

Seeing More Clearly

By David Feddes

There is one miracle of Jesus that didn't quite seem to get the job done the first time. It's a very strange and puzzling miracle. When you read about the miracles of Jesus, after a while you come to have a pretty high standard for a miracle: it works right away the first time, accomplishes everything, and is a total success. Except this one. In this miracle, it takes a couple of tries.

A puzzling miracle

They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village. When he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Do you see anything?" 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. Jesus sent him home, saying, "Do not even enter the village" (Mark 8:22-26).

In reading about this miracle, there are a number of things that are puzzling. One is the whole spit thing. There are some miracles where Jesus spits on people or spits in the dirt, makes mud, and smears the mud on them. Those of us who are a little bit finicky might say, "What's with that spit? What's going on with that?" We know it's not that Jesus had magic spit and that to really get the miracle done, a bit of that magic spit was the potion required. Jesus did miracles where he was miles away and simply spoke a word, and the person was made better. He didn't have to touch or put spit on people, but in some cases he did.

Often these cases involved those who were most separated or most outcast, and physical touch and a sense of Jesus' bodily nearness was a very comforting thing to the person. I'm sure the guy himself didn't complain. Can you imagine being a blind person being healed? You wouldn't say, "Ick, you put some spit on me." Probably once you'd been healed, when you realized who had healed you, you might say, "I'm never washing my face again!" That might be the more likely reaction. But at any rate, it is one of those things about this story that makes you wonder.

Another puzzling thing is the fact that when Jesus was about to do the miracle, he took the man away from everybody else. Then, after he had healed his vision, he told him, "Go straight home. Don't even go into the village." This is consistent with something that Jesus often does in the book of Mark. He does something fantastic and then tells them, "Don't tell anybody. I don't want anybody else to find out about this." You find Jesus healing someone of leprosy, and he says, "I'm giving you strict orders not to tell anybody." He raises a little girl from the dead and tells the three disciples in the room, as well as the girl's parents, "I don't want you to tell anybody about this." He heals a man who is deaf and can't speak, gives the man the ability to speak, and then tells him, "Now don't speak to anybody about this." And here in this miracle, he says, "You go straight home and don't go into the village." What's going on with that?

Bible scholars sometimes refer to this as the Messianic secret, where Jesus tries to keep his great works as secret as possible. I might say a bit more about that later, about Jesus' motivation for

keeping such things a secret. But at any rate, it's in this story, and it is one of those head-scratchers.

Look at our own day and age. If somebody can do a miracle a tenth as impressive as the ones Jesus was doing—someone had a little bit of back pain and now feels better—they'll ask the camera to zoom in, and the preacher will say, "Look, look, look at this fabulous miracle!" Jesus, at least during his earthly ministry, never said, "I want maximum publicity for every miraculous thing that I do." He often said the opposite.

So the contact and the spit, the Messianic secret, and keeping miracles hush-hush rather than looking for more publicity, those are aspects of this miracle that are puzzling. But the most puzzling, at least compared to all of Jesus' other miracles, is the fact that it didn't quite work the first time. It worked some. Jesus put spit on the man's eye and then said, "Okay, do you see anything?" The man couldn't make out faces and noses and ears and fingernails, but he kind of saw some long blobs moving around and said, "I see people, but they look like trees walking." Now, that's a big improvement on nothing, but it's not quite where he wanted to be. Then Jesus laid his hands on him and made him completely well so that he could see crystal clear.

What's going on here? Did Jesus give it his best shot and didn't quite give it enough oomph, so he had to try again? If at first you don't succeed, try, try again? So this was just that one time where Jesus gave it a shot, and that first attempt didn't get the job done fully. So one more shot of Jesus' power, and now he can see. Is that all that's going on here?

Not quite. Very often when Jesus does a miracle, it is about more than just healing the person who needs healing. Jesus is often dramatizing or acting out something that he is seeking to show us, something that he's seeking to reveal to us.

Just before this miracle, something else happens. Jesus had fed 4,000 men and their families, had some disputes with the Pharisees, and then got into a boat with his disciples. He said to them, "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod" (Mark 8:15). The disciples said, "I think he's talking about the fact we only brought along one bun. We've got a bread shortage." Jesus said, "Weren't you guys there when I fed those 5,000 men and all the people with them? What about the 4,000 that we fed? I'm not really worried about bread. I can handle bread shortages really, really well. Are you blind?" (Mark 8:17-20).

And then they ran into this blind man. The disciples are people who sometimes sort of maybe see something like trees walking around. They're beginning to know something about Jesus, but it's pretty blurry and hard to make out any features clearly. So Jesus does this miracle of healing a man in two stages to show that he is about to help them to see things more clearly.

Seeing more clearly

- **The Christ:** who Jesus is
- **The Cross:** why Jesus came
- **The Christian:** what it takes to identify with Jesus
- **The Consequences:** results of denying self versus denying Jesus

Mark has this incident right at the very center of the Gospel of Mark because he is about to show us with great clarity what Jesus wants us to see. In the story that follows the two-stage healing of the blind man, we see clearly the Christ: who Jesus is. We see clearly the cross, as Jesus tells of his upcoming death, and we see why Jesus came. We see the Christian: what it takes to identify with Jesus. And we also see very clearly the consequences: the results of denying yourself contrasted with the results of denying Jesus.

Some of us may still feel like we're in a bit of a fog sometimes when it comes to the things of God. For many people, the knowledge of God and of salvation doesn't come instantaneously or with absolute clarity. It comes more at first as though the trees are kind of walking around. We aren't totally blind anymore. We sense that there's something special about Jesus. We're aware that there's a God of some sort there and that he's up to something, but it's not always easy to get it clear.

It's very valuable that we understand that Jesus does help us to see more clearly. And it's very valuable too that Jesus had such dimwits for disciples, and still has dimwits for disciples, because when we see the blundering and the fumbling and the "What's going on? Maybe he thinks we didn't bring enough buns along today"—that kind of dimness that the disciples had—we're not entirely free of that problem yet. It's a great comfort to know that Jesus helps us to see more clearly.

The Christ: who Jesus is

The first thing that we see more clearly in the descriptions that follow, right here at the very center of the Gospel of Mark, is the Christ—who Jesus is.

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They told him, "John the Baptist. Others say Elijah, and others, one of the prophets." 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 (Mark 8:27-30).

There again, the Messianic secret. They finally got it clear. They're not just saying, "Oh, it's a prophet, he's a this, he's a that." You're the Christ, you're the Messiah. And Jesus says, "Shh, don't tell anybody yet." But Jesus does want his own disciples to understand by now who he is, and to get very clearly who the Christ is.

The whole Gospel of Mark has been leading up to this. Mark shows us Jesus through the eyes of various people who run into him or who encounter him. "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him!" "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" (Mark 1:27; 4:41). You get these questions: "What's going on? Who in the world is this?"

Now, Mark is not a very subtle author. In some ways he is, by showing us Jesus through the eyes of those who had questions. But he does tell us in the very first verse who Jesus is: "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). He's not waiting for the

big reveal, the big moment to come out. He tells us right up front who he's talking about: the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Then he gives us various voices commenting on this Jesus. We're still going to hear voices like that today. At the baptism of Jesus, the voice of God the Father himself says, "This is my beloved Son." He says it with love: "This is my beloved Son" (Mark 1:11).

The demons state the same fact but with a very different attitude: "You're the Son of God! You're the Son of God! Don't hurt us!" (Mark 3:11). So you have God the Father lovingly stating who Jesus is, and you have the demons stating the same fact but with a very different attitude. That in itself reveals something: it is possible even to have the faith of demons, where you recognize as a fact that Jesus is the Son of God, but he's not the beloved Son of God to you.

His family says at one point, "He's out of his mind" (Mark 3:21).

The scribes say, "Sure, there's something supernatural and amazing going on with this man Jesus. He's possessed by Beelzebub, the prince of demons" (Mark 3:22).

The crowds say, "Whoa, he can talk like nobody ever talked. He's like one of those prophets of old. We haven't had a prophet like that for a while" (Mark 6:15).

Herod says, "John the Baptist is back. I chopped his head off, and here he is again! I knew there was something spooky about that guy." Sometimes Herod had kind of liked to listen to John. He really didn't want to kill him, but he was such a knucklehead that he promised anything up to half his kingdom. So he handed John the Baptist's head to his wife's daughter on a platter. But now John's back—at least in Herod's opinion: "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." (6:16)

So these are some of the opinions floating around before Jesus asks that question: "Who do people say that I am?" Peter says, "You are the Christ. You're the Messiah, the anointed one—the one anointed to be God's prophet and priest and king and deliverer. You're the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mark 8:29).

Very shortly after that, Jesus is transformed or transfigured, and light shines from him. The great prophets Moses and Elijah come from heaven and speak with him on the mountain, and the voice of God once again says, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!" (Mark 9:7).

Blind Bartimaeus cries out, "Son of David, have mercy on me! Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mark 10:47-48). He's not just saying "Son of David" because he knows that Jesus comes from David's family line. "Son of David" is the title of the Messiah, the expected deliverer.

And what does Jesus himself say? For much of his ministry, he keeps his identity as Messiah a secret from most people—until he's asked by his worst enemy, the high priest: "Are you the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" And Jesus said, "I am" (Mark 14:61-62). "I am" may mean even more than just "Yes, of course I am the Messiah." "I am who I am" is the name of God himself (Exodus 3:14). So when Jesus finally states who he is, it is when he has been whipped, and he is on trial, and about to be crucified. Finally, he states clearly who he is.

The sign on the cross said, "This is the King of the Jews" (Mark 15:26).

At the foot of the cross, after Jesus died, the centurion who presided over the killing of Jesus exclaiming, "Surely this man was the Son of God" (Mark 15:39).

Mark records a lot of different voices about Jesus. Which of those voices is speaking the truth? The voice of God from heaven? The voice of Jesus himself saying, "I am"? The voice of Peter saying, "You are the Christ"? Or the ones who are saying, "He's a nutcase, he's demon-possessed"? Or those saying, "He's a pretty good guy, a better prophet than normal"? There are all these opinions, but there is only one truth. Amid the opinions is the truth: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16).

Each of us needs to weigh that, because we're told that we live in the postmodern age, where there are lots of different opinions and no firm truth anymore. This is alleged to be some new and unprecedented situation. But come on—we have always been a world full of conflicting opinions, a variety of gods, and a variety of ways of seeing. But the question still comes down to this: "Who do you say that I am? There are lots of opinions. You've told me what those opinions are. Now what do you say? Have you got it clear in your mind yet? Who am I?"

When Peter says, "You are the Christ," Jesus acknowledges that he is. We're told in another gospel that he says, "Blessed are you, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:17). So it is definitely a revelation of God that helps Peter to see this much, and to see this clearly.

But then Jesus says, "Now don't tell anybody." In a moment, we'll see exactly why they weren't supposed to tell anybody—because the fact that Jesus is the Messiah is a very misleading fact if you have a certain notion of Messiah in your head. If you've got this whole idea of what the deliverer is going to be like, then when you're told that the deliverer has come, you say, "He filled in my blank. I knew what he was going to be all along; now I just tack the word Jesus onto that, and we're good to go." That's about the stage Peter is at right now. He's been expecting a Messiah, and it's dawned on him that this guy is the one. But he does not understand what's involved in being a Messiah.

The Cross: why Jesus came

"And he 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. He spoke plainly about this. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 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'" (Mark 8:31-33).

Peter rebukes Jesus. Just think about that for a minute. He rebukes Jesus! He says to him, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God—and now I've got a few things I'd like to straighten you out on." That's not the last time this would happen. There are a good many of us who have our own notions of how God ought to operate, what his plans ought to be like, how things ought to

unfold. And if God's ways are not our ways, God ought to take a few lessons from us! We are so smart, we know so much.

Now can you see why Jesus didn't want people to view him as Messiah right away? Peter, the moment he's got Messiah really locked in his mind, knows one thing it doesn't mean. It does not mean the leaders of the Jewish people are going to reject him. It means he is going to be acclaimed by them, because Messiahs don't get rejected by the most important people of the nation. Messiahs come to rescue. Messiahs defeat Roman enemies. Messiahs get rid of the problems that you have. Messiahs don't get rejected by those who know what's going on. And Messiahs don't get killed. Peter knows this with absolute certainty.

So he rebukes Jesus. And Jesus rebukes him right back and calls him Satan. Just a moment earlier, Jesus has said, "Peter, blessed are you. Flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." And a moment later he's saying, "Shut up, Satan. Just get behind me. I don't listen to you, Satan," because he hears in the words of one of his best friends the very same words that Satan had tempted him with in the desert: "How about a shortcut? This should never happen to you. You didn't come into the world to die; you came into the world to reign. And have I got a deal for you! You can reign right now without any cross, any suffering whatsoever."

Jesus says, "That's how Satan thinks. That's how fallen humanity in the grip of Satan thinks. You're not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." The cross remains a blur to Peter and the other disciples, even after Jesus tells them about the cross.

Jesus doesn't just say it one time or two times. Three times in the Gospel of Mark he very explicitly says, "Now the Son of Man is going to be rejected by the leaders. He's going to be killed, and then he's going to rise again" (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). So does each disciple say, "Now I understand why you came. I understand that you're here to die"? Not quite. Here are the three reactions to Jesus' three statements about his coming suffering and death.

The first time he says he's going to die, Peter rebukes him.

The second time he tells his disciples that he's going to die, the disciples are scratching their heads, saying, "What in the world is he talking about? I don't know. Hey, by the way, which of us do you think is going to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? That sounds like a good theological discussion. We don't want to ask Jesus what he meant about suffering and dying. But we do know something we're really interested in—who is going to be tops?" That's quite a reaction to the revelation that the Son of God is going to die: a nice argument about which of you is going to be number one.

Then there's the third time. Jesus says, "Now I'm going to suffer and die and then rise again." And the reaction this time is that his other two closest friends—not Peter this time, but James and John—come up and say, "Lord, do you think you could reserve a throne for one of us on one side of you and the other on the other side of your throne in your kingdom? We'd like a share of the majesty." Do these guys have their hearing aids turned off? Jesus says, "I'm going to die," and they're saying, "We'd like to be on the thrones next to you."

The cross is a total blur. Jesus can say it, and say it, and say it, and it does not sink in. They cannot bear it. And when it does finally happen, they all run away. It catches them totally off guard, even after all the warnings, because the cross is just something so foreign, so strange, so ridiculous in their view of Messiah, that they can't put up with it. It just stays a blur in their minds.

And if it stayed a blur in the minds of those who were told in no uncertain terms why Jesus came, it's not hard to imagine why Jesus wouldn't want the crowds and others to think of him as the Messiah, the appointed Savior, just yet. They would totally misunderstand.

After Jesus dies and rises again, then he says, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all nations" (Mark 16:15). But the full gospel is that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). You really can't preach the gospel until you have a cross and a resurrection.

All too often people want a Christ without a cross. You might say, "Well, this is history. It's impossible to make that mistake now. We know what happened. We can see why Peter and these other guys blew it, because they were still only partway through the story. We've got the benefit of 20/20 hindsight. We can see crystal clear that Jesus suffered and died. We know what happened."

But even after Jesus suffering and death and resurrection, some people can't grasp it. For example, the religion of Islam denies that Jesus died. They also deny that he was the Son of God, but they say he was a great prophet. So it is possible, even knowing the full historical record, to say, "No, it didn't happen. Couldn't happen. God would never let that happen to one of his great prophets. End of story. Somebody else died on that cross." In that case, greater vision is needed.

Lamin Sanneh, a great scholar and historian at Yale, grew up as a Muslim in Africa. He was taught that Jesus was a great prophet, and that Jesus didn't die on the cross but that somebody else did. He got to thinking, "Well, who was that somebody else? And if so, what were they doing on that cross? And what if it was Jesus that died on that cross?" He thought and thought, and all of a sudden everything began to make sense to him if it was Jesus who died on that cross. By the way, he then became a Christian and applied to some neighboring churches to see if they would baptize him, and none of them would because they were too scared of what might happen if they baptized him. We'll get to that later. People don't want to pick up the cross and carry it with Christ. Believing in the cross comes hard to some people, and being willing to carry the cross also comes very hard.

What about us? We're here today. Nobody here is going to deny that Jesus died on the cross. In American culture most people will accept the story that Jesus of Nazareth died on a cross. But if you just look at our culture for a moment—we plan, celebrate, and work our way up the Christmas season. But the Good Friday service, or the evening before Good Friday when we have our service—church attendance is much lower than on Christmas.

The question isn't so much whether these seasons are required—they're not. The question is, which event really has a grip on us? We sometimes shy away from the cross and all that goes

with it. But it was a suggestion from Satan that Jesus not go to the cross, because that was God's plan. And to deviate from God's plan is the voice of Satan.

Why was the cross God's plan? That's another reason we don't like the cross. We want a deliverer who deals with our problems and our enemies. We do not want to hear, "You are your own worst enemy. You've met the enemy—and it's you. And I'm here to deal with what's wrong with you, not what's wrong with the stinking Romans, not what's wrong with the people of those bad political parties, not what's wrong with the lobbyists for immorality in our society. The first thing I came to deal with is what's wrong with you. And what's wrong with you is so wrong that I have to die for you, to pay for it. You are a mess."

That's why many people have an allergic reaction to the cross of Jesus—that he would have to die for us, that something so awful would happen to the one we might identify with as our leader. And so the cross and its meaning can tend to remain a blur. But when Jesus fixes that, then we begin to see why he died: as our substitute, as the one who takes our penalty and our punishment on himself.

So we want to see more clearly the Christ: who Jesus is; the cross: why Jesus came; and then Jesus goes on to show us clearly the Christian: what it takes to identify with him and the consequences, the results of denying self versus denying Jesus.

The Christian: what it takes to identify with Jesus

"Calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me'" (Mark 8:34).

A couple of statements about that. If you understand the cross and the Bible's teaching about the cross, you understand that Jesus is our substitute—that he did for us what we could not do for ourselves, that he died a death in our place and suffered the wrath of God so that we would not have to suffer the wrath of God. He is our substitute. He is our Savior.

But these words of Jesus tell us that he is not only our substitute and not only our Savior; he is also our leader, our pioneer, our model. And so when he takes the cross, he is not just doing something instead of us; he is also calling us to do the same. "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21). That Scripture is talking about the cross—that we suffer in his steps.

"Christian" is just applying the name of the Christ, the Anointed One, to us and saying, in a sense, we're anointed ones too. We're Christians. But Jesus also makes it very clear that Christians are Cross-tians: we bear Jesus' cross as well as his anointing. We are people not only who are anointed by his Holy Spirit, but we must bear Jesus' cross if we are to follow him at all. Every Christian is a Cross-tian—or you're not a Christian. That's the plain implication of these words of Jesus about taking up our cross.

Now, what does it mean to take up our cross and to deny ourselves? It is obviously very vital to what it means to be a Christian. The apostle Paul said, "We are children; and if we are children,

then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ—if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (Romans 8:16-17). If we share in his sufferings, then we will also share in his glory.

Paul said, "I want to know Christ." Many of us associate knowing Christ with our devotions and our moods of closeness to God. Certainly that may be part of knowing God. But Paul says, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings" (Philippians 3:10). When we look for communion with Christ, a sense of belonging to him and being very near to him, do we look for it in sufferings? The fellowship of sharing in his sufferings—that's not the kind of fellowship we were hoping for. We were hoping for the fellowship of the warm, fuzzy variety, where we're feeling really close to him and he's blessing our hearts with joy, peace, and satisfaction. I'm not making light of the joy, peace, and satisfaction—I've spoken on other occasions of those tremendous blessings from the Holy Spirit. But the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings and of being Cross-tians is very important.

Deny the self-life

- Deny sinful self. Instead, desire new self.
- Deny self righteousness. Instead, trust Jesus' righteousness credited to you.
- Deny what makes sense to you. Instead, believe God's revelation in Jesus. Deny your desires and goals. Instead, join Jesus' mission and follow where he leads.
- Deny your pleasure, comfort, and safety. Instead, endure pain, shame, and death.
- Deny self-life. Instead, have Christ-life.

What's involved in denying the self-life? Maybe take the most obvious first: deny your sinful self. Say, "I don't want to be wallowing in sin anymore. I don't want that guilt anymore. I want a new self." Now pause just at that point a moment. We want a new self, and the Bible speaks of that as being born again, of having a new self. And it is wonderful. But let's not forget the flip side of being born again. Before you're born again, you die. You must die before you're born again. You must die to an old self before a new self is given to you. You must take up a cross. And when you take up that crossbeam, you are headed toward execution. The old self has got to die that the new self might live.

You deny your sin, but that's not all you do. You deny your righteousness. You deny what's good about you. You deny the things about you that, in your own humble opinion, might merit God's approval. And you say, "When I'm at my best, I am a filthy mess. All my righteousness is like filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6).

The apostle Paul said, "If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ" (Philippians 3:4-7). In other words, "I've been keeping the law since I was a little kid, I've been doing this, I've been doing that. It's all garbage compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ."

So when you deny yourself, you're not just saying, "I've got this vice, and it's kind of stinky anyway. I hope Jesus will save me from that. I hope he'll straighten out this fault and that fault as well. I do feel guilty about those things, so I'd like him to clean them up anyway." Sure, that's important—give up the sins you know. But now give up the righteousness too. Give up on anything that you think puts you in a position to have claims on God.

It's tempting to think, "God, you owe me. I've done this and this and this, and all I get from you is suffering? Why me?" That's the first question many people ask when something bad happens in their life: "Why me?" Why not you? That's not the first thing I'd say to somebody who's really struggling or suffering when they're in the midst of it. The Bible says, "Weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). But let us recognize now what it shows about our hearts when we ask, "Why me? We think we have a claim to happiness, to God's blessing forever.

We must give up on our own righteousness and say, "God, I have no claim on you whatsoever. Please, just credit Jesus' righteousness to me, because I don't have any other ground for being right with you. On Christ the solid rock I stand. All my own righteousness—that's sinking sand."

Another thing about denying the self-life is denying what makes sense to you. We live in an age that worships the human intellect and the right to think for yourself. We're told that if you simply accept what God says, you're leaving your brain at the church door. That's a really common cliché among the so-called "smart set" who say, "It's so dumb just to believe what the Bible says, and so dumb to believe what your preachers and parents have brainwashed you to believe. Believe what we say instead, and you'll be thinking for yourself." Oh yeah? You're not thinking for yourself just because you believe what some alleged expert told you. And even if you did manage, by some miracle, to think for yourself, who promoted you to being the greatest intellect in the universe? What makes you think you can understand the ways of God?

Your brain is smaller than the brain of an ant compared to the mind of God. And so part of denying yourself is denying what makes sense to you and what standards you think God has to meet in order to prove his truth to you. You've got to believe God's revelation in Jesus. If God says, "This is my Son. This is how I'm saving—by ordaining the cross and resurrection," then you had better construct your whole intellectual system around that, rather than using your intellectual system to measure that. You'd better just kill your whole old mindset and say, "When I try to evaluate God, I've got things backward. God has revealed himself in Jesus. I'm going to deny what makes sense to my natural mind and listen to the mind of God."

It also means you've got to deny your desires and goals, and instead join Jesus' mission and follow where he leads. A lot of us are born or grow up wanting this or wanting that. And as we want those things, how often do we ask, "What does God want?" What job you want in the future? Is that what God wants for you? If so, great. But consider that there might be a different possibility. There may be various objectives you have, but if they're not God's objectives for you, then you've got to give them up, even if they're not sinful. Certain things are okay for somebody else, but they were not God's plan for you. And if you come to that realization, then you have to follow the Lamb wherever he leads, no matter what your desires and goals were.

Peter, James, and John were fishermen before Jesus called them. Maybe their desires and goals were: "We're going to be top-notch fishermen, maybe expand the business, get some extra employees, and then retire and live large for a few years." They may have had something like that in mind, but it didn't work out that way. If you follow Jesus, he may call you into something totally different from what your previous plans were.

Related to that is that sometimes self-denial means denying not just your sin, but denying what would be legitimate pleasure or comfort or safety, because you're called into something where you're going to be facing attacks. People are going to get angry at you. You're going to be taking risks—sometimes very dangerous ones. Pain, shame, death.

In short, you deny the self-life, and instead you have the Christ-life.

The Consequences: results of denying self versus denying Jesus

Which of those two is better to have, the self-life or the Christ-life? You can't have both at the same time. If you want self on the throne, then you will get what self can do. And just one word of warning: it's not your real self. That is not who God designed you to be. So when you put self on the throne, all of a sudden you have lost your real self.

Jesus goes on to talk about the consequences of either denying self or denying him. "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels" (Mark 8:35-38).

Two questions: What are you afraid of? What are you ashamed of? Those two questions will tell you volumes about yourself. If the thing you're most afraid of is losing the life that you've mapped out for yourself, or losing somebody close to you, or losing your own health and comfort—if those are the things that are the greatest fears that you have—Jesus has news: you're going to lose them. You will. Death will claim everybody. We're going to lose those things that we think we're trying to preserve for our life.

So if those are what you're afraid of, well, you're going to lose them anyway. If you're still seeking yourself, you're going to lose that plus everything else. You're going to lose your own soul. You lose your own identity even in this life when you're just trying to grab and get, when you're trying to stay comfortable and play it safe. You spend your 70 or 80 or 90 years playing it safe—and then you're dead anyway. You played it safe, you played it safe, you played it safe, and you lost it all.

Remember the story of the talents. The one guy plays it safe, buries his talent in the ground, and loses it—and loses himself forever. Playing it safe doesn't cut it. Playing it safe is the least safe thing you can do. If you will not risk it all, you will lose it all. That's what Jesus is saying.

What are you ashamed of? What embarrasses you? When people look at you or laugh at you, is that the most shameful thing that can happen? Do you need the approval of others that much? When you need other people's approval that much, you don't have a self—you just have a mask. A mask that you manipulate to get people to approve of, something that's not really you. So why did you go to all that trouble to be such a poser and a pretender? You lose it if you try to hang on to that self and the good opinion of everybody around you.

You gain your true self when you follow Jesus, because that's who you were meant to be anyway. You were meant to be somebody who dares, somebody who follows the Lamb wherever he leads, somebody who takes the risks and accomplishes the great things—even in death—that others only dare to dream of.

Jesus says, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. Fear him who, after killing the body, has power to throw you into hell" (Luke 12:4-5). "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?" (Mark 8:36) If you're like the rich farmer who laid up all the wealth for himself and said, "Ah, early retirement—eat, drink, and be merry," and God says, "Fool! Tonight your soul is required of you," then who's going to get all the stuff? Somebody else is going to get the stuff, and you are going to get a very unpleasant eternity, because you only thought of yourself (Luke 12:16-21).

"Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels" (Mark 8:38). Do you want this wicked and adulterous generation to be the measuring stick of what to be embarrassed about? Why worry about the opinion of a wicked and adulterous generation? Would you rather have the Son of Man and the Son of God say on the day of judgment, "I never knew you. Away from me, you workers of iniquity" (Matthew 7:23)? If you wanted to identify with a wicked and adulterous generation, then you may go to hell with the wicked and adulterous. Those, Jesus says, are the consequences.

Seeing more clearly

- **The Christ:** who Jesus is
- **The Cross:** why Jesus came
- **The Christian:** what it takes to identify with Jesus
- **The Consequences:** results of denying self versus denying Jesus
- **The Comfort:** if your sight is still blurry, Jesus will heal you fully.

We're not just looking at trees walking around anymore, are we? It's not just long fuzzy blobs. Many folks prefer their religion to be fuzzy. Clarity is offensive. Clarity calls for decision, not for meandering around in a fog. The Christ, the Son of the living God, who came to die in our place and to save us, and who calls us to walk the path of the cross and warns of the eternal consequences if we choose self over the cross—that is the gospel in its clarity.

And having said all that, let me just add one more thing: the comfort. If your sight is still kind of blurry, if you're still like Peter, James, and John and you're muddling, there's good news. If Jesus has laid his hand upon you, if a little bit of his spit is on you, if you're starting to see—he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion (Philippians 1:6). Now if you deny

him, he will deny you on the final day (2 Timothy 2:12). But don't forget—Peter denied him and was not denied on the final day. Peter's denial of Jesus was wrong, but it was not final. When he heard the rooster crow, the tears began to run from his eyes, and he repented. And Jesus restored him.

Later on, Peter made another grievous blunder when he was acting as though the gospel was not by grace, separating himself from other people so that he could have the approval of a wicked and adulterous generation. Paul got up and rebuked him to his face (Galatians 2:11-14). Again Peter repented. And Peter went on to write, "Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Peter 3:18). He called us to suffer that we might follow in his steps (1 Peter 2:21). And Peter himself literally went to the cross, dying on a cross in loyalty to his Savior.

The comfort is: even though you're blundering, even though your eyes are blurry, if you're in the hand of Christ and in the company of Christ, you will not finally fall. If you look to him, there may be many things you do not understand, but understand this: he never lets go of those who are his own. Nobody can snatch you from his hand (John 10:28).

But you must be in his hand. So don't let that comfort soften what you understand about the consequences. The consequences are final and terrible for those who reject the Christ and reject his cross. But for those who see dimly but see, and who follow imperfectly but follow, the end is perfect light, perfect seeing, face to face, and glory forever.

Prayer

Lord, help us to see more clearly. Lord, we believe; help our unbelief. We pray, Lord, that we may with our whole heart praise, adore, and worship you as the Christ, the Son of the living God. We pray that with our whole heart we may accept the sacrifice of the cross given for us, and then take up the cross, deny ourselves, and follow you in obedience and love. And help us, Lord, to live in awareness of the the blessed consequences of being owned by you and claimed by you on that final day. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Seeing More Clearly

By David Feddes

Slide Contents

A puzzling miracle

^{8:22} And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. ²³ And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, “Do you see anything?” ²⁴ And he looked up and said, “I see people, but they look like trees, walking.” ²⁵ Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. ²⁶ And he sent him to his home, saying, “Do not even enter the village.”

Seeing more clearly

- **The Christ:** who Jesus is
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The Christ: who Jesus is

²⁷ And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” ²⁸ And they told him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹ And he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.” ³⁰ And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

What is this? Who is this?

“What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” (Mark 1:27)

“Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:41)

Who is Jesus?

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (1:1)

- **God:** “You are my beloved Son.” (1:11)
- **Demons:** “You are the Son of God.” (3:11)
- **Family:** “He is out of his mind.” (3:21)
- **Scribes:** “He is possessed by Beelzebub.” (3:22)
- **Crowds:** “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” (6:15)
- **Herod:** “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.” (6:16)
- **Peter:** “You are the Christ.” (8:29)
- **God:** This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” (9:7)
- **Blind Bartimaeus:** “Son of David” (10:47)
- **Jesus:** The high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” And Jesus said, “I am.” (14:61-62)
- **Cross:** “The King of the Jews.” (15:26)
- **Centurion:** “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (15:39)

The Christ: who Jesus is

²⁷ And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” ²⁸ And they told him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹ And he asked them, “**But who do you say that I am?**” Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.” ³⁰ And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

The Cross: why Jesus came

³¹ And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

The cross remained a blur

Three times Jesus told his disciples of his upcoming death and resurrection. How did the disciples respond?

- Peter rebuked Jesus. (8:32)
- The disciples were confused but scared to ask—so they argued about who was greatest. (9:32-34)
- James and John asked for thrones on either side of Jesus. (10:37)

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The Christian: what it takes to identify with Jesus

³⁴ And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

- Jesus is our leader and model as well as our substitute and savior.
- Christians are Cross-tians: we bear Jesus’ cross as well as his anointing.

Deny the self-life

- Deny sinful self. Instead, desire new self.
- Deny self righteousness. Instead, trust Jesus’ righteousness credited to you.
- Deny what makes sense to you. Instead, believe God’s revelation in Jesus.
- Deny your desires and goals. Instead, join Jesus’ mission and follow where he leads.
- Deny your pleasure, comfort, and safety. Instead, endure pain, shame, and death.
- Deny self-life. Instead, have Christ-life.

The Consequences

³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.

³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? ³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his soul?

³⁸ For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

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