

Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

Session Thirteen – Mark 8:1-34

Mark 8:1-3 - During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 2 “I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. 3 If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance.”

Here we go again! This sounds an awful lot like the Feeding of the 5000 we read about in Chapter 6. There are so many common elements in the story, which differs only in the details, that it is tempting to write it off as a retelling of the earlier event. But Mark is well aware of the similarities, and Jesus speaks of both events, so it must be a separate event.

Some things to notice: ***“During those days”*** is tying this story together with the healing of the deaf and mute man at the end of Chapter 7, which seems to place Jesus in the Gentile Decapolis. The location is important!

Chapter 7 has been highlighting conflicts with the Pharisees about properly maintaining strict Jewish law. Yet it is followed by the account with the dangerously foreign Syro-Phoenician woman, and the healing of a deaf-mute man in the Decapolis. And now the feeding of the Gentile 4000. All the Messianic blessings offered to the Jews are being shared with the Gentiles – a sign that the Messiah and the Kingdom are for all people.

We may think that it is only fair that Gentiles get a share in Christ’s benefits, but from Mark’s Jewish perspective the inclusion of Gentiles is a sign of the coming Kingdom of God. The miracle signifies that Jesus is not simply “a redeemer, a messiah like Moses and David”; he is The Redeemer, offering redemption to more than just the people of Israel.

“Another large crowd” tells us that Jesus has been attracting many such crowds, but perhaps this one is remarkable in size, much like the Feeding of the 5000 crowd. This however is a particularly dedicated group, as they are there for several days, and have long since run out of food. Once again, Jesus responds with compassion.

“Some have come from a long distance.” We’ve heard elsewhere how Jesus is attracting crowds not just from the immediate area, but from far afield. If this story is taking place in the Decapolis, to the west of the Sea of Galilee, it would encompass parts of what we now know as Syria and Jordan, where we know Christian communities were established early.

Mark 8:4-9 His disciples answered, “But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?”⁵ “How many loaves do you have?” Jesus asked. “Seven,” they replied. 6 He 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 distribute to the people, and they did so. 7 They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them. 8 The people ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. 9 About four thousand were present.

Comparing the Feedings

- Both occur in a desert place
- The plight of each crowd spurs Jesus’ compassion.
- Both feedings feature an exchange between Jesus and the disciples about the logistics of feeding such a number.
- In the first, the disciples worry over the great expense of buying bread for such a crowd; in the second, that there is no place nearby for the crowd to buy bread for themselves.
- Jesus asks the disciples how much they have, and it is not enough even for themselves.
- In both incidents, Jesus thanks God for what they manage to scrounge together and has the disciples distribute it to the seated multitude.
- Miraculously the crowd eats its fill, and the disciples collect an abundance of leftovers.
- In the second feeding, the number fed drops from five thousand to four thousand
- The loaves and fishes increase from 5 loaves and 2 fish to 7 loaves and a few small fish
- The number of baskets of fragments leftover diminishes from twelve to seven.

Are the numbers significant? While not explicitly stated, the 5000-4000 could demonstrate that Jesus’ popularity in those days was greater among the Jews, but still substantial among the Gentiles. The 12 versus 7 baskets of leftovers could be a confirmation that the first feeding was to a Jewish crowd (12 tribes) while the second mirrors the (7 day) number of the Creation account – a blessing for all created humanity.

Mark 8:10-13 - After he had sent them away, 10 he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha. 11 The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. 12 He sighed deeply and said, “Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to it.” 13 Then he left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side.

Back into the boat, and a quick trip to the Jewish area of Dalmanutha, now presumed to be in the area of Magdala, on the NE side of the lake. Right away, the Pharisees again find Jesus and go on the offensive. They ask for “a sign from heaven.” They have seen healings

and other miracles, but now they want unmistakable proof that Jesus is not just a miracle worker, but the Messiah. The disciples had seen such signs; the Pharisees had not.

Jesus “sighed deeply” – disappointment, frustration, exasperation. After all that has happened, the Pharisees are still wanting Jesus to “pass a test.” The last time such language was used was in the wilderness, when Jesus was being tempted by Satan. He passed that test, but is unwilling to provide incontrovertible proof of his Messiahship to the Pharisees, thus leaving no room for faith. In this same chapter, Peter will make this Messianic identification, which the Pharisees were unable to do.

Mark 8:14-21 - The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. 15 “Be careful,” Jesus warned them. “Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.”

16 They discussed this with one another and said, “It is because we have no bread.”

17 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? 18 Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don’t you remember? 19 When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?”

“Twelve,” they replied.

20 “And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?”

They answered, “Seven.”

21 He said to them, “Do you still not understand?”

Jesus’ frustration with the Pharisees is now going to come out against the disciples. They too seem blind to what the signs are pointing to. Jesus warns them about their lack of faith and constant need for more and more proof, which they share with the Herodians and Pharisees. He compares it to leaven – a fermentation agent which feeds on the nutrients, but has no substance or structure of its own.

Jesus’ frustration boils over in a series of statements: ***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? Do you still not understand?*** Even after feeding 9000 people, with baskets left over, the disciples are concerned that Jesus cannot meet their needs – they will be left wanting.

Mark 8:22-26 - They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. 23 He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man’s eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, “Do you see anything?”

24 He looked up and said, “I see people; they look like trees walking around.”

25 Once more Jesus put his hands on the man’s eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. 26 Jesus sent him home, saying, “Don’t even go into the village.”

Having left the Pharisees (and the crowds) behind, they park the boat at Bethsaida, where the Jordan River meets the lake, en route to the North. Folks there know of Jesus, as it is the home town of three of the disciples. The townsfolk bring him a blind man. In order to respect the man as a human being, and not as healing spectacle to cause yet another scene, Jesus takes him outside the village.

Once again Jesus uses saliva as a healing mechanism. In sharing of his own physical substance with the man, is Jesus indicating that there is inherent power in himself, as the New Adam, bringing physical restoration to creation? In any case, surprisingly, the healing is incomplete, and Jesus does it again. This time, the cure is total.

Why the two stages? My favourite explanation is that the first stage of healing was physical – the man’s eyes were restored. The second stage was the healing of the man’s ability to interpret what he is now finally able to see. Is this an illustration of what is about to happen with the disciples? That they have seen Jesus, and what he can do – but now they are about to properly identify the truth of who Jesus is?

Mark 8:27-30 - Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”

28 They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

29 “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

Escaping Bethsaida without drawing a crowd (likely why Jesus asked the now-seeing man to not return to the village, but to go straight home) it appears as though Jesus and the disciples are finally going to get away from it all. To do so, they pick what would be for a group of Jews a very odd choice – Caesarea Philippi, a centre of Pagan religious pilgrimage and worship.

Located in the very north of modern Israel, and in Jesus’ day, in the tetrarchy of Philip, and named in honour of the Emperor, Caesarea Philippi is an impressive rock face, featuring a large, deep cave, and from which arose springs which were a primary source for the Jordan. Sacrifices would be made and thrown into the cave to be accepted (or not) by the gods.

A large temple to Pan was in front of the cave, which was considered the “gateway to hell.” A shrine to Pan’s father Hermes was immediately to the right, and a Temple to the Emperor as the son of god was to the left. Many other niches and temples were scattered across the vast rock face, representing the known Pagan gods. Matthew and Luke place the Jesus’ question to the disciples at this spot; Mark places it “on the way.”

“Who do people say I am?” To answer, the disciples give the very same response as the crowds – and Herod - in Chapter 6: Jesus is Elijah, or another of the prophets, or maybe even John the Baptist come back from the dead. These were apparently the real representative opinions during Jesus’ ministry as to who he might in fact be. Any of these identifications would account for his ability to work miracles. But the upcoming Transfiguration will leave no doubt.

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” It is no coincidence that this question is asked at the *exact* midpoint of the Gospel. Chapters 1-8a have been establishing Jesus’ identity as the Messiah. Chapters 8b-16 will explain the consequences of that identity – a new understanding of what “Messiah” means.

Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.” There it is; in the very same chapter where the Pharisees demand yet a further unmistakable sign; the same chapter where Jesus is exasperated at the disciples’ inability to truly see who he is, despite all the miracles; the same chapter where a blind man is healed but can still somehow not fully immediately understand what he sees; finally Peter sees clearly.

Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. This is baffling – they finally get it, and are told to be quiet. Why? Is it because they are in the epicentre of Pagan worship, and Jesus would be proclaimed as “just another God,” or perhaps, dangerously, proclaiming himself as a rival to Caesar as “son of god,” a capital offence, and ending the ministry of Jesus then and there?

Another compelling reason for silence is that while the disciples now see Jesus as the Messiah, they do not understand what this means. Jesus is about to completely overturn and redefine their expectations, to Peter’s dismay.

Mark 8:31-33 - He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. 32 He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

33 But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

This is not the triumphant Messiah brandishing a sword, riding a white charger, expelling the Romans, restoring Israel to geopolitical power. This is an Isaiah “suffering servant” Messiah, who will carry upon himself the punishment of the people, and die on their behalf. For Peter, this is too big a reversal to take – after all, they have staked their lives on Jesus, who is now predicting what appears to be utter failure.

Peter “**took him aside and began to rebuke him**” – a strong word, used in Jesus’ interactions with evil spirits – but at least Peter “took him aside” to tell him it is a bad idea, and Jesus should never speak of it again. In contrast, Jesus “rebukes” Peter in front of them all, saying that there is a plan of God which far outweighs their “human concerns.”

Jesus says the Son of Man “**must suffer.**” Never before this moment had anyone in Israel connected suffering with the Messiah. There were many prophecies about a Servant of the Lord who suffers (eg Isaiah 43, 44, and 53), but nobody before Jesus had ever associated those texts with the **hope** of the Messiah, who was supposed to defeat evil and injustice and make everything right in the world, not die at the hands of evil.

Timothy Keller: By using the word **must**, Jesus is also indicating that he is planning to die - that he is doing it voluntarily. He is not merely predicting it will happen. It is one thing for Jesus to say, “I will fight and will be defeated,” and another to say, “This is why I came; I intend to die! That's how I'm going to defeat evil and put everything right.” That is totally inexplicable to Peter.

Jesus didn't just say that the Son of Man would suffer; he said that the Son of Man **must** suffer. This word is so crucial that it's employed twice: “*the Son of Man must suffer many things and... he must be killed.*” The word **must** modifies and controls the whole sentence, and that means that everything in this list is a necessity. Jesus must suffer, must be rejected, must be killed, must be resurrected.

What Jesus said was not just “I've come to die” but “I have to die. It's absolutely necessary that I die. The world can't be renewed, and nor can your life, unless I die.” And next, he is asking us to follow in those very footsteps. No wonder Peter is confused and upset. This is not the Messiah Peter was expecting – or had chosen to follow.

Next Week: Mark 9:1-32