



THE BEREIA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

Opening Blind Eyes

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One of the more puzzling passages in Mark—and it’s unique to that Gospel—is Mark 8.22–26. Jesus and his disciples arrived in Bethsaida, on the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. As had happened in the Decapolis (Mark 7.31–37), the local residents brought a man for Jesus to heal, this time a blind man (8.22). As in the prior incident, Jesus first led the man out of the village. Was this to enter his thought world and establish a personal relationship (Lane 1974, 285)? Or to separate him from the tension with the Pharisees so he could tend to him without interruption (Hurtado 1989, 134)? Mark doesn’t say. But he does say that, once outside the village, Jesus “spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him,” and then “asked him, ‘Do you see anything?’” (v. 23).

Here’s where the story takes a surprising turn. We expect, as Mark has written before, that the man’s sight will be restored “immediately” (cf. 1.42; 2.12; 5.29, 42). But instead, “he looked up and said, ‘I see people, but they look like trees, walking’” (v. 24). Jesus then laid his hands on him a second time, “and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly” (v. 25).

What are we to make of this? Why was his healing not immediate? Did Jesus falter? Was his power inadequate on this occasion? The cure perhaps more difficult than he expected? These are among the questions that have been asked about this story. As we think about them—and factor the context of Mark into our thinking—we should notice three things.

First, Mark’s telling reinforces our conviction that the gospels are reporting events that actually occurred, as they occurred. The writers are admittedly selective in what they report (cf. Luke 1.1–4; John 20.30–31; 21.25), and they obviously have a theological viewpoint they want their readers to accept. But neither of those realities imply inaccuracy or fabrication. The case before us illustrates their concern for accuracy; it is hard to imagine that someone creating a God-man, or embellishing the exploits of a sage to cast him as divine (as some critics have alleged), would make up a story that risked presenting that person as weak or inadequate. Mark doesn’t try to dress up what happened; he simply reports it.

But, second, he does so in a way that reinforces the point that Jesus’ miracles were not just power displays by a wonder-worker; they were “‘acted parables’ of the miracle of faith” (Hooker 1991, 198). The reports of his works are told to show Jesus’ nature and character. They also help us see what coming to faith entails. John’s record of a similar granting of sight illustrates the point: he told it “to show the gradual development of the healed man’s faith in Jesus in contrast

to the blindness of the Pharisees” (Hooker 1991, 197) (cf. John 9.17–18, 24–30, 35–38, 40–41).

Our third observation, then, is that Mark implies what John makes explicit, a conclusion we can confirm from Mark’s context. The Pharisees rejected Jesus’ signs, even as they asked for more spectacular ones (Mark 8.11–14); they didn’t see. The disciples’ sight was better, but only partial. They weren’t like the Pharisees, but their response to Jesus’ warning about the leaven of the those critics prompted Jesus to ask them, “Do you not yet understand?” (8.21). Even later, after they ventured to declare their belief that Jesus was “the Christ” (8.29), it took some time for them to grasp what that meant for Jesus’ mission and following him (8.31–33; 9.31–32; 10.32–45). Like the Bethsaida blind man, their vision was slow to clear.

What does that mean for us? We understand that Jesus does not want his disciples to imitate the Pharisees. But it should also be clear that he wants us to grow beyond the faith his followers exhibited during his ministry. Whether we do that depends on whether we learn what they eventually learned about the truth and how to receive it.

Other passages, written from the perspective of the disciples’ later maturity, help us see if we are on the right path. Peter told his readers that to grow in the faith, they needed to be “like newborn babies [who] crave pure spiritual milk” (1 Pet 2.2 NIV). The writings of John and Paul show why such craving is required: only if we are so committed will we come to know (John 8.32) and love (2 Thess 2.10) the truth, leaving the world and its priorities behind (1 John 2.15–17; Rom 12.1–2).

Works Cited

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