

Jesus Messiah: Seeing Christ In The Gospel Of Mark

*“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”
(Mark 1:15 ESV)*

*And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said,
“Truly this man was the Son of God!”
(Mark 15:38–39 ESV)*

He Makes The Deaf Hear And The Mute Speak

August 20th, 2017

Mark 7:31-37

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Introduction:

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles to Mark 7:31; that’s on page 843 in your pew Bibles. Last week I mentioned that Jesus has taken the disciples on a retreat deep into Gentile territory. In verse 24 – right after another very heated exchange with the Pharisees, the Bible says:

And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know (Mark 7:24 ESV)

Tyre and Sidon is in modern day Lebanon and Syria. Jesus is pulling the disciples out of the hostile environment in Israel as the opposition against him continues to intensify. When he comes back into Israel he is going to fix his eye on Jerusalem and the cross – he is going to give himself to the tractor beam of the cross and he is going to be pulled in and so before that, he wants to spend some time with the disciples.

That’s the plan – but as we have seen before, there may be a plan, there may be a purpose but Jesus is always filled with pity. He didn’t go up there to Lebanon to minister to Gentile needs – but when did he ever not respond to human needs? He is Jesus. All the time and he is good.

Now, Matthew, in his version, doesn’t give us any details. He just says:

great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, 31 so that the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel. (Matthew 15:30–31 ESV)

Did you hear that? They glorified the God of Israel! These Gentiles were overwhelmed with the mercy and the kindness and the power of Israel’s God on display in the person of Jesus Christ. Matthew just tells us the effect, he doesn’t give us any story – but Mark does. Mark tells us about one of those deaf and mute people – one of those sick and needy people – who received a healing

from Jesus. And I wonder why it is that he chose this particular story to share with us. It sounds like Jesus healed a lot of people! Great crowds came to him bringing many people and he healed them. Why is Mark telling us this story and not others? I think its because this story preaches. Remember, miracles are like parables, I mentioned that a while ago. NT scholar Dennis Nineham for example says:

“there is more in miracles than their outward appearance; they are, to use the fourth Evangelist’s word, ‘signs’ of the power of God. According to Mark the miracles like the parables are understandable and ought to be understood”¹

Miracles are SIGNS! They point to larger realities! You should look at them, you should lean in and you should try and understand them. And by God’s grace, that’s what we will try and do today.

Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 31:

Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32 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. 33 And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. 34 And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” 35 And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. 36 And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37 And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.” (Mark 7:31–37 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Now as I said, miracles, like parables have a message to be understood. We are not just supposed to be impressed here we are supposed to be intrigued. We are supposed to see this as a SIGN. Remember the problem with the Pharisees was that they fixated on the SIGN of the sacrificial system and they missed what the sign was pointing to. Like dogs they stared at the Master’s finger instead of following it to where the Master was pointing. John the Baptist saw the sign and he followed it and he said: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” We want to be like that! We don’t want to lick the Master’s finger like a dumb dog, rather, we want to follow the Master’s finger and see and understand what he is pointing to. So, we want to ask, what is this sign saying? What is the message inside this miracle?

The Message:

I think that’s where we want to begin, and thanks be to God, I don’t think its very complicated. I think the message in this miracle lies very close to the surface. I think it is saying 3 things. It is saying first of all that:

1. Jesus is God

How many of you are surprised that that’s the first point? In Mark’s Gospel its always the first point! How does Jesus heal this brother – what does he do? He does two things. He speaks and he touches and then the people say:

“He has done all things well.” (Mark 7:37 ESV)

¹ Dennis Nineham, *Saint Mark*, The Penguin New Testament Commentaries. (London: Penguin Group, 1992), 181.

Alright Bible readers, what does that sound like? It sounds like Genesis 1 and 2! How does God create in Genesis in 1 and 2? By word and touch. He does a bunch of things by the power of his word – the most frequent phrase in chapter 1 is:

And God said (Genesis 1:3 ESV)

Vyomer Elohim – then God said! God speaks and stuff happens! Life happens! God's Word is LIFE! But he touches stuff too.

Do you remember chapter 2? In chapter 2 it says:

the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. (Genesis 2:7 ESV)

God got down on his knees, as it were and he made something out of the dust. He made a man shape. And then he put his mouth over his nose, so to speak, and he breathed into him the breath of life. And the man became a living creature. That's an intimate picture and it looks a whole lot like what we see in Mark 7.

And everybody there was making the connection. In the Bible after God makes stuff, it says:

God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. (Genesis 1:31 ESV)

Hm! God has done everything well. Very well! What do these folks say about Jesus after he has done his thing? Behold:

“He has done all things well.” (Mark 7:37 ESV)

Jesus is God! His Word is power! His touch is life and he does all things well – thanks be to God! That is, once again, the main point of the passage. But there is more. We also see here that:

2. Jesus brings salvation to the Gentiles

Now Mark makes this clear by the use of a very unusual word. He uses a word that is used only in the New Testament here. It is the word *mogilalos* translated in the ESV as “a speech impediment”. That Greek word is used only once in the rest of the Bible – and its in the Old Testament. Its from Isaiah 35 which says:

5 Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall hear. 6 Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of **the stammerers** shall speak plainly; for water has burst forth in the desert, and a channel *of water* in a thirsty land. (Isaiah 35:5–6 LXX-B)

This is important because in Isaiah chapter 35 comes after a bunch of chapters about God's judgment on the cities and nations of the world – including Tyre; there is a whole chapter on Tyre! But then in chapter 35 there is a turn towards future salvation. God is going to judge but then God is going to save! He is going to bring salvation to the nations! He is going to do it through Messiah. You will know that the time of salvation has come when a Messiah comes who can open the ears of the deaf and loosen the tongue of the stammerers. This is Mark making a profound statement about the significance of Jesus Christ.

James Edwards for example says:

The allusion to Isaiah 35 is of supreme significance for Mark's presentation of Jesus, not only because the restoration of speech to a *mogilalos* signals the eschatological arrival of the Day of the Lord but also because the desert wastelands of *Lebanon* (Isa 35:2) will receive the joy of God. The regions of Tyre and Sidon are, of course, precisely the Lebanon of Isaiah 35. Jesus' healing of this particular *mogilalos* in the Decapolis becomes the firstfruit of the fulfillment of Isa 35:10, that Gentile Lebanon will join "the ransomed of the Lord [and] enter Zion with singing!"²

This is by the way is the answer to the question why does Mark include this healing story rather than some other. Because obviously, Peter understood the significance of what he was seeing. Peter is standing there when Jesus fulfils one of the most significant prophecies in the Old Testament. God told the Gentiles – God told the people of Lebanon – I will judge you but then, I will save you! You will know it is the season of salvation when a Messiah comes to you who can open the ears of the deaf and loosen the tongues of the stammerer. Peter SAW THAT and now Mark wants us to see that.

This is Jesus signalling to the Gentiles that salvation is now at hand.

The second thing and the third thing are inextricably linked. We also see in this story that:

3. Jesus makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak

That was the sign - that was to signal to the Gentiles that salvation was at hand – but it is significant in and of itself. It means that Jesus can reverse the curse. The curse is the degradation of creation. When we sinned we fell away from God, away from each other and away from our original design and function. We fell away from our given nobility and towards the dust of the earth. Humanity apart from God is not EVOLVING. We are not BECOMING more noble and more dignified – we are becoming beasts.

That is what Paul says in Romans 1. He says that when we fell away from the glory of God we became debased.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. (Romans 1:22–25 ESV)

In descent away from God, locked in the echo chamber of their own stupid, subject to the power of their own degraded lusts, human beings have been racing headlong towards social destruction and the total loss of dignity. We've embraced deadly passions and destructive lusts that are contrary to nature and that are below even, the wisdom of the beasts. So much for evolution. This is DEVOLUTION. This is humanity locked in a box. Enslaved to our most ignorant passions. Fading and falling further and further away from our original design and calling.

But the Gospel is the Good News that Jesus can reverse the curse! By his word and by his touch, we can be healed. By his grace and intervention and mediation we can become again the people we were created and intended to be. We can become hearers and speakers again – which is after

²James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 224-225.

all – central to what it means to be human.

Jesus can unstop our ears and loosen our tongues so that we can HEAR from God and SPEAK to others as we were created and intended to do.

That's the message in this miracle – thanks be to God!

But like I've said before, miracles are like parables – they reward those who lean in. Right? There is a surface meaning to this miracle – there is low hanging fruit and we've got that fruit in our basket now. But miracles, like parables reward those who lean in and so I want to do that. I want to meditate with you on the meaning of spiritual deafness.

The Meditation:

The first question I want to ask is this:

1. What does it mean to say that people are “deaf”?

Jesus is very aware that most of the people he is speaking to are spiritually deaf. That's why he is always saying:

“If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” (Mark 4:23 ESV)

Is there anyone out there that has ears to hear this, Jesus asks? Because it seems like everyone is DEAF to the voice of God. Because they are. Isaiah the prophet said that long before Jesus. He said:

You have never heard, you have never known, from of old your ear has not been opened. (Isaiah 48:8 ESV)

People have not been hearing from God, the prophet says. They might think they are, but they're not. They're spiritually deaf – their ears are closed - and they have been for a very long time.

You see when we fell – way back in Genesis 3 – we fell away from God and away from one another. We were falling in all kinds of directions! We were falling down and we were falling out and we were falling into a type of solitary confinement. That's what happened right, when Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden. As soon as they sinned, they HID FROM GOD and they turned on one another. They immediately became ISOLATED. That's what sin does! It separates us from God and from others. It locks us in a prison of solitary confinement. We can't connect with God and we can't connect with people. We are on our own. And locked in that room we can't speak right because we can't hear right. But we still speak. We stammer out all kinds of smut and stupid and it bounces off the walls and the ceiling and it sounds for all the world like the voice of God to us.

But its not. Its just the vocalization of our own lust and confusion. That's what Jesus said:

out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. (Matthew 12:34 ESV)

Now already in Mark 7 Jesus has told us that the human heart is deceived and filled with all manner of lust and degrading passion. The human heart is a well spring of filth and nonsense and

it wells up and it flows out of our mouths and it bounces off the walls and the ceiling and we think that GOD HAS SPOKEN – but it wasn't God! It was us. Telling us what we want to hear.

Isn't it interesting how unconverted people are so sure that they are hearing from God and yet what God says to those unconverted people sounds nothing like the Word of God as we have it in the Bible? Isn't that weird? You see the God in the Box is not God. Its you! So of course it tells you what you want to hear. "You're doing great! Its all grace! Love is all you need! If it makes you happy, it can't be that bad. Santa loves you!" Right? That's the voice in your head – and you call it God!

That's what it means to be deaf. It means to be unable to truly hear from God. It means that you could even read the Bible and hear nothing but what you want to hear. It means you can pray and hear back only what you want to hear.

That's what it means to be deaf. It is part of the curse. And it is what leads to the degradation and diminishment of human beings. Away from God we hear only the echo of our own sin and stupid.

2. How do people get "undeaf"?

So how do people get "undeaf" – because that doesn't sound very good. That's really bad, so we are really interested in how we can be healed of that and set free and given ears to hear again. How does that happen?

Well let me show you, according to the Bible it works like this:

grace → hearing → faith → salvation

Now, let me think with you backwards along that chain. Let's start with salvation. How are people saved? Most of us know the answer to that. We are saved by faith! The Bible says:

we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ (Galatians 2:16 ESV)

Amen! We know that – praise the Lord! But here is a harder question: how does a person come to faith? Not as many of us think about that far. But thankfully, the Bible addresses that. The Bible says:

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:17 ESV)

Ok! So faith comes by hearing. We are saved because we have put faith in Christ! We have faith because we heard the Word of Christ. Good! But here's an even harder question: how did you come to hear?

Because, the Bible says that you are spiritually deaf! You've got eyes that don't see and ears that don't hear – so how did you hear? Very few of us think that far back which is why our testimonies tend to go astray. We start telling the story and all of the sudden we are boasting in ourselves – that's not right! We start saying: "I started thinking about God and I started reading books and I started understanding and even though the devil tried to distract me and discourage me I pressed through and I believed and was saved." Well that is a marvellous story about you –

which means that its probably not the Gospel. Because the Bible says that if you really understand the Gospel then:

what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. (Romans 3:27 ESV)

Meaning, that if you follow the trail of your faith far enough back you will discover that there is nothing in that story for you to boast in. You didn't do it. God did it. Deaf people don't hear anything. You were deaf. More than that:

you were dead in the trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1 ESV)

Dead people don't hear so well. So how did you come to hear? That's the question.

And this story gives us the answer. By the touch and word of Jesus. That's how! How did this brother hear? Did he go to Jesus? No, Jesus came to him. He took him aside. He touched him. He spoke to him. And he commanded his ears to open. That's how people hear. It ALWAYS BEGINS with the prior grace of God.

Paul said:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8 ESV)

Yes you put faith in God – but this was not your own doing! It was grace! How do you think you came to be able to HEAR in the first place if not by a gift from God!

Do you see that? Most of us don't see that because we don't look far enough back along this chain. We see our salvation and we look back to our faith and we stop there but we need to PRESS ALL THE WAY BACK or we will rob God of glory.

So let's do that – let's press back. I want you to think right now of that time when you first began to hear the voice of God speaking to you in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Think back to that precise moment. Now look around. What do you see in that moment? I'm guessing you see other people. I'm guessing you see special circumstances. I'm guessing you see grace.

You see God doing stuff – you see him touching you, stirring you and healing you so that you could hear, believe and be saved.

The Bible says that – Old Testament and New. Brother Job in the Old Testament said:

He delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity. (Job 36:15 ESV)

Do you hear that? Brother Job says that sometimes God cracks the ceiling of our prison by means of a personal disaster. He shakes the cage and he cracks the foundation and the whole prison of our spiritual deafness comes crumbling down. And then standing out in the big free world again, what do we hear? We hear the voice of God! And it tells us to look at Jesus. And seeing him we are saved.

That's how it works. That's how it always works. Hearing is a gift from God!

Now I've got one question left and it is this:

3. What happens to hearing people?

Let's jump back into the story. Mark tells us:

his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. (Mark 7:35 ESV)

If you can't hear, then you can't speak – or at least you can't speak very well. But when this brother's ears were opened, his tongue was released and he spoke plainly – the Greek is far more dramatic. It literally says, “the chain of his tongue was broken and he spoke *orthos* – you know that Greek word if you kids with crooked teeth. *Orthos* means “straight”. When this brother could hear – he could speak! Hearing from God we speak straight.

You can't speak like a human until you can hear like a human. The truth of God goes in the ear, down into the heart where it makes a miracle and then it bubbles up and it flows out of the mouth where it can bless others.

The Scriptures say that you believe in your heart and you speak with your mouth and you are saved. (Romans 10:10) But this story reminds us that before any of that happened – before there was a miracle in your heart and a blessing in your mouth there was grace in your ear! God went first!

Therefore, where is boasting? Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord!

And let him who strives, strive in the Lord. Listen, I think there are two obvious implications in this particular meditation. The first one is personal and devotional. This should remind you to look further back into the story of your faith to see and celebrate the miraculous grace of God. See it and celebrate it! Give thanks with a grateful heart – we'll do that in just a minute.

But there is another implication – an evangelistic implication. I think this changes the way we evangelize our resistant friends and neighbours. You know, sometimes we lob volley after volley after volley thinking that we might eventually WEAR A BROTHER DOWN. But we might just wear a brother out. This passage suggests a better way. A Star Wars kind of way; right? They could drop all the bombs they want on that Death Star but if the shield was up then all those bombs would just go bouncing right off. So what did they do? They went for the shield first. That's what we have to do. We have to pray for the Spirit of Jesus to bring down the defences - we have to pray for Jesus to unstop those ears – to shake and shatter the prison of their isolation and alienation. To break down the walls so that they can hear and see and believe and be saved.

That's how it happened in this story and that's how it happened in your story, if you think about it. And that's how it always happens. He goes first. Grace goes first – it is always a gift from God.

Thanks be to God! Let's pray together.