous. Broly weather, except if you took a broly to a coastal town like Arbroath, the people would know you're an outsider.

[5:39] I spent the walk from the train station to the place that I was going, counting how many times the broly went inside out. Don't take a broly there. So the weather forecast for the whole time was looking pretty bad.

And so I decided I'm not going to book a later train. I'll book as early as I can. So the conference finished on Tuesday at 2pm. And the earliest train was 2.30.

And it was a direct from Arbroath to Glasgow. And I thought, that's good. And it's only a 10-minute walk to the station. It's all good. Gave me a little bit of time to walk.

On Tuesday, we finished up a little bit early. So I ended up having just over an hour to spare. And so I thought, okay, I'll check the town out, even though it's pretty grim.

I walked down to the shore. And the waves were crazy. It's the North Sea, you know. And the weather was whipping the waves up. And it was excellent. I stayed there for as long as I could until my fingers got numb.

[6:44] And the rain and hail started to come down. And then I took the walk up to the station. But I had loads of time, unexpectedly. And so I was looking for a cafe to go to for a wee coffee or something.

And like, everywhere was closed. Everywhere closed early. And the funny thing was, I passed by about a dozen hairdressers that were all open. And so it seems that people of Arbroath care more about their hair than they do about getting a coffee.

And I thought, I've got all this time. And there's absolutely nothing to do in Arbroath unless you want your hair cut. What am I going to do? And it's raining. And maybe it would be better in summer.

But there's nothing to do. And so I couldn't even get myself a coffee. I walked to the train station. And I got into the train station about two.

And I looked up. And my train was cancelled. I was absolutely gutted. Two things that came to my mind.

[7:46] One was, I don't want Jen to have to drive all the way to Arbroath with the boys just to pick me up. But the second thing is, I don't want to be left here in Arbroath. There's nothing to do.

And I don't need a haircut. And so I panicked. And I went up. And I spoke to the staff. And thankfully, they said, don't worry.

You can get the train, the next train to Dundee. You can use the ticket you've got, get the next train to Dundee, and have a wee changeover, and then get a train to Glasgow. It's all right.

And I was wanting a direct train. I didn't want to do a changeover. I was wanting a quick, easy, direct route. No stops. No delays.

Straight to my destination. However, I had to deal with the fact that the journey was going to be broken up. It turned out that when I changed over in Dundee, there was a little shop right on the platform that I could get coffee from.

[8:44] And it was all good. And the train was there. And I got home safe and sound. Now, the point of this story is that on our journey of faith, it can feel a bit like that. Look at this man who was blind.

This is the only miracle where there's a changeover on the journey. We've seen more than enough times that healing is not a difficult thing for Jesus. So it cannot be anything to do with a lack of power or ability.

But why wasn't his healing more direct? Why take two trains when you can take one? So my unexpected journey on the train was a bit like this blind man's journey.

But it's also a bit like Peter and the journey of the disciples. These two events, the blind man being healed and the disciples with their great confession of Christ, they go together.

The miracle of healing the blind man is the same kind of thing as Peter's confession. Both of these things are about seeing, about seeing something. And so I've got three points for this passage.

[9:56] The first point is, spiritual blindness is more stubborn than we realize. The second point is that Jesus really is the Christ.

And the third point is, stay with Jesus and he won't leave you blind. And so, point number one, spiritual blindness is more stubborn than we realize. The blind man has been brought to Jesus, and this is the only one in the Gospels who is healed in two parts.

It's the only time in all the Gospels that a person is healed in two parts. And Jesus would have likely have healed thousands of people with various infirmities, including those who are blind.

And so why is this healing in two parts? Well, firstly, we must understand that it's not two attempts. Jesus doesn't need to attempt anything.

He never had to attempt a healing as though he was unsure of the outcome. Jesus knows what he's doing. And rarely does he do the same thing the same way twice. And so, we can't think that he attempted and failed on his first attempt and has to do it a second time.

[11:05] No, Jesus, he's got a purpose for doing things the way that he does them. We've already seen in Mark's Gospel that nothing is too difficult for Jesus. And so, it's nothing to do with a lack of power.

Secondly, it's helpful to remember the theme of unbelief in the Gospel. The only other time that we've seen in Mark something that looks like a healing is limited was back in chapter 6 when Jesus went to his hometown of Nazareth.

Do you remember? In Nazareth, there was such astonishing unbelief that only few people came to be healed. The next time that we're going to see some kind of limit to power is going to be right after the transfiguration when the disciples have failed to cast out a demon.

And so, there's this thread of these things having something to do with faith and unbelief and this struggle between faith and unbelief. Thirdly, the text itself doesn't tell us explicitly why this happens in two stages, but the context gives us a big clue.

And so, this is now halfway through the Gospel of Mark, and so far Jesus has done countless miracles, yet the Pharisees are still asking for a sign, and the disciples still do not understand.

[12:31] The first eight chapters of Mark have been dealing with the question of, who is Jesus? And the second half of Mark will deal with, what does it mean that he's the Christ?

What did he come to do? And what does it mean to follow him? And so, the first half comes to a close. We get this big confession from Peter, and it's the first time in the whole of Mark's Gospel, it's the first time that a person has called Jesus the Christ.

Now, demons have stated who Jesus is, but this is the first time that a human has stated what Mark said at the opening of his Gospel, that Jesus is the Christ.

And so, this concludes the first half with the first question, who is Jesus? This comes to a conclusion. And the reason this context helps us understand why this miracle happens in two parts, is because if the Gospel is in two parts, and the disciples are only now beginning to see something of who Jesus is, then like the blind man, it will take more for them to see clearly what that means. Remember, the blind man was healed, but he could only see blurry people like trees. And so, the disciples see something about Jesus, but their vision is blurry.

[13:55] They don't understand everything. Notice that Jesus again takes this man away from the crowd to heal him, and afterwards he sends him home, and tells him not to even enter the village.

You see, the miracle isn't for the sake of the crowd. And while Jesus is compassionate to the man himself, he's also trying to teach something to his disciples. He's trying to show his disciples.

Remember, just before this miracle, he had warned his disciples about the yeast of the Pharisees, the attitude of unbelief that will corrupt, and yet they still don't understand.

He's trying to get his disciples to see. And so, this miracle is happening at the point, in front of this particular group of people, his disciples, who the last question he asked was, do you not yet understand?

And then he asked the blind man, do you see anything? And he sent his disciples, come on, do you not see anything? And so, this miracle is trying to teach his disciples something.

[15:02] Now, I wonder if you noticed how many questions are in just this chapter, chapter 8. How do we look through all the questions that Jesus asks in chapter 8?

Have a listen to this. Verse 5, How many loaves do you have? Verse 12, Why does this generation seek a sign? Verse 17, Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread?

Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Verse 18, Having eyes do you not see? Having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember?

Verse 19, When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up? Verse 20, On the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?

Verse 21, Do you not yet understand? Verse 23, Do you see anything? Verse 27, Who do people say that I am?

[16:03] Verse 29, Who do you say that I am? Now, if you didn't know that verse 12 was asked to the Pharisees, and that verse 23 was asked to the blind man, you would think that those questions were asked for the disciples as well, wouldn't you?

They apply to the disciples. When Jesus asks who other people say that he is, it's clear from the answers that other people cannot see who Jesus is.

So when Jesus asks his disciples, Who do you say that I am? He is in effect saying the same kind of thing that he says to the blind man. Do you see anything? Do you see anything?

After all, before the healing of the blind man, he asked them, Having eyes do you not see? After all their struggle to understand, despite countless miracles in their sight, Jesus is asking them, Do you see anything?

Who do you say that I am? Now, it's been suggested that the blind man was also slow to believe. Although Jesus is teaching something to his disciples about seeing, he is also aware of this blind man's struggle.

[17:17] And this is what Alexander McLaren, the Glasgow-born theologian and pastor, says, he puts it well when he says, Christ accommodates the pace of his power to the slowness of the man's faith.

Isn't that something? Christ accommodates the pace of his power to the slowness of the man's faith. Isn't that a wonderful thought?

He accommodates the pace of his power to each person. John McKinnon, who many of you know, he used to say, you can't microwave maturity.

Ezra, my son, used to think that on the day of your birthday, you suddenly grew up a year's worth of age.

That your body would suddenly, on that day, change a year older. That would be a terrible thing to wake up and look in the mirror and just think, wow. I told him that it happens a little bit each day.

[18:23] But can you imagine that's how it happened? On the day of your birthday, suddenly your bones started to strip. You see, the body can't handle something like that.

The human body isn't supposed to handle that kind of stress all at once. Your bones and your joints, your muscles, etc., couldn't handle changing that quickly.

And that's the same with our faith. It's the same with who we are and how we understand. We just can't handle that quick a change. Even the Apostle Paul, when he had that sudden experience on the road to Damascus, he spent three years in the Arabian desert learning all of what that meant. And so Christ accommodates the pace of his power to each one of us because often our faith is slow. Think about my train journey from our broth.

faith. We want a direct route, don't we? When it comes to faith in Christ and getting to our destination of being this great godly person of faith, we would rather have a direct route.

[19:33] No stops, no changeovers, no delays, no stuck in our broth and minging weather, no having to hang about Dundee.

We want a direct route. We would like to think that our journey of faith is more direct than it actually is. We would like to think that we don't need any stops or delays or changeovers.

Another funny story about my trip to Arbroath, the train ticket allows you to pick your seat, choose a window, an aisle or this or that.

I chose a window seat. I thought, I want a good view on the way to Arbroath and back. And when I got on the train at Glasgow Queen Street, it was the inside seat but there was no window. It was the only bit. Every other seat had a window and it was the only bit between the windows. I was like, can you believe this? Our journey of faith doesn't always turn out the way we expect it, does it?

[20:36] Now the Pharisees, they were culpably blind they persisted in stubborn unbelief. Some people are like that. In fact, we probably know some people who are always demanding signs.

It'll never be enough. Never willing to believe. In fact, a question that you can ask someone is, if this was true, would you believe? And they might just still say, no, no I wouldn't.

I don't want a God like that. That's what the Pharisees were like. They were stubborn and persistent in their unbelief. However, the disciples, I mean, they were blind, but more or less they were ignorant and slow.

It was a dullness. Like most of us, their blindness was a dullness, a slow process. And for us, our faith is a slow process.

And thank God that He is so patient with us. This is what McLaren goes on to say, and I think this is wonderful. He says, both the gradual process of illumination and the rate of that process as determined by faith are true of us.

[21:45] How dim and partial a glimmer of light comes to many a soul at the outset of the Christian life. How little a new convert knows about God and self and the starry truths of His great revelation.

Isn't that true? A new convert might be bursting with excitement and enthusiasm, but how little they know. I remember we were doing a bit of Christology on Wednesday night and it was deep and challenging stuff.

But I remember in Bible college someone asked a question, how much do you need to know to be saved? And someone, a classmate, gave a brilliant answer.

I thought it was a brilliant answer. He just said, mercifully little. God is so patient and kind we need to get it right. We need to get Jesus right.

But it's mercifully little we need to know. But we shouldn't stay there. Jesus wants to take us further on. And so McLaren goes on to say, Christian progress does not consist in seeing new things, but in seeing old things more clearly.

[22:55] How good is that? Progress isn't about seeing new things, but seeing old things more clearly. The same Christ, the same cross, only more distinctly and deeply apprehended, more closely incorporated into my very being.

We do not grow away from Him. We grow into knowledge of Him. And so, after all that the disciples have heard and seen, after all this time, Jesus asks them if they see anything.

the disciples finally say, you are the Christ. The first and eight chapters leading up to this. The first eight chapters have all been leading up to this moment.

And the next eight chapters unpack what this moment means. It's a peak. It's an absolute peak on their journey. But it's not the destination.

The disciples have a long way to go. So the second point is, Jesus really is the Christ. Jesus asks, who do people say that I am? And we see this list of opinions in chapter six.

[24:01] Same list in chapter eight. Oh, some people think that He's John the Baptist raised from the dead. And other people think that He's Elijah, come back. And other people think He's one of the prophets.

And in Matthew's account, they even say that some people think that He's Jeremiah. Basically, all of these opinions are putting Jesus into the category of prophet.

Clearly, He has to be someone important to be doing the things that He's doing. Back in chapter three, the Pharisees couldn't deny His power, but they said that it was because of the devil.

But the crowds who have experienced the power of Jesus conclude that He must be some kind of prophet. Some kind of prophet. Maybe even John raised from the dead.

Maybe even Elijah or one of the other prophets sent back. If you used to watch the old TV show catchphrase, you'll remember Roy Walker and what he used to say.

[25:03] It's good, but it's not right. And all these people have this opinion, and even although they put them in the category of prophet, it's good. But it's not right.

It's not right. There's some honor in being recognized as a prophet sent by God, but the prophets are all pointing towards the hope of the Messiah. And so when the Messiah comes, and people think He's just another prophet, that's a swing and a miss.

And later on in Mark chapter 12, Jesus will tell a parable, the parable of the tenants. Do you know it? And He says that the prophets were just servants.

All the prophets sent to the people were just servants of the owner of the vineyard. But Jesus, the Messiah, He's the Son, the beloved Son of the owner of the vineyard.

And so when people are saying that they think this character, who is actually the beloved Son, when they think He's just another prophet, they get it very wrong. The prophets were always calling people back to God.

[26:05] But when the Son of God shows up, and people think that He's just a prophet, clearly they are blind. And so if we look at this blind man in this passage, in the three stages of his life, blind, partial sight, and seeing clearly, this is how we can see these other people in the story.

The people who have these opinions about Jesus being a prophet, they're still blind. The disciples, they finally see something.

Jesus, You are the Christ. But they don't understand what that means. So they are like the blind man with partial sight. They see people, but they look like trees walking about. The blind man still has a way to go.

When you are entrusting your life and soul and your future on a prophet, you will always be disappointed. And so I think one of the challenges is, who are you trusting?

Are you trusting John the Baptist? Some people did. In fact, in Acts chapter 19, Paul runs into some people who are still trusting in John the Baptist, and he says, listen, that's not enough.

[27:23] John's not going to save you. Elijah's not going to save you. One of the prophets, they're not going to save you. Are you trusting in Muhammad? Did you know that in Islam, there is no assurance of salvation or forgiveness?

Even Muhammad himself said that he didn't know what Allah would do with him. And salvation in Islam is based on works, and the religion is advanced through violence, and dying while killing people makes you a martyr.

Is that who you're trusting? Or maybe you're trusting in Buddha. Did you know there's no hope in Buddhism either? The end goal of Buddhism is the complete loss of your personal individual self.

A stripping away of the physical world. In fact, they have a thing that they say in Buddhism, some of the monks say, there is no misery like the physical existence.

Is that your hope? That's ascetism, severity of the body, and Paul talks about that in Colossians 2, and he said it's of no use.

[28:30] It's actually of no use to prevent the indulgences of the flesh. And seeking enlightenment within is not going to work because we do not inherently have light.

or are you trusting in karma or reincarnation? Both of these are false, and actually on the ground, they are an absolute practical nightmare for the vulnerable.

And some of us who have been perhaps in contact with the folks in India know how this plays out on the ground. that the vulnerable people who are the lowest rungs of society and suffer in pain and degradation and rejection and abuse, when you live in a system of karma and reincarnation, people

say, well, you must deserve this.

If this is your lot, then you must have done something in your past life that deserves this. So we're not going to help you. We're not going to pull you out. This is what you're owed. It's a practical nightmare.

And any idea that all religions lead to God is false because each of them have their own way of salvation and each of them, aside from Christianity, evolves.

[29:50] It involves something that we can merit by our own works. All these religions involve something that we need to do ourselves except Christianity. And each of the founders of each religion, aside from Jesus, was morally corrupt and lies in a grave somewhere.

Or, I think worse than all of these choices, are you trusting in yourself? How well do you know yourself?

Psalms 130 says, If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? Romans 3 says, None is righteous. No, not one. We all know it.

We all know ourselves. We are incapable of contributing anything worthy to merit salvation. Or even if we think we don't need to trust anything, we believe there is no God and no afterlife and no resurrection of the dead to judgment.

Psalms 14 says, The fool says in his heart, there is no God. Yet when all is said and done, when all is stripped away, we were talking about that earlier, Alan, when we face our own mortality, the question of meaning and purpose, the question of God, humanity, of who Jesus is, these things will matter more than we know.

[31:15] You see, it's not like the world has any good reason to doubt the gospel. Of all the historical documents for any person in history, whether religious leader, philosopher, or emperor, there are far more manuscripts and more evidence for Jesus by a country mile.

The writings are confirmed time and again by archaeology and science, and among all the religions in the world, there is actual historical data for Christ in great abundance, greater than we realize.

There's no good reason to doubt the gospels except that we don't want to believe it. And many hard hearts would not believe even if they saw with their eyes and heard with their ears.

Just as only God can heal this blind man to make him see, so too only God can shine light into our hearts and make us understand who Jesus is. And so Jesus asks his own disciples, okay, you don't think that I'm one of the prophets.

You're not trusting in John the Baptist being raised from the dead. Who do you say that I am? And Peter answers, you are the Christ.

[32:35] This is like when the blind man sees people walking about like trees. Peter sees something. It's a real high point. It's absolutely monumental in the gospel that from the lips of a human someone says you are the Christ.

And we don't get it here but in Matthew's account Jesus says, well, this didn't come from your flesh but my Father in Heaven revealed it to you. But they only partially see.

God has opened their blind eyes and overcome the stubborn dullness of their hearts but they only partially see. They still have to understand what it means that Jesus is the Christ. What did he come to do?

As Matthea says in the kingship of Christ Jesus is the expected Messiah in the most unexpected manner. And so the apostles finally understood that Jesus truly was the Messiah but they just had to learn what it means.

They get the first part right who is Jesus and so many folks still get that first part wrong. So many folks still get the who is Jesus wrong.

[33:46] And so the challenge is and maybe you're not trusting in one of the prophets but what Jesus are you trusting in? Did you know that the Mormons think that Jesus is the firstborn spirit child of God and the brother of Satan?

That's what Mormons believe. They are trusting in the wrong Jesus. Did you know that Jehovah's Witnesses think that Jesus is the Archangel Michael? The first created being.

They're trusting in the wrong Jesus. Did you know that Islam thinks that Jesus was a true prophet but only a prophet? Not God. Not God's Son. They're trusting in the wrong Jesus.

You know the world often thinks that Jesus is just a good person or a moral teacher. If you trust in that Jesus he's not going to save you. All of these versions of Jesus cannot save you.

If you're trusting in that kind of Jesus you won't find any hope or salvation or forgiveness or resurrection or life. And so the last point is stay with Jesus and he won't leave you blind.

[34:54] The apostles this is the great thing. After the past few chapters where they're just not getting it and they're not understanding and they're not seeing the apostles are not left behind.

They're not left blind. They're not left in the dark about Jesus. Just like he didn't leave the blind man blind so too he didn't leave his chosen apostles blind to who he was.

And that's so important for us. It's so important for us that he did that for them because it's on account of their witness and testimony that we can know. They are the chosen ones.

They are the witnesses to spread the gospel to the whole world. They are the ones that give us the gospel and the New Testament. So it's important that they get Jesus right.

If they don't get Jesus right we won't get Jesus right. The good thing about my trip to Arbroath was and I'm sad to say this if I was leaving a review the good thing about my trip to Arbroath was that I wasn't left in Arbroath.

[36:01] Even if I couldn't get a direct train I'm so thankful that Jesus didn't leave me blind. Are you not thankful for that? I might not be all the way there on my journey of faith but he has never left me stranded at some station.

If Jesus didn't leave the blind man blind and he brought his disciples to a point of seeing that he was the Christ then we know that he can open blind eyes to see.

If he didn't leave the blind man with partial sight and he didn't leave the disciples with partial understanding will he leave us with partial understanding?

No he will not. Stick with Jesus. And the way that we get Jesus right is that we learn Jesus from the apostles who were his witnesses and who were the first disciples.

And if we stick with Jesus and stick with the apostles teaching he will not leave us behind. And I'm finishing with this.

[37:07] Hendrickson William Hendrickson says the crowd may say this and that but a true believer is one who is willing whenever necessary to fly in the face of popular opinion and to openly express a conviction that is contrary to the masses.

So if you don't yet see who Jesus is pray that God would open your eyes. And if you know someone who is blind to Jesus bring them to Jesus in prayer and beg him that he would open their eyes because only he can.

And if you do see who Jesus is then believe that boldly against the flow of the world and trust him to lead you on. It might not be direct.

We are slower in faith than we think we are and that we would like to be. But he is patient and kind with us and he will never leave us blind and he will never leave us behind.

Let me pray. Lord we thank you for this testimony and recording of your word.

[38:17] And this question that you asked your disciples is so paramount and important for our eternity, for the whole of humanity. Please help each one of us wrestle with this question of who we say that you are.

And please do not leave us blind or behind. Please do not leave us in partial understanding of who you are. But please would you shine your light in our hearts so that we can truly see who you are.

And give us the boldness and conviction and courage to follow you and learn what it means to follow you all the days of our lives. Please do this for your glory and for our good.

We pray in your name. Amen.