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Why Didn't Jesus Fully Heal the Blind Man the First Time He Laid Hands on Him?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Question about the greater message Jesus meant to convey when he healed the blind man at Bethsaida in two stages in Mark 8:22-26.

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Transcript

(upbeat music) (bell dings) - Welcome to Stanterreasons, hashtag STRS podcast with Amy Hall and Greg Kockel. - Good morning, Amy. - Good morning, Greg.

You ready for your first question? - I don't know. We'll see, depends on the question. - All right, this one comes from Jack.

In the account of Jesus healing the blind man at Bethsaida in Mark 8:22 through 26, it appears at first glance, Jesus doesn't quite get it right the first time. He touches the man twice to fully heal him. What's really going on here? What greater message is this account meant to convey? - It's interesting, he ends that way.

What greater message is this account meant to convey? Because some people think there is something else going on here that's an additional message. I'll get to that in a few moments. But I think this is a good case example of trying to figure out what appears to be a kind of confusing passage.

And I have always been confused by this. And when I, in fact, in my margin, I have one of my famous question marks in pencil. What the heck is going on here? The same kind of concern that's expressed by Jack.

So what I wanna do is I wanna read the account just five verses or whatever. And I want, I'll come back to some key points that are important. And there is a kind of, in a certain sense, secondary message here or conclusion that's really, really significant.

That's easy to miss, all right? And starting at Mark eight, verse 22, and they came to Bethsaida. Okay, so there's a town they came to. And they brought a blind man to Jesus and implored him, Jesus, to touch him, the blind man.

Now, taking the blind man by the hand, he brought him out of the village. And after spitting on his eyes and laying his hands on him, he asked him, "Do you see anything?" And he looked up and said, "I see men, for I see them like trees walking around." In other words, it's not that clear. Then again, he laid his hands on his eyes and he looked intently and was restored and began to see everything clearly.

And he went to him, rather, he, Jesus, now sent him, the blind man, now restored to his home saying, "Do not even enter the village." Okay? This is really an awkward passage at first reading. And here's the little lesson from that. Nobody invented this.

Anybody trying to make Jesus into God a couple of decades or even centuries, as some people claim, by concocting the Gospels, Jesus becomes God, would never leave this in there, because it looks like Jesus failed, or only partially succeeded the first time around, and God doesn't try and partially succeed. He does. Okay? So the first takeaway here is, this is authentic because no one inventing the story, as is many times claimed by people like Bartirman, all kinds of folks would put this in there.

This is called an embarrassing detail. And in this case, it's not just embarrassing for the disciples, so if the disciples themselves would have invented this story, or invented the Gospels, they wouldn't have included all of the embarrassing details about the disciples. Jesus calling Peter Satan, for example, or having women, having women be the first people who are witnesses to the resurrection of Christ, and they tell the disciples, and the disciples were hiding and trembling, and didn't believe them.

If this was fabricated by man, it would have been the other way around. This is an embarrassing detail about Jesus. In other words, it looks like Jesus is less than capable of doing it completely in the first round.

He only heals partly. Okay? So this is one observation, but it doesn't solve the problem. It does add integrity to the text as an historical record.

Okay, which by the way is, I think really important. Okay. Secondly, I want you to notice that they were in Bethsaida, and this man did not come to Jesus on his own.

He was brought by other people. In other words, there are other people, and it doesn't say the motive, but it says, "And they brought a blind man to Jesus and implored him Jesus to touch the blind man." Okay. So they're looking for Jesus to do something.

Now it might be they're looking for Jesus to heal this friend of theirs, but it doesn't say anything about friends like it does in Mark 2, where the guys dropped the paralytic through the ceiling. These are just people who bring this man to Jesus. So the man is not

coming up his own accord.

Okay. It isn't out of confidence that he is coming expecting Jesus to heal him. We do have a healing like that in John.

Is that blind Bartimaeus maybe? Or John maybe nine or something like that? And he's crying out, "Son of David, have mercy on me. Son of David, have mercy." And he's such an annoyance that disciples are telling him to shut up. And finally, Jesus gives him an audience and heals him.

The man blind from birth. This person was not blind from birth, because when he begins to see again, he knows what trees are, and he knows what men are, and he knows that one looks like the other kind of. And so this is probably a case of someone who was blinded sometime after birth, had a season of sight and was not coming to Jesus on his own, but being brought by others so that Jesus could heal him, maybe out of compassion for the blind person, and maybe because he wanted to see a sign.

And the response of Jesus next is an indicator that might have been the case, because Jesus takes the man out of the village, away from all the people. Okay, taking the blind man by the hand, he brought him out of the village, and then he does his deal. And at the end he says, "He sent him to his home saying, 'Do not even enter the village.' So the man's home was not in the village.

It was elsewhere. Jesus didn't want to have him go back to the same people that brought him there." So what I'm doing here is, I'm applying kind of a general approach to problem passages that I think is helpful. And that is, even if the answer to the question is not, at least immediately obvious, there's a couple of things that you can conclude about the circumstances that brings all the particulars into clearer focus that might give a hint at what's going on.

And I think of this, I'm just a goofy metaphor, but this is what comes to mind. It's like a wheel that has spokes, and the center is the answer. And we're out on the rim, and we don't know what the center looks like, we don't know what the answer is, but what we can do is travel closer to the center on the spokes.

And maybe we can't answer the question, but we can remove some possibilities and we can get closer to what this is. That's all I'm doing. I'm just moving on the spokes now.

This man didn't seek Jesus out himself, other people sought Jesus on his behalf and told Jesus to touch him. And then Jesus takes the man away from the mob in the city where the man doesn't even live, takes him on his own, has this encounter and subsequent healing, and then tells the man not to go back to the village, but to go home. Okay, we have a number of cases, by the way, where Jesus implores the person he just healed, not to tell anybody about it.

They usually don't obey because they're pretty jazzed about the healing, but it seems to be the obvious rationale is he did not want people following him just to see magic, science and wonders. No, I don't think it was magic, of course, but this is the way the group was kind of viewing it. Let's have another display.

We see this in John chapter six, quite clearly, he feeds 5,000, and then all those people are coming. He says, you want to see a sign. And then he says, actually, he don't want to see a sign, he just want another free meal.

Okay, so Jesus is sensitive to the wrong motives people have to follow him. All right, and by the way, that's true even today. People have wrong motives to follow Jesus.

All right, and so you can see the details here that indicate that this is the case for him. So we've got a guy who was not there because he chose to go to see Jesus to get healed, but others did and have Jesus touch you. And then Jesus takes him away privately.

Okay, now the question is, why two attempts? He does one thing that causes the a partial restoration of sight, and then he does something else that causes a full restoration of sight. Now there's two ways to look at this, and actually they're not self, they're not exclusive of each other, they might both be going on. I'll say up front, I'm not totally convinced, but these are the possibilities that other commentators have offered here.

And it's the best we have. Part, there's a lot in the New Testament that just, I mean, I can't make sense of, particularly in the Gospels. Why did Jesus say this? Why did he do this? Why did he do this other thing? I don't know in many cases, but I don't even have a good conjecture.

But I recall in John chapter six, at the end, when Jesus spoke in such a way to drive a lot of these people away that we're looking for a free meal, following him for the wrong reasons, and he turns to the disciples and says, "Are you not also going to go?" He's not begging them to stay. He's just checking with them. "Are you going to leave with the mob, or are you going to hang with me?" And Peter says, "Where are we going to go?" I don't think Peter had any better understanding about when Jesus said, "Eat my flesh and drink my blood," than anybody else.

But he said, "You are the one who had the words of eternal life." And what's powerful about that passage is, even in the midst of mystery, curiosity, unsatisfied curiosity, or even a fence coming from what Jesus did, Peter still knew who Jesus was, and was willing to follow Jesus, even if Jesus wasn't doing the things that he thought was best. Okay, the very important lesson there. And so when I come to a passage like this, and I say, "Hmm, I'm not entirely sure why Jesus made two attempts, it does seem to invade against his capability and power, but that proves that this actually took place, because no one who is falsifying a document trying to make Jesus look great would write this in there.

This actually happened. Okay, so what are the possibilities? Here's the first possibility. The man who Jesus healed had weak faith.

Or maybe not at all, I don't know, because he wasn't the one who came to Jesus, others brought him to Jesus. And so what Jesus is doing is kind of healing in two stages to kind of ease this man into the miracle. Now, that's not very persuasive to me, but it's the possibility.

I'm just saying, none of the options are very persuasive to me. That's the first one. And it does seem, even with Jesus' words, he spits in his eyes, he says, do you see anything? Well, then he sees a little.

So then he goes, okay, and the next thing Jesus says, he lays hands on him. So he spits in his eyes, and then he lays hands. It's a two-step process, and laying on the hands brings the complete healing.

So maybe that was just to ease the poor blind man into his healing and serve as a two-step process to bring healing that encourages his faith. Okay, that's one possibility. The other possibility is that this is actually a certain kind of metaphor.

No, I'm not usually very comfortable with this way of understanding an historical account. But the problem that we see, and there were a number of commentators who said the same thing. It wasn't just the blind man who was blind.

The people were spiritually blind. Now, what about the disciples? Well, they were half-blind, because they still didn't understand even until really the resurrection and the ascension. If you look at Acts chapter 1, the disciples are saying, is now the time when you're going to restore the kingdom to Israel.

And Jesus said, hey, that's none of your business. Get to work. Judea, Jerusalem, Samaria, the rest of the world.

Get moving, which it took a while to get moving, right? So we have this history of blindness of the people, and then partial blindness, even of the disciples. Remember the road to Emmaus? These guys can't figure this out. He died.

That really shocked us. Now people are saying, we don't alive. We don't know what to make of this.

And Jesus said, oh, man, you idiots, don't you know this is all. This is my paraphrase, of course. There's all of these things in Moses and the prophets, the books, throughout the Old Testament, all the things that really are pointing to what happened here, and he opened their eyes to see it.

So the metaphor then, this event is meant to depict the blindness of the people, the

partial sight of the disciples, which eventuated in them being able to see clearly, just like this man was able to see clearly. Okay, so there's the two options. And I don't know if either of them is correct, neither of them really satisfies me.

But nevertheless, I have great confidence this event actually took place. And what it shows is Jesus is capable of healing completely like he did in many other cases. For some reason, it was a two-step process here, and I'm not going to let that bother me.

Because I have plenty of other information that Jesus is the man with eternal life. And even though I have passages that I can't completely explain, I can get a little closer. Now I understand more of the background information here, the detail.

Once Jesus healed this guy, he sent him away quietly to his own home. Okay. Even though I can't figure it out completely, I'm still confident it happened for the reasons I said, and the same time I trust Christ anyway, even though I have lacunas, holes in my understanding of the text.

And we always will have those holes. We're not going to understand everything in this life. So I love that you said that, Greg, because I think people need to understand that they don't have to obsess about every little thing.

They can keep it in the back of their mind as they're reading. And sometimes these things become clear over time as you're reading the Bible. Sometimes they don't, but we can rest in the things that we do know.

And that makes it easier to handle the things that we don't know. But one thing that we can conclude from this based on his other healings, including the one where he heals the man who's born blind, that they said nobody had ever seen that before ever. Well, we know he was capable of it.

So we know there was a reason for this. Even if we can't figure it out yet, we know there was a reason. So I love the clues that you gave, Greg.

I don't really have an opinion on this because I don't know what he was doing. But I will say right before this in the chapter, he's saying to the disciples, having eyes, do you not see and having ears? Do you not hear? So he's talking about them not seeing. And then he says to the guy, do you see anything? And I think there might be a connection there somehow where he's making some point related to people having eyes, but not seeing and having ears, but not hearing.

I also like the idea that you had about him having not having faith that other people brought him there. And maybe Jesus was giving him a chance to exercise that faith because it says, then he laid his hands on his eyes and he looked intently and was restored. And I'm not sure.

It sounds like the man was looking intently. So maybe at first he didn't think Jesus could do anything. And then after seeing a little bit, then he had faith.

So that could have been something. He was giving him a chance to express his own faith. Right.

Well, both of those things are what you just expressed for were kind of variations of the two options that I had discovered in my own research on this passage. But it's a and I had not noticed the verse 18 having eyes. Do you not see? And it's not always clear that Mark is putting details in consecutive order.

Well, we know he's not always doing that, but he's doing it thematically. So I'm not sure if the statement of verse 18 having eyes, do you not see is just proceeds. It might not in the actual events, but he puts it here on purpose to make the point that you're making.

And then finally, I wanted to say one more thing because I had never noticed all those things you said about the other people bringing him and that not being his home and all that. And people maybe just trying to see a sign from Jesus. What's so amazing is that Jesus does not want to use people for his own advantage.

So he could have just said no, but he actually removes him from the situation and then has compassion on him individually for his compassion for him as an individual. And of course, this brings him glory ultimately, because we see it later, but at the time he was not using that man to display his glory. He was actually showing compassion on him and removing him from that situation.

So I find that really interesting also. You know, there is another added element here to keep in mind a lot of people. And I think rightly so make the point that that the word translated miracles or signs, it means a testing miracle that is the miracle is done to give evidence of something else that can't be seen.

Miracle can be seen forgiveness of sins. Cancel Mark two, he says, in order that you may know that the Son of Man is the authority to forgive sins. I say to you, arise, take up your palate and go home.

So we see there as a connection there, but sometimes people make blanket statements that this is all that miracles are for. A testing to the truth of the speaker. But that's clearly not the case here.

And in a number of cases with Jesus, Jesus often worked miracles out of compassion and a response to deep human need. He's taking this person away from the crowds. He doesn't want them to see the healing.

Then he tells the man, go home and don't go back to town. He tells other people, don't tell a bunch of folks about this because he doesn't want to create a circus environment

for people that are pursuing him for the wrong reasons. So on the one hand, you have miracles that are that are a testing miracles.

They bear testimony to the the accuracy or truth of the claims that Jesus had been making. At the same time, you have other miracles that are done in secret, in private and purposefully so in order that the mobs don't follow him for the wrong reasons. And if that's the case, which it is, obviously, and this is an example, then appealing to God for a miracle today based on the reason of compassion and meeting it, oppressing need is entirely biblically appropriate.

And there are some people who are very uncomfortable with that. Well, like miracles aren't going to happen now because that's attesting to something that now the Bible gives attestation to. We have the word of God.

We don't need miracles. Well, well, sometimes there are needs that God is interested in fulfilling and satisfying and responding to that results in a miracle as God fixes the circumstance. And so it's entirely appropriate, in my view, when there's pressing human need to respond to that need by asking for God to miraculously intervene.

Nothing wrong with that at all. Well, thanks, Greg. And thanks, Jack, for such a great question.

We appreciate hearing from you. If you have a question, you can send it on Twitter with the hashtag #strask or you can go through our website. Just look for our hashtag #straskpodcast page and you'll find a link there to send us your question.

We look forward to hearing from you. This is Amy Hall and Greg Kolkle for Stand to Reason.

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