

Hearing Jesus' Healing Words

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 March 2023

Preacher: Tom Schmidt

[0 : 0 0] Good morning. In Psalm 119, the psalmist prays to God. He says, Oh, how I love your law. It is my meditation all the day. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts. I hold back my feet from every evil way in order to keep your word. I do not turn aside from your rules, for you have taught me. How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth. Through your precepts, I get understanding. Therefore, I hate every false way. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. The psalmist tells us that God's law is a lamp unto our feet. His scriptures are sweet in our mouth. By his word, we get wisdom, and by his word, we get life. And in his words, spiritual wonders may always be found. And so after all this, the psalmist then adds this little prayer.

Father, open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. And this will be our prayer today. This morning, we read a brief passage from the Gospel of Mark about Jesus healing a deaf man. But though Jesus works a miracle of healing in this passage, how he works it can come across sometimes as a little strange or confusing to us. At first sight, it may not seem to you that there are wondrous things in this passage. But God promises that wondrous things can always be found in all of his words. So as we look at this passage, we will do so with that prayer in our hearts from the psalmist. Oh Lord, open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. The passage is from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 7, verses 31 through 37. And it reads like this. That's chapter 7, verses 31 through 37 of the Gospel of Mark.

Then he, Jesus, returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee in the region of Decapolis. And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. And they begged him to lay his hand on him. And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears and after spitting, touched his tongue. And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, Ephthatha, that is, be opened. And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak. In the story we just heard, Jesus heals a man who is deaf and mute.

[3 : 2 4] And now, Jesus does a lot of things like this in the Gospels. But as I said, this particular story often strikes people as somehow different or puzzling, possibly even a little weird. There are a few reasons for this. The most obvious one is in verse 33, where Jesus spits and then touches the man's tongue. Why does he do that? If we're honest, this makes some of us a little uncomfortable and seems a little gross. There's some other odd things, too. When healing the man, Jesus performs all these physical actions. He touches the man's ears. He touches his tongue. He looks up to heaven. He sighs.

We know from other miracles that Jesus didn't have to do all those things. We knew that he didn't like making a show of things. With just a simple touch, he worked even greater miracles. With just a word of command, he raised Lazarus from the dead. In fact, Jesus often tries to hide his miracles and make sure people don't spread news about them. But this time, with this miracle, he has all these gesticulations going on. And there are other things also that are a little puzzling. Why doesn't he want people to speak about this miracle? And what about that strange, almost unpronounceable word, epitha, that Mark records Jesus as saying? What's going on here? Well, the first thing to do when interpreting this passage is the same thing you should do when interpreting any passage of Scripture that is confusing to you. You should pray that prayer of the psalmist. Oh, Lord, open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. God has promised that there are wonders

in every passage of

Scripture. So whenever you find something confusing in the Scriptures, ask God to open your eyes, open your ears, soften your heart, and humble your soul to see the wonders that are there. And over the years, I've had many times when my eyes were too weak or my ears too hard of hearing. In my study of the Scriptures, where there have been words or verses or passages or even whole books of Scripture that I did not understand or that I did not like and which I stumbled. But time and again, God opened my eyes and my ears to reveal many spiritual wonders. So let's do this now. Let's pray together and ask God to open our eyes and let's see what's hidden in his Word together in the Gospel of Mark. Join me in prayer.

Father, Father, we come before you and, Lord, we confess that our eyes are weak and our ears are hard of hearing to see and to hear your Word. And we ask that you would anoint us with your Holy Spirit to enable us, Lord, to look upon your shining self and to hear your softly spoken words. Lord, we submit to you in this. And we pray this in the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen. So to find all of the wonders in this passage, let's work through it verse by verse. We'll start with verse 31 in chapter 7. Verse 31, Then he, Jesus, returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee in the region of Decapolis. In verse 31, Jesus is in the north of Israel. He's in Gentile country. He's near the cities of Tyre and Sidon. This is up where modern Lebanon is today. Jesus, as we saw last week, he's been resting there. And he comes down south to the territory near the Sea of Galilee. Now, the Sea of Galilee is very familiar to Jesus. It's very familiar territory. But Mark tells us that Jesus departs from his normal practice. Instead of ministering on the western side of the Sea of Galilee, which was heavily Jewish, he instead is ministering in the Decapolis, which is on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. And this is an area dominated by Gentiles.

[7 : 28] What this means is that many of the people to whom Jesus was ministering were likely Gentiles and not Jewish. And this little fact casts this story in a different light. It suggests that the local residents may not have been as familiar with reports of Jesus as the Jewish inhabitants on the western side of the Sea of Galilee. And it suggests they may not have known as much or much at all about Jesus's teachings. Let's see what happens next in verse 32. And they brought to Jesus a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. And they begged him to lay his hand on him.

In verse 32, there occurs something very typical when Jesus comes to a new place. People hear that a great healer has come to town. So they bring all those with various ailments to him to see what he can do with them. And this time, they bring a man who was deaf and who spoke with difficulty. Now the fact that this man was deaf, but yet still could speak with some difficulty, this fact tells us that the man probably lost his hearing when he was a small child. If he had been born deaf, he probably would not have been able to speak at all. Perhaps he got a very high fever and woke up one day without his hearing while he was a toddler or a very little boy. We can infer more about this man too. Because he was deaf, he likely had an almost impossible time communicating with others. And this is because there was no sign language back then. There was also no therapy for people who were deaf. And on account of this, the deaf man could barely speak. And moreover, there was no formal training for reading lips. So this man would have passed through life only understanding a small percentage of what was going on. People would have had trouble communicating with him and he would have had a terrible time communicating with others. He probably spent most of his time being ignored and being alone. It was probably a very hard life and likely a very lonely life.

And Mark tells us in verse 32 that the crowd brings this man to Jesus and begs him to heal the man. Notice here in the passage that the man is not the one asking to be healed or even motioning or gesturing to be healed. This is another indication that this man has a difficult time communicating and people also had a difficult time communicating with him. But this little observation also gives us a clue about what is really going on here. It's not too much to imagine that this man may not have even known exactly why he was standing before Jesus. Mark implies that it is not the man who goes out and seeks Jesus.

The crowd does. It's not the man who approaches Jesus. The crowd does. The man is not trying to rudimentarily communicate that he needs healing. Instead the crowd begs Jesus to heal him. And Jesus is also ministering in an area where he was likely relatively unknown. So the man may not have known about Jesus even if he could hear and speak. But if it's true that this man may not know entirely why he's standing before Jesus, then what do you think is going through his mind as he looks at Jesus? In fact, let's go back a few steps. What do you think it was like for this deaf man

when a crowd showed up and hurried him off to some unknown direction? Imagine in your mind all of a sudden you are being jostled, you are led along, you are hurried, you're pushed. Imagine if this happened to you. You've lived your life deaf and mute in the ancient world. You've been ignored and lonely with few if anyone to communicate with. And then suddenly a crowd comes and hurries you off. You don't understand what is happening. Where are they taking me, you wonder? What is going on? And now you're standing before a strange man while a crowd surrounds you. Who is this man? What is going on, you're wondering? It is probably fair to say that the deaf man is feeling some uncertainty or fear or anxiety, worry and confusion. And even if he understood what was going on, it must have been terribly fearful being surrounded by so much chaos without being able to hear or to communicate. And now he stands before this strange man. Let's see what Jesus does in verse 33.

Verse 33, the first part says, And Jesus, taking him aside from the crowd privately. Well, Jesus, the first thing he does is to calm the situation down. He settles everything. He brings the man aside privately and reassures the man. The man is probably relieved and put at ease. Now it's just him and Jesus. And as we learn later in the passage, a few other people as well. And then verse 33 goes on. He put his fingers into his ears and after spitting, touched his tongue. And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, Ephatha, that is, be opened.

[12:50] All right, it's in this verse that we get to some of those odd bits. Because here Jesus puts his fingers into the man's ears. He spits and he touches the man's tongue. Some Bible translations say that Jesus touched the man's tongue with the spit. But the Greek does not actually say this. But either way, what's going on here? Why is Jesus touching the man's ears and even reaching his fingers into them?

And why is he touching this man's mouth and even reaching his finger in to touch his tongue? And why does he spit? Well, to understand all this, we need to view this story through the eyes of the deaf and mute man. And I mean this somewhat literally. Because remember that this man cannot hear. He relies on a sense of sight and a sense of touch far more than most. So let's envision this story from his point of view, through his eyes and his sense of touch. And I think all will be revealed. The man is standing alone in front of Jesus. Jesus puts his fingers in the man's ears. What would the man think about that? Well, naturally, he would think, Jesus is touching the part of me that does not work properly. And then Jesus spits. Now, in our culture, spitting is viewed as something unclean or gross. It's unhygienic. It's rude. It's offensive.

And this was also true in the ancient world. This is why when Jesus went to the cross, the high priests tried to humiliate him by spitting on him. But in the Greco-Roman world, saliva was also thought of as having healing or restorative properties. There are, in fact, whole chapters in ancient literature devoted to the healing properties of saliva. And unfortunately, I've read some of these. But in this way, the ancients thought of saliva like how we think of something like manure. Normally, we find manure to be gross and off-putting, in certain contexts even offensive.

But we also agree that manure can be a very desirable thing when used for certain purposes, like fertilizer for crops and gardens. So like manure, the ancients thought of saliva in the same way. In certain contexts, it was offensive and gross. But in medical settings, it could be quite useful. So putting all this together, what this means is that when Jesus spits, the deaf and mute man would see him spitting right after he touched his ears. And this would probably cause the man to think of healing, restoration, and rejuvenation. Perhaps he might begin to wonder, is Jesus going to heal my ears?

[15:47] Then, after Jesus spits, the man sees and feels Jesus touch his tongue. And the man thinks, I can't speak well. And Jesus is touching the other part of my body that does not work properly.

And this prompts the man to think, is Jesus also going to heal my tongue and let me speak? Next, the man sees Jesus looking up to heaven. Now, what is one of the first things that comes to our mind when we think of heaven?

We think of God. And so the man seeing Jesus look up to heaven would be prompted to think, Jesus is focusing on God. Afterwards, the man sees Jesus sighing deeply. To do that, he needed to fill his lungs with air. This is a visible action. The man could have seen Jesus' chest expanding. He could see his shoulders rising a little bit. We do this when we're getting ready to do or say something very important. We take a deep breath to ready ourselves. The man sees Jesus doing this while he's looking up to heaven. And the man puts both of these together and he thinks, Jesus

is getting ready to say something to heaven. Perhaps he's getting ready to pray an important prayer to God.

Let's go over this again. The deaf and mute man's first encounter with Jesus is when Jesus caringly takes him aside from the large crowd to put him at ease. And then he sees and he feels Jesus put his finger in his ears. And then he sees Jesus spit, which as I said, indicates healing.

Then he sees and feels Jesus touch his tongue. Then Jesus looks up to heaven. And then he sees Jesus fill his lungs with air. What is Jesus doing here? Well, I've wrestled with this passage for many years.

[17 : 35] And I keep being led back to the same inescapable conclusion. Jesus seems to be trying to communicate with this man who cannot hear. But instead of speaking with audible words, he speaks with him via rudimentary sign language. Jesus speaks with visible movements and with physical touch.

And there's a good chance that no one, especially no stranger, had ever done something like this for this man. But Jesus understands this man's struggles. He sees his weakness and he comforts the man. He communicates to the man that he's going to help him. Throughout this whole process, he's telling the man he's going to heal him. He's going to heal his ears so he can hear. He's going to heal his tongue so he can speak. And this isn't going to be by some magic spell.

This is going to be from the God of heaven. This is going to be through prayer. Consider the love that Jesus had for this man. Consider how this man may have felt loved by Jesus. Jesus takes time away from the demands of his day to give his attention to this disabled man and to speak with him in a way that the deaf man could understand. We know that Jesus could have snapped his fingers and healed the man. But he didn't. He first took time to love the man. And I think it is fair to say that this act of love is the first miracle Jesus did for this man. And this is typical of Jesus. We read in the Gospels that out of the same love, Jesus touches a leper who had not felt touch in years. With the same love, when Jesus was at a dinner party and a disabled man was present, he told the host he should have invited that disabled man as the guest of honor. We read further that Jesus welcomes little children, though others rejected them. He speaks with a despised Samaritan woman. He allows an unclean and desperate woman to touch his garment for healing. And I should say too, Scripture testifies that most of all Jesus, while seeing all of your sins, went to the cross to wipe them away.

But I want to return to Jesus and this deaf man for a moment. If Jesus is indeed endeavoring to communicate with this man, and I think he is, then we should spend a little more time on how remarkable this is. These rudimentary signs Jesus made would have impacted this deaf man powerfully. We are fortunate to have an account from history about what it is like to be unable to speak or communicate, and then what it is like to gain this ability when someone attempts to make physical signs to you as Jesus was doing with this deaf man. And this account comes from a woman, some of you might recognize this name, named Helen Keller. And her story will help us to understand this deaf man and what it was like for him and what Jesus did for him by physically signing.

Helen was born about 1880. When she was two years old, she grew gravely ill, and her fever caused her to become deaf and blind. And for five years, until she was seven years old, Helen went through life alone, without speech or communication, and given to tantrums and raging.

[21 : 10] In her autobiography, she says that one day a teacher named Ann Sullivan arrived at her house, and Ann attempted to start signing into Helen's hands.

Signing into someone's hands is when you trace letters into someone's hands to spell a word. And to do this, Ann first gave Helen a porcelain doll as a gift, and then spelled the word doll into Helen's hands. As Helen relates years later, she did not understand.

And grew quickly frustrated and smashed the porcelain doll on the ground. Undeterred, Ann gently led Helen outside. And then while Helen was feeling cool water pour over her hands, Ann signed the word water into her hands. And then for the first time, Helen understood that Ann Sullivan was communicating with her.

Ann Helen writes this, That living word awakened my soul. It gave it light, hope, joy, and set it free. I left the well eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house, every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life.

[22 : 27] That was because I saw everything with the strange new sight that had come to me. On entering the door, I remembered the doll I had broken. I felt my way to the hearth and picked up the

pieces.

I tried vainly to put them together. And then my eyes filled with tears. For I realized what I had done. And for the first time, I felt repentance and sorrow.

In Helen's account, a simple word to a wordless soul awakened her and gave her life and joy. And in a manner of speaking, even gave her the knowledge of her sins.

Forever afterwards, Helen would call this day her soul's birthday. One word to a wordless soul did this. How much more, therefore, did Jesus do for this deaf and mute man?

How much more does Jesus do for you? After all, Jesus does not simply speak true words to you. He is the true word for you.

[23 : 37] Jesus is the word of God made flesh. He is the word of God descending to earth and becoming like us in order to reach us and to communicate with us and to save us from our sins.

And Jesus is the word of God. It is he who speaks to the deaf man, not with audible words, but with words he can understand. Friends, is not this a beautiful picture of the incarnation of Jesus, the Son of God?

And this is what Jesus does for all of you. Jesus speaks to all of you in ways you can understand. Now, of course, the deaf and mute man was a special case.

Jesus couldn't speak to him with audible words, so he used physical signing. But in truth, you're all special cases. And Jesus speaks to all of you in your own language with images that you can understand so that you can be brought to repentance.

Consider all the ways Jesus describes himself in the scriptures. He is the good shepherd who lays his life down for his sheep. He is the mother hen who gathers her chicks under her wings.

[24 : 48] He is the father who forgives the wayward son. He is the woman looking for the lost coin. He is the husband who welcomes back the unfaithful wife. He is the vine and you are the branches.

He is a wellspring and you are thirsty. He is a healer and you are sick. He is light and you are darkness. He is the word of God and you are deaf and mute and you cannot hear him and you cannot understand his message.

So he speaks in a way that you can hear. Have you heard God lately? Are you listening for his voice?

Are you listening to his voice? Sometimes he speaks words of comfort, sometimes encouragement, sometimes forgiveness, but sometimes rebuke, sometimes words of command.

What is he saying to you? Because he is speaking to you, sometimes, or just heart of hearing or heart of heart. And his constant call to every one of you is to repent of your sins and to be comforted by his Holy Spirit whom he has sent into your hearts and to follow Jesus with joyfulness.

[26 : 04] Are you listening to him today? Let's return to our gospel passage because Jesus is not done speaking to this man.

Let's see what he does next. Verse 34, And looking up to heaven, Jesus sighed and says to the man, Ephphithah, that is, be opened. And his ears were opened and his tongue was released and he spoke plainly.

Jesus says this odd little word, Ephphithah. This word is Aramaic for be opened. Jesus' native language was Aramaic and here Mark spells out Jesus' Aramaic phrase and then translates it into Greek for his readers.

So in our English Bibles, we have the practice of spelling out the Aramaic word like Mark did and then we translate it into English. But this linguistic information aside, what's really remarkable about all of this is that this word, be opened, was the first word this man had ever heard or at least the first word he'd heard in a long time.

And thanks to modern medicine, we have examples of people who are deaf and then who are given the ability to hear like this man was given miraculously by Jesus. And you can go on the internet, you can find videos of people hearing voices for the first time and if you do, you'll see that the experience is often completely overwhelming.

[27 : 26] They're surrounded by sounds. At long last, they hear voices of their loved ones. It's so overwhelming and new that their brain has to acclimate and learn how to process the sounds. Often people break down sobbing when they're given the gift of hearing for the first time.

It's amazing to watch and this man probably had a similar reaction but let's see what Jesus says. In verse 36, and Jesus charged them to tell no one.

Jesus heals this man of deafness and the first thing he tells him is not to tell anyone. This would have been a very difficult command to obey.

This man has just miraculously gained the ability to hear and to speak and Jesus tells him that he can't share this. Can you imagine? Can you imagine you can finally speak, you're miraculously healed by Jesus and Jesus doesn't want you telling anybody.

And Jesus tells the same thing not just to the man but the few others who witnessed the miracle. He commands them not to tell anyone. But Mark goes on in verse 36 and 37. He says, but the more he charged them the more zealously they proclaimed it and they were astonished beyond measure saying he's done all things well.

[28 : 42] He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak. Here we see that though Jesus commands people not to spread around the news of his miracles all the more do they proclaim it.

So the question needs to be asked why did Jesus not want people to speak about his miracles? Jesus just gave the mute man this miraculous ability to speak. Why doesn't he want him to speak about it?

And what should we make of the people who disobey Jesus here? He told them not to tell anyone and then they go and do it anyway but they're saying good things about Jesus. They compliment Jesus.

They praise him. They say he's done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak. What's so bad about that? Well practically speaking what's so bad about saying those things is that Jesus told them not to do it.

And friends how often we commit similar things when we think we know better than God. Then we act much like Saul the king in the Old Testament where he disobeys God's command so that he could offer a sacrifice to God and the prophet Samuel rebuked him and said obedience is better than sacrifice.

[29 : 55] Remember that in your walk with Christ God will sometimes command you to do things you don't always fully understand. But this is just like when you read the scriptures and you come to a difficult passage which you don't fully understand.

In both situations you should do the very same thing. Humble yourself. submit to God. Obey him. And pray that prayer the psalmist prayed earlier O Lord open my eyes that I may see wondrous things in your law.

And we might also pray like this deaf man would have prayed O Lord open my ears that I may hear wondrous things in your law. Because there are always reasons why God commands things.

And sometimes these reasons are for us to hear and to know on the other side of eternity. But God also delights in sharing his purposes with his children. And he will often explain his commands if you come to him in humility and with patience.

In the case of the deaf and mute man Jesus commands the man and others around not to speak of his miracles. And this is just the same old thing Jesus does many times throughout the gospels where he tells people not to speak about his miracles.

[31 : 11] And if we read those passages there may be observed a profound gospel centered reason for why Jesus often wants his miracles to be kept secret.

The passages as a whole make clear that the whole point of Jesus' ministry is ultimately not earthly signs and wonders. The whole purpose of Jesus' ministry first, last and all the time is nothing else than the forgiveness of sins and the glory of God.

God. This is the entire purpose for Jesus going to the cross and rising from the dead. And as good and wonderful as Jesus' miraculous ministry was and it was wonderful and some of us have experienced true miracles but as wonderful as these things are they do not compare with the ministry of Jesus for forgiving sins and bringing the sinner into newness of life for the glory of God. God. This is why Jesus repeatedly says a wicked generation seeks for a sign. This is why when a paralyzed man was brought to Jesus the first thing he did was not to heal him but to say son your sins are forgiven.

This is why when Jesus healed a blind man he said you have been made well stop sinning or something worse may happen to you. This is why when a crowd of people sought Jesus out he said truly truly I say to you you are seeking me not because you saw signs but because you ate and were filled.

[32 : 46] For they had eaten the spiritual food that Jesus had given to them. This is why when a deaf and mute man was brought to Jesus he did not skip straight to the miracle he saw that what

this man needed above all else was for fellowship and reconciliation with God.

So Jesus took him aside away from the crowd and he patiently spoke to him with physical signs which the man could understand and he communicated that this miracle would be by the God of heaven and in doing this Jesus prepared this man's heart for accepting the gospel that God had come down to save those who are lost.

But what about you? How is Jesus taking you aside away from the crowd today? What is he communicating to you? How is he preparing your heart for repentance?

What is his command to you? If his message is difficult to understand are you praying O Lord open my eyes that I may see wondrous things in your law?

Or like this deaf and mute man are you praying O Lord open my ears that I may hear wondrous things? Are you praying O Lord loosen my tongue that I may proclaim wondrous things?

[34 : 06] If you truly pray these things then God will make you to be his disciple. And this is what Isaiah the prophet declared in chapter 50 of his book.

He says Let's pray for these things now.

O Father in heaven we come to you Lord and we are hard of hearing we are slow of speech our eyes are dim and it is difficult for us to understand you and to seek you and we pray that you would reach down and awaken our ears and our eyes to behold what you have for us.

Loosen our tongues that we can proclaim your gospel message of forgiveness. Show us Lord show us Lord how we can share your love and your precious truth and your scriptures with this world.

Help us to delight in your word and we pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen. Amen.