

DO YOU SEE ANYTHING?

SERIES: QUESTIONS JESUS ASKED

by Steve Zeisler

In this series, we have been moving through the gospel of Mark and stopping at points where the Lord asks a question that illumines truth or calls for a response. The passage we will study in this message contains several questions, and it begins with a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. They tried to test him, and he responded with the question, "Why do you seek a sign?" Jesus challenged his own disciples with the questions, "Do you still not see or understand? Do you have eyes but fail to see?" The final section of the passage describes Jesus' interaction with a blind man. In caring for the blind man, the Lord asked him, "Do you see anything?" Throughout all of these encounters, the issues of blindness, failure to perceive, and inability to understand are of concern to our Lord.

These issues should be our concern as well. It's easy to be oblivious to our surroundings. We are often unaware of the significance of the things that happen around us. We can be blind in relationships with our friends, our spouses, and our children. We are in desperate need of our Lord's ministry to us in our blindness.

Let's now turn to Mark 8:11. There are three scenes in this passage: the first (verses 11-13) is Jesus with the Pharisees. The second (verses 14-21) is Jesus in a boat with his disciples, and the third (verses 22-26) is Jesus alone with a blind man in Bethsaida.

The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. He sighed deeply and said, "Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it." Then he left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side.

The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. "Be careful," Jesus warned them. "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod."

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

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

"Twelve," they replied.

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

They answered, "Seven."

He said to them, "Do you still not understand?"

They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. 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?"

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

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. Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't go into the village."

The first of the three scenes begins with Pharisees accosting Jesus. Verse 11 says that they came to question him. The Greek word translated "question" indicates an argumentative disposition. These Pharisees came to challenge Jesus, to test him and make him prove himself to them. Jesus was saddened by their question, and he said that they and their generation were the ones who should be questioned. "Why do you require signs? Why has my life as I've lived it not been enough? Why are my miracles, which have been widely reported, not enough? Why do you still need more?" Then he abruptly told them, "You will not be given a sign."

Jesus refused to perform an act of power to impress the Pharisees. Those whose hearts are like those of the Pharisees cannot see signs from heaven. They are incapable of being persuaded by anything that God does. Psalm 19 declares:

**The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.**

**Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they display knowledge.**

**There is no speech or language
where their voice is not heard.**

**Their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.**

God speaks of himself everywhere. Creation declares the glory of its maker, people see God at work, and hearts that are open receive benefit from him. "You will not be given a sign," Jesus said, "because you cannot see what God is doing. You are unwilling to be persuaded by God. What would be enough? What sort of sign would convince you?"

If we love to think of ourselves as intrepid inquisitors who can call God to account, if we aren't happy with the way he is doing things and insist on more, or if we proudly prefer our questions to his answers, then we will never see a sign. Nothing he does will persuade us.

People in this congregation have received healing. Cancers have disappeared, and children on death's door have been given back life. Others have given testimony to periodic visitations by God in answer to prayer. Such things persuade some people that God is at work, but others see them as coincidence. In *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis, four children made the first journey through a magical wardrobe to Narnia. Three of them remembered what they experienced and were forever changed by it. The fourth child, Susan, allowed the memory of her experience to fade. As she grew up, she considered her experience to be a mere child's tale, and it ceased to persuade her.

Dramatic events happen, and we interpret them. But the lasting power and authority of signs is that they point to something. Signs must signify. A freeway sign is only useful if it gives us direction. It does no good to stop and stare at the sign, to marvel at its geometry and color, and then drive away. A sign points to something, and our attention should be directed toward the thing to which the sign points, not toward the sign itself. Because the Pharisees came to Jesus impressed with their authority to ask questions, lacking any desire to learn, the Lord said that they would never receive a sign. Nothing he could do would ever persuade them. Recall Jesus' story about Abraham and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). The rich man wants to go back and warn his brothers, but Abraham replies, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them... If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." Empty tombs will not persuade anybody who is determined not to be persuaded.

The incident before us here is also recorded in Matthew's gospel, and Matthew gives a bit of information that is not recorded in Mark. Jesus said, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times" (Matthew 16:2-3). In an agrarian society, weather influenced economics. Crops depended on rain, so the people became experts in reading the sky and forecasting weather because their financial welfare was at stake. Jesus was telling the Pharisees, "You care more about those things than you do about what God is saying." We are very much like that. We are often more interested in the trends of the stock market or who the 49'ers are going to pick than we are in seeking God's perspective and wisdom.

The next scene opens with Jesus and his disciples sitting in a boat crossing the sea of Galilee. In verse 15, the statement "be careful" is actually the ordinary Greek word "to see" or "to stare at." The word translated "watch out" is another Greek word for sight, perception, seeing, using one's eyes. Jesus told them, "Watch out for the yeast (or leaven) of the Pharisees and that of Herod." Yeast is used in the Bible as an illustration of the invisible power of sin. Just as yeast permeates dough and changes its characteristics, so does sin infect our lives. Thus Jesus warned his followers to be alert and attentive to this dangerous spiritual reality.

Remember the parable of the four soils (Mark 4:3-8). The first soil never produced anything because the seed was taken away. The second soil was rocky ground and the seed quickly withered under the heat of the sun. The fourth soil produced a crop of great bounty. The third soil also produced a crop, but the plants did not bear grain because "...the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful" (Mark 4:19).

The Herodians loved worldly power and the pleasure it could produce, and the Pharisees were filled with pride. Jesus said to be careful and to watch out for the subtle influence of yeast, but he didn't just warn his disciples. He showed them where their focus should be. He wanted them to be alert to his presence. "Don't be so distracted by unimportant things that you fail to see me for who I am," said the Lord, "to hear what I say, to believe the invisible reality of the love of God." Yet, while Jesus was explaining spiritual truth, they were concerned about who forgot to bring lunch.

Their discussion of bread had no purpose and no value. They were distracted by silly things.

We are very much like them, aren't we? How often do we forget to consider what is beautiful and true and valuable, what is filled with the presence and glory of God? How often do we ignore the things of God in favor of petty pursuits? We are royal sons and daughters, sacred ambassadors of the King. God has called us to serve him in a world that needs him, and yet, instead of believing that of ourselves, we feel frustrated because nobody pays enough attention to us, or because we were snubbed in some social environment or passed over for some sort of recognition. You can almost hear the Lord saying, "Why are you talking about bread? Why do you waste your attention on such silly things?"

Our bodies and minds are the temple of the Holy Spirit. We carry with us the presence of God into every place we go. We are an aroma of

the divine presence wherever we are. Yet how many of us are inordinately bothered by our body shape or wrinkles or gray hair? Is the temple more important than the Spirit within us? We can again hear Jesus saying, "Why are you talking about bread? Don't you understand? Don't you perceive? Don't you see?"

Angels long to understand the gospel come down from heaven (1 Peter 1:12). They look at the words of the Prophets and marvel at the love of this God who became human. They would give anything to participate in what we take for granted, but we are fascinated by glitzy TV shows, sports celebrities, electronic toys, small, silly, petty things. "Don't you see? Aren't you paying attention? Having seen, don't you perceive what you see? Don't you value what is valuable?"

These questions of our Lord come back to us, and they are important, challenging questions. Jesus wondered at the disciples' forgetfulness and hard-heartedness. Not much time had passed since the feeding of the 4,000, and Jesus was asking, "Have you forgotten so soon?" That is a great reminder that very often the most helpful thing we can do is to make ourselves remember who we are, where we've been, and what God has done for us.

The proud Pharisees loved their ability to ask questions more than they longed for answers from God, and the disciples were distracted by unimportant things. Blindness keeps us from knowing what we need. Because we are blind, we don't know what to ask for, where to go, how to be, or what is of value, so the blindness reinforces itself. That is why the last part of our passage is so powerful and helpful.

Consider the third scene, which begins at verse 22. Of all Jesus' healings this one is, in some ways, the most curious. For one thing, Jesus rarely healed anybody in stages. In this case, the blind man was given partial sight, then a second work of the Lord gave him clear sight. Also, the passage tells us that a group of people brought the man to the Lord. Note, however, that Jesus took the man by the hand and pulled him away from the crowd, out of the village. Jesus deliberately chose to interact with the blind man in a personal and intimate way, and after healing him, he told him not to go back to the village.

The use of saliva, which people of that time believed to be of medicinal value, indicated a loving intimacy as well. On another occasion, Jesus healed a blind man by spitting on the ground, then applying the mud to the eyes of the blind man (John 9:6). On this occasion recorded in Mark, Jesus spit directly on the blind man's eyes knowing that the man would receive it as an act of love. It is a curious story, but the dominant theme is intimacy with Jesus. We are reminded of creation. God shaped clay, then brought his face near to breathe life into the shaped clay. Likewise, Jesus came very near to the blind man in Bethsaida, first applying saliva to his eyes, then touching him with his hands, and then touching him again. Jesus asked, "What do you see now? Do you see anything?" The man answered, "I can only see a bit. I'm still confused. I'm unsure." The Lord allowed the man to speak of his uncertainty, then he ministered to him again. Everything about this scene is tender and intimate, and the passage makes a statement to those of us who are spiritually blind. Jesus challenged Pharisees who could not see the work of God because they would not see; they were more interested in their ability to ask questions than in God's ability to answer them. He challenged disciples who were petty and small-minded, silly and self-absorbed. He calls on us to awaken and perceive.

In the end, however, it is Jesus who gives sight. He does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He takes us by the hand and draws us near to him. He touches us and allows us to speak of our uncertainty and lack of clarity, to ask for more help, and then he helps us again. There is gospel in this-good news, not just challenge. There is a work of Christ. We are too blind to even know how to proceed from here. We are oblivious to what is important. We don't know how to ask for help, and when it's offered, we don't know how to receive it. We make a mess of things. The blind can only follow at Jesus' initiative. It starts with his concern. It's true that we may know what concerns him and yet not believe or act upon that knowledge, but it is also true that, in our blindness, most of us need more help than we know how to get. We don't even know the direction to turn.

What we need is the intimate touch of the Lord, "I will come. I will take you by the hand. Just you and me. I will love you. I will touch you. I will touch you again. I will ask you questions. I will let you speak. I will draw you out. I will make the changes."

The gospel of John describes the incarnation in an amazing way: "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us..." (John 1:14a, NASB). What a remarkable statement. God the Son, in fellowship with the Father from eternity, became a child, took on flesh, and dwelt among us. But that is not the most remarkable part of that sentence. The work of God is true whether we perceive it or not. It remains true that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us whether we are able to perceive it or not. But the wonder of what John wrote is this: "...we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14b, NASB). God acted, and we were allowed to see it. He opened our eyes so that we could see the Lord as he is-glorious, filled with grace, filled with truth. He has persuaded us of who he is. He has let us believe it. Our lives are changed.

John was once a disciple arguing about bread in a boat; at the end of his life, he would write of seeing the Lord as he is in all his glory. The apostle Paul wrote, "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints..." (Ephesians 1:18, NASB). That is our hope, not only that the incarnation took place, but that we are going to be allowed to believe it and have our lives changed by it. His glory, grace, and truth will grow ever greater in our experience because he will lead us into it himself. He will come for us, touch us, awaken us, and open our eyes.

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Steve Zeisler
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[Back to Index Page](#)

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