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Q&A#144 Men as Trees Walking (Mark 8)

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Today's question: "What do you think about the vision of walking trees in Mark 8:24?"

I know that trees are symbol of men in typology. But why they are walking? What does that mean?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, what do you think about the vision of walking trees in Mark chapter 8 verse 24? I know that trees are symbols of men in typology, but why are they walking? What does that mean? The passage in question is in Mark chapter 8, and I'll read the surrounding section to give you a sense of the context. The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him.

And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, why does this generation seek a sign? Truly I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation. And he left them, got into the boat again, and went to the other side. Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had

only one loaf with them in the boat.

And he cautioned them, saying, watch out, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod. And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread. And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up? They said to him, twelve.

And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up? And they said to him, seven. And he said to them, do you not yet understand? And they came to Bethsaida, and some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. 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? And 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. And he sent him to his home saying, do not even enter the village.

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? And they told him, John the Baptist. And others say Elijah, and others, one of the prophets.

And 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. 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.

And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 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.

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. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? 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.

The passage of the healing of the blind man is a very rich and complex passage in Mark's gospel. And once again, this is a passage that shows that Jesus' miracles are also to

some extent parables. They disclose something about the identity of Christ and the nature of his mission.

They're not just about healing someone, they're about telling us about who Jesus is. There has already been an interesting miracle in the previous chapter, the very end of the previous chapter, with the healing of the deaf man was spittle put on his tongue and then fingers put in his ears. And here we have the healing of the blind.

These, the healing of the blind and the deaf and the lame, these are all themes that might remind you of the book of Isaiah and elsewhere in the Old Testament that foretells the ministry of the Messiah. Christ is ministering as the one who is the foretold Messiah, but there's more going on here. If you pay attention to the details of this passage, it leads you to ask some questions.

Why does he take him out of the village to heal him? Why does he say don't return to the village? Why does he put spittle upon his eyes? Why is there a two-stage healing? Again, why does he see men like trees walking? So there are a number of things to note here. A number of people have questioned the efficacy of Jesus' healing power. Maybe Jesus is using some traditional methods of healing that he's and this has been represented as some sort of miraculous effect that he's doing, but really he's just going through a natural process of setting the man's eyes right by manipulating his eyes.

Now, when we read this passage, if we're thinking primarily in terms of Jesus is demonstrating his power and that's all that's going on, the question of the two-stage miracle will become a keen one. It'll become very difficult to answer because clearly the miracle does not seem to take the first time round. It only half works.

And so there's a problem. Is Jesus failing to exercise his miraculous powers he could or is he just not able to? Is there something about this man's lack of faith that's an obstacle or is it something else along those lines? And here I think remembering that the miracles are also parables will help us to understand a bit more about what's going on. Now the questioner asks about the vision of the men as trees.

Is that something that can be explained by some sort of symbolism? Now within the Old Testament, human beings are often compared to trees in specific contexts. You have empires compared to great trees spraying out their branches for the birds of the air, etc. You have trees as righteous men who grow by the streams of living waters in the very beginning of the Psalms.

Psalms 1 is about the man who is like a tree. Now elsewhere in scripture we'll have that sort of imagery taken up but we should be aware of treating symbolism as if it were a code. Symbolism is more like a language than a code.

If you were thinking about symbolism as a code, it'd be like going around in conversation

and constantly looking into a dictionary to find what every word meant rather than paying attention to the context. And there are times to look into the dictionary, but if you tried to figure out speech constantly using only the dictionary you would end up with a very stilted form of communication and understanding. And so we don't read symbolism primarily as a sort of code.

Rather symbolism is more like a language. It depends upon the context, contextual factors, associations and so I don't think that the association with righteous men being like trees is the primary one here. I would look closer to the context.

What does the context suggest? And again, if you're just treating it as a sort of code what does that even mean? You see righteous men like trees, righteous men. Now there may be a sense in which that symbolism does exist in that chapter, but I think a far stronger case would need to be made for it. What you do see in the two-stage healing is something that refers to the broader context in a more parabolic manner.

So the disciples are people who have a failure of sight and this is something that is very clear within the context. There is a two-stage healing that needs to take place in them. Their eyes have been opened to some degree and they see Christ, but they don't see him clearly.

They don't see his mission and what's going on with him. They don't see the kingdom mission, which maybe is like a group of trees being walking around a new group of men and women who will be like a forest of God that's planted. Now Mark is drawing upon imagery of Isaiah where you have imagery of trees growing up and being cut down all this forestry imagery taking place.

Christ is the root that grows up out of dry ground. Christ is the one who's the branch growing out of Jesse and the trees having the axe laid to the root of them. This isn't something that you find at the very beginning of Mark as you find in Luke or Matthew, but the imagery is there more generally in Isaiah and Mark draws upon Isaiah quite considerably.

So maybe there's that sort of thing going on but that's a more particular use of the righteous men imagery that Christ is setting up this new kingdom and he's gathered people around him to become this new planting of God, this new forest and they're seen like men walking. They're not like trees walking. They're not perceived truly for what they are yet, but yet there's some sort of intimation of what they are even within that blurred and limited vision.

Now look at the way that disciples speak in the surrounding context. There are a number of stories of Jesus and boat stories in Mark. There are three key boat stories in previous chapters leading up to two key boat stories leading up to this third boat story.

So in chapter four you have a boat story with Jesus calming the storm and they were filled with great and after he stills the storm he says to them, why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith? And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, who then is this that even the wind and the sea obey him? And then in chapter six he walks on the waters and then they see him and they're terrified and immediately he spoke to them and said take heart, it's his eye, do not be afraid. And he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased and they were utterly astonished. For they did not understand about the loaves but their hearts were hardened.

Now this chapter draws attention to that, connects with that previous account by bringing up the events of the loaves. Again a miracle with a significance. They're supposed to understand something about what that meant.

And so again they're on the boat and Jesus talks to them about the failure to bring bread with them and watch out, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod. And then he says, do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see? And having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? And then at the end, do you not yet understand? And so having eyes do you not see? Jesus is again referring to the fact that they have seen some things. They have understood enough to follow Christ, but they do not yet fully perceive what's going on.

And then immediately after that you have the two-stage healing of the man. The man is taken out of the village. He's told as it were to follow Christ outside of the village.

And then Christ gives him his sight. But yet he does not yet have perception. His eyes are opened, but he does not yet truly perceive.

And so there's a second stage that must occur. But yet at that initial stage he sees some things, but he sees men walking around as if as trees. The immediate section after that is another case of people failing to perceive in a two-stage sort of testing.

Jesus goes to his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi and he asks his disciples, who do people say that I am? And he's given different answers and he presses them for a further revelation. And Jesus is told by Peter that he thinks that he is the Christ. And so there is a two-stage event there.

And yet even then Peter does not clearly perceive as we see from what he says after that. That he tries to resist Christ going to his death in Jerusalem. Now, I think there may be a clue there to why it's trees and why it's walking.

This is the beginning of the walking segment, the way segment of Mark's gospel. They're on the way to Jerusalem and this comes at the very outset of that turn in the narrative towards Jerusalem. And that two-stage healing is something that introduces that section.

At the very end of that section, just as he arrives in Jerusalem, just before he arrives in

Jerusalem at Jericho, he sees Bartimaeus and heals Bartimaeus by the roadside. Again, a blind man. And so it's framed by the healing of two blind people.

And as you read through the gospel more generally, you'll see that that image of blindness is used to reflect spiritual blindness. And so the healing of the blind man is representing not just God's power over the ailments of the physical body, but it's a picture of the spiritual state of the disciples and others and what needs to take place in them. Those verses from Isaiah are quite key within Mark and in Luke and elsewhere, where he talks about seeing you shall see and not perceive.

There is this judgment upon Israel and then also his disciples suffer from it to some extent. All the things he does in front of them and yet they cannot truly perceive who he is and what he is doing, what he's about. Now, why are they trees walking around? Maybe a clue to it is found in what Jesus says to his disciples after his rebuke to Peter.

He says to his disciples in the crowd, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Now the cross is such a familiar symbol to us that maybe it's lost its weight that maybe we just don't think about it enough in terms of its associations and its particularity because it represents everything. The weight of associations that it has leads us to forget the particularity of the associations.

The associations with wood, for instance. And here maybe that's part of what's going on. These are men expected to take up their cross and follow Jesus.

And so Jesus is walking around as it were with this big log on his back walking around like a tree and like a tree walking and followed around by people behind him walking with trees on their backs ready to be crucified. And that is associated with a broader failure to perceive that the cross is not just representing the fact of crucifixion, but it's the great victory that Christ will achieve at the cross. And so the cross isn't just a tree.

The cross is the victory of Christ. And that greater perception that will occur as they leave the village, as they leave the background, as they follow Christ, their eyes are initially opened and they'll see themselves on the way like people carrying trees towards Jerusalem ready to be crucified. And then at that later stage with the resurrection of Christ and Pentecost and the gift of the spirit, there will be as Jesus lays his hands on man's eyes, so he will lay his hands upon them and they will receive the Holy Spirit.

And as they receive the Holy Spirit, their perception will be opened and they will see that it's not just men walking around as trees. It's not just a wooden cross as an instrument of torture, but it's a means of victory and it's Christ leading his disciples to Jerusalem, to suffering and death, but finally towards victory. Now, this is a rather tentative reading of the passage.

I wouldn't put too much weight upon this, but this is where I suspect it's going. Thank

you very much for the question. If you would like to ask any questions, please leave them in my Curious Cat account.

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