

Spiritual blindness

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[0 : 00] Today's passage is from Mark chapter 8 verses 14 to 30 and you'll find that on page 1017 of the church Bibles.

! Mark chapter 8 starting at verse 14 on page 1017. Now they had forgotten to bring bread and they had only one loaf with them in the boat.

And he cautioned them saying, watch out, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod. And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread.

And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened?

Having eyes do you not see? And having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?

[1 : 08] They said to him, twelve. And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up? And they said to him, seven.

And he said to them, do you not yet understand? 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 spat 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.

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.

[2 : 12] 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.

Thanks, Lizzie. And good morning again. Do keep that Bible passage open. And we're just going to pray now as we begin again. Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, thank you that you are real in heaven listening to us.

As we pray, thank you that you are with us by your Holy Spirit. And we pray now as we come to your word, we long to hear your wonderful, life-giving voice into our hearts.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, our subject today is spiritual blindness. Can I point you to our key verse?

[3 : 27] If you've got your Bible still open, just had it read there. Verse 18 of chapter 8. Jesus says to his disciples, Having eyes, do you not see?

And having ears, do you not hear? Our subject is spiritual blindness. The Bible says that we are not born free, but born blind.

Not physically blind, but spiritually blind. And that to see the truth about God, we need a miracle. That's where we're going today.

Now, I don't know whether you've heard about this before. This may come as a surprise to you. Maybe something you've never really thought about. But I hope we're going to see that it is the clear teaching of the gospel of Mark.

Now, to be spiritually blind needs defining, right? What does that mean? Well, I can start with a couple of things that it doesn't mean. To be spiritually blind doesn't mean that we can't understand many things about how this world and this universe works.

[4 : 45] DNA. Stars. The laws of science that God has made. Doesn't mean that we can't understand that. Obviously, we can. It doesn't mean that we can't grasp that there's a creator God or some kind of God.

Doesn't mean that. It doesn't mean that we can't see that there is a real spiritual world. That's not what it means to be spiritually blind.

In fact, for most people across time and space, well, the existence of God, some kind of God is obvious. And certainly, the existence of the spiritual world is obvious, too.

It's really only in our brief little pocket of Western materialism where that hasn't been obvious to us. And that pocket, it looks like, is crumbling before our eyes anyway.

So, just to say there, therefore, that spiritual blindness doesn't simply mean being an atheist or being a materialist. Now, that's not all of what spiritual blindness is.

[5 : 53] No, you can believe in God and be spiritually blind. You can believe in the spiritual world. What the Bible means by spiritual blindness is blindness to God's revelation of himself as he truly is.

And what he's doing in the world. His great plan of salvation. The heart of which is his son, Jesus Christ. The identity and work of Jesus.

That is what we can't see by nature. That is what we can't grasp. That's what we can't understand. It's as if the eyes of our hearts and minds, our spiritual eyes, if you like, are utterly blind to who God really is.

And what he's really doing in the world. I.e., the gospel. Now, I wonder what you make of that. Does that tally with your experience of life?

Or of the world? It may be that you're here just, you know, as a visitor and you're sort of looking into the Christian faith. It's just a really weird idea. Well, hopefully, it will start to make sense of a few things to you.

[7 : 09] Two points today. Firstly, the spiritual blindness of the disciples. Just look down again at that verse 18 that I read out just a second ago.

Jesus says to his disciples. He's speaking to the 12 disciples here. He says, having eyes, that is having spiritual eyes, having physical eyes, do you not see spiritually?

Having physical ears, do you not hear spiritually? Now, in chapter 8 of Mark's gospel, we're halfway through Jesus' ministry.

We reach a crucial point in the relationship between Jesus and his 12 closest followers. And it's a massive shock. It's a massive shock. All this time, these 12 men had had a front row seat of Jesus' life and ministry.

They'd seen private miracles. Jesus had brought them in to see the raising of Jairus' daughter. They'd seen him calm the storm on the boat.

[8 : 18] But as the brightness of Jesus' identity and power has been being turned up in chapters 4 to 8 of Mark, their blindness to his true identity becomes more and more obvious.

And by chapter 8, they've made no progress. Come back to chapter 4, verse 41. And this is just after the calming of the storm.

Jesus has just calmed the storm and they say to him, they say, who is this then that even the wind and the sea obey him? Now, who is this is the right question.

But then come to chapter 6, verse 52. Chapter 6, verse 52. Now, they've just seen the feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus walking on water.

But look what it says. They did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. In other words, they don't understand what these miracles mean about Jesus.

[9 : 38] They've seen the miracles, but they don't understand what they mean. That he is the God of the Old Testament, the long-promised Messiah. Well, you might think they're just being slow.

They'll get there in the end. But then when you get to the feeding of the 4,000, which is a separate occasion in chapter 8, just look down with me at chapter 8, verses 2.

Mark tells this with almost a comic tone in verse 2. Jesus looks around and says, I have compassion on this crowd, because they've been with me three days and have had nothing to eat.

And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. And some of them have come from far away. And his disciples answered him, How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?

Now, we're meant to be thinking as readers, Are you serious? You've just seen him do this, the feeding of the 5,000.

[10 : 45] And now they ask him that question. I've been enjoying thinking of the disciples writing this down. Now, Mark, who wrote this gospel, was Peter's understudy.

And probably heard most of these events from Peter. Now, imagine Peter telling Mark of this event. Yeah. We even said to him at the second one, How can one feed these people with bread in this desolate place?

Even the feeding of the 5,000. They'd seen so much of Jesus. And Jesus says to them, You give them something to eat. I think prompting them to say, No, but maybe you can.

And instead they say, How can we spend 10,000 pounds on food? So they were blind at the feeding of the 5,000.

They were blind at the feeding of the 4,000 to Jesus, his identity. And then the nail in the coffin of their blindness is the third occasion where there's a lack of bread. And look at verse 14.

[11 : 52] They had forgotten to bring bread. And they had only one loaf with them on the boat. Jesus cautioned them saying, Watch out.

Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod. And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread. Here they are on the boat.

And they said, Logistical questions.

When I broke the five loaves for the 5,000, how many baskets were left? Did you take up? They said, Twelve. Correct. And the seven for the 4,000, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?

They said to him, Seven. That's right. And he said to them, Do you not yet understand? What does he mean there? Do you not yet understand who I am?

[13 : 17] They know what happened. They saw the details. They had physical eyes. But their spiritual eyes were closed. They didn't understand what the miracles mean about Jesus.

Now isn't that so contemporary? The point is this. It was not just Herod who was blind back in chapter 6.

It was not just the Pharisees who were blind. But even the disciples themselves were blind. Did you realize that? And one of the things that this means is that the human problem is worse than we think.

We were looking last week at the sinful human heart. Jesus exposing our hearts full of uncleanness, just pumping out sin.

It's what we're all like by nature. We need a saviour who can cleanse us. But the problem is worse than that because we can't even see the saviour who stands before us offering to cleanse us.

[14 : 27] We can't understand his words. Spiritual blindness. Spiritual deafness. It was true of me. I remember the first 14 years of my life I was brought to church by my parents.

I actually spent five years of those five years between eight and 13 singing these words every single day apart from the odd one off.

Even had to sing them on Christmas Day. Did they mean anything to me? No. Spiritually blind. Remember, do you remember back at the beginning of Mark's gospel?

chapter 1, verse 15. Jesus comes in and he's preaching and he says, repent and believe. The kingdom is at hand.

Repent and believe the gospel. By chapter 8, we've realized that the answer is we can't by nature. because we're blind to the king and we're blind to the kingdom that he's bringing.

[15 : 40] And so the fall of Genesis 3 is much deeper and much worse than we may think because there is not just one problem. our sinful hearts.

There are two problems. Our sinful hearts and our blind eyes and deaf ears. Well, secondly, the miracle of Jesus.

Jesus does two miracles here. He heals a deaf man which we didn't have read and he heals a blind man. And these miracles are clearly meant to be understood together.

Just come back to chapter 7, verse 32 and look down with me there. They brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment and begged him to lay his hand on him.

And taking him aside from the crowd privately, Jesus put his fingers in his ears and after spitting, touched his tongue and looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, Ephatha, that is, be opened.

[16 : 49] And his ears were opened and his tongue released and he spoke plainly. Just have a look at the blind man and see if you can see any similarities in these miracles.

The blind man in chapter 8, verse 23, he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village and when he'd spat on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked, 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 and his sight was restored and he saw everything clearly.

What's going on here? Well, like all of Jesus' miracles, they are highly symbolic and point to a greater reality. And the reality they point to is that Jesus' work is to give spiritual understanding and spiritual sight.

Just see the careful placement of the blind man healing just before we've had the disciples not understanding and then straight afterwards look down with me at the question Jesus asks his disciples in verse 27, who do people say that I am?

[18 : 07] They told him John the Baptist and Elijah and the prophets. Verse 29, who do you say that I am? For the first time in the gospel Peter gets it right.

He answers him, you are the Christ. The point is it takes a miracle for Peter to understand who Jesus really is.

The long promised Messiah, the Son of God. God the shepherd who has come for his sheep. Well in a second we're just going to think about some of the implications of this but before we do I just want us to notice a couple of things about these miracles.

Firstly, did you see that these are the only two miracles that seem to be hard for Jesus to do? He seems to have some kind of struggle with them that he hasn't had with any of them.

I mean just think speaking to the wind and the waves, be still, get up to Jairus' daughter. But just come and look again at verse 33 of chapter 7.

[19 : 17] He takes the man aside, he sort of touches his ears and spits and touches his tongue and then he sighs, the only one he sighs for, he sighs and looks up to heaven and says, be opened.

As if he's finding it a greater act of power. And then also with the blind man, you know, none of the other miracles does it take Jesus two goes to do.

Do you see? Firstly, he can see something and then secondly, he can see clearly. Now, could Jesus have healed the physical deafness and blindness of these people with a word?

I take it, yes, absolutely. If he can speak to the sea and to the winds, I take it he can speak to a couple of eardrums and some optical nerves.

Why did he do this deliberately like this? to convey to us the point, what is the point? That the work of opening deaf spiritual ears and the work of opening deaf blind spiritual eyes needs a greater work of God even than raising the dead.

[20 : 44] Do you see? So deep and entrenched is our spiritual blindness. it takes a greater power to take it away.

Greater works than these will you do, he said to his disciples in John. Now, this is not what we think, is it? We don't think this is the miracle of God that takes the greatest power of God but our spiritual problems are far greater than our bodily ones.

Do you realize that? God now, the point is that spiritual sight takes a great miracle, the greatest miracle of them all.

Where are you looking to see the greatest miracles of God today? Well, when a person realizes who Jesus really is, repents of their sin and comes to him as their saviour and Lord, well, that is when we should stand and go in awe and go, wow, a great work of God, a great miracle, the greatest of all miracles.

Briefly, I just want us to notice a second detail of these miracles. I just think it's so beautiful the way Jesus does them. Do you see they're both private?

[22 : 10] Verse 33 of chapter 7, he takes this man aside, away from the crowd privately. And the same in chapter 8 with the blind man.

He leads him by the hand out of the village and takes him away privately. It's private, it's personal. What's the point? I think the point is that what really happens when a person becomes a Christian is that the God of the universe takes an individual aside by the hand and opens his or her eyes in person.

That is a breathtaking truth. And this is what we see around us in fact as one by one people in Dulwich, people in the city, people across London, people across the world come to faith in Jesus and put their trust in him.

it's not usually whole cities, it's not usually whole companies or schools or whole villages, individual by individual by individual.

That is the work of Jesus in the world. I'm just going to pause on two implications. Firstly, this affects what we expect to see in the world around us.

[23 : 39] You know, how often it seems that the gospel falls on deaf ears. Have you experienced that? Well, that's because it is falling on deaf ears.

Have you ever asked, how can people be so involved in church all their lives? You know, be the dean of a cathedral, a church warden for years, know the words of the Bible backwards, and yet know evidence of spiritual life, no personal relationship with Jesus?

How can a child grow up in a loving Christian home, go to all the camps, and yet never make a personal response? At least until this point.

Because hearing the words of the gospel, it's essential, but it's not enough. We need a miracle. people cannot obviously, from this truth, people cannot be argued or persuaded into the kingdom.

And sometimes churches can go off in this direction, you know, and put all the emphasis on we've got to get the best arguments, the best reasoning, it's all about that, and then people will become Christians.

[24 : 59] Well, persuasion and reasoning with biblical arguments has its place. the gospel contains lots of reasoned evidence, but people need a miracle. What people need is the straightforward word of God, and a miracle of the Lord Jesus by his spirit.

You know, sometimes you can have one or the other kind of churches or approaches, can't you? You know, either it's all about proclamation, if we just proclaim the gospel, or forget about proclamation, just pray.

Well, actually we can see that we need both. And I wonder if for us at Grace Church, it might be that the importance of prayer is something we need to remember. You know, proclamation without prayer is to misunderstand the depth of the problem.

If we love our family, friends, if we love our colleagues, we will pray for them. that's why we meet at 10 o'clock on a Sunday to pray. Pray for this area.

Pray for individuals. Please come and join us if you'd like to. Well, firstly, it affects what we see around us. But secondly, and this is where I want to finish, is it affects how we understand our own experience of God.

[26 : 19] it affects how we understand our own experience of God. It affects that. Now, if we're Christian here today, we can look back and understand what has really happened in our lives.

Not only did we need the Son of God to die for us, we needed his Spirit to open our blind eyes. And if today we know Jesus as Savior and Lord, well, that is a great miracle of God in your life and mine.

Just think of the privilege. We were blind. You were blind. I was blind. He took us aside as it were by the hand in person.

He opened your eyes, eyes that you could never open, to see him for who he really is. and to understand what he's really done for you.

He unstopped your ears that couldn't understand the words of the Bible or the gospel, so that you began to hear the voice of God speak to your hearts as you read the Bible.

[27 : 39] Well, many privileges are bestowed on people by people. people, you know, promotion, recognition at work or at school, the England captaincy, the knighthood, Sir Gareth, Southgate.

Many privileges are bestowed on people by people, but none greater than the love of God in opening our eyes that we might believe and follow the Savior.

If you're Christian, do you know the privilege and the extent of God's grace to you? Jesus has been your double Savior. I remember a conversation with someone around the table, and he'd recently come to faith as a Christian, and he said, sometimes I just wonder, why me?

Why me? And the answer is, there is no answer, except that God has set his love on you. I think also this helps us to understand our experience of God today.

That is, I don't think we should be surprised when we find the Bible hard to understand, even as Christians. We were blind. Or if sometimes Jesus is hard to see, do you ever feel like it's with your spiritual eyes, it's like seeing a cloudy figure?

[29 : 11] the gospel. I take it the gradual healing of this blind man speaks of a lifelong work of God to open and open and open and open until one day we will see him face to face.

Don't be surprised when we find the Bible hard to understand. We were blind. God is opening our eyes bit by bit. If we're looking into the Christian faith, perhaps you feel the same, you just don't understand the Bible at all, you've tried to read it, get nowhere, we're blind by nature.

But the Bible says, seek and you will find, ask and it will be opened to you. So pray, Lord, if you're there, open my eyes.

And do you know what? He loves to do that. Perhaps you feel you're beginning to see shapes and shadows, beginning to sense that Jesus is real, that the gospel is true, but still so much haziness and uncertainty.

Well, like the blind man who could see the trees. That is good news for you because it means that God is at work in your life. Pray, Lord, open my eyes.

[30 : 38] Well, let's pause for a second as we reflect on some of these things and then I'll close us in prayer. Our Heavenly Father, we realize that we had a double problem and we need a double Savior, that our problem is our hearts, that our problem is also though our blindness.

But we praise you that you have provided a double Savior, who has come to lay down his life to cleanse our hearts forever, to forgive us. But not only that, to send his spirit to open our blind eyes one by one, that we might see and believe in him.

We want to praise you again for your undeserved grace in our lives. Lord, we want to pray that you would continue to open our eyes to see the glory of Jesus, who he really is, and what he's really done.

The eternal king who will reign forever, who laid down his life for sin, who rose again triumphant to defeat death, and who is coming back to bring in his kingdom once and for all.

Lord, we pray these things, Father, in the name of Jesus. Amen.