

OpenTheo

April 12th: Leviticus 26 & Mark 8:11-38

April 11, 2020



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Blessings and judgments. Lack of perception.

Some passages referenced:

Deuteronomy 28—30 (blessing and curses); Psalm 1, Proverbs 9, Matthew 5 & 23 (other juxtapositions of blessing and judgment framing bodies of biblical material); Deuteronomy 30:1-10 (the promise of restoration); Leviticus 25:1-7 (the law of the Sabbath Year); Leviticus 25:8-13 (the Year of Jubilee); Joshua 6:12-16 (the Fall of Jericho like the Year of Jubilee).

Isaiah 29:13-14 (unrecognized wonders); Mark 7:31-37 (the paralleled healing of the deaf-mute); 2 Samuel 19:21-22 (David's rebuke to Abishai).

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

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Leviticus 27 Leviticus 28 Leviticus 29 Leviticus 30 Leviticus 31 and they must choose
accordingly. If they obey the commandment of the Lord, they will enjoy a blessed and
fruitful life in the land. If they reject his word, they will suffer disaster and ultimately be
driven from it.

If they are faithful, they will prosper, enjoy a fruitful land, be delivered from wild beasts
in the land and from their enemies. Most importantly, the Lord will dwell among them
and be their guard. This is the great covenant formula.

I will be your guard and you shall be my people. It expresses the covenant relationship
between God and his people. He delivered them so that they would be his own.

The Lord brought them out of Egypt so that they should cease to be slaves, so that they
should walk at their full stature, no longer bent down under a burdensome yoke. The
purpose of the Lord's commandments then is to retain them in the freedom for which he
set them free. The majority of the chapter is devoted to the judgments that Israel will
suffer should they reject the way of the Lord.

The judgments that follow steadily escalate for each failure to respond to God's
correction. Each successive judgment is introduced by the formula, if you will not listen
to me, or something similar, and threats of sevenfold judgment. After several iterations
of judgment without faithful response, beginning with God sending things such as
plagues, wild beasts or enemies after them, God will finally come after them himself,
devastating their land personally, as we see in places like verse 32.

At many points the judgments can be seen as the direct inverse of the blessings. The
choices between the land being fertile or unproductive, between God turning in favour
towards his people or turning his face from them, between Israel triumphing over their
enemies or being routed by them, between deliverance from wild beasts or being
devoured by wild beasts, between the protection of the land from the sword or giving the
land over to the sword, between security in the land or being uprooted from the land.
God will subject the people to the most serious judgment, expelling them from the land
and placing them in exile and captivity to their enemies if they persist in their
unfaithfulness.

They would risk being extinguished as a people, rotting away in exile. However here a
rich note of promise is introduced. When they have fallen to their lowest point, if they
will confess their iniquity, humble themselves and make amends for their sin, the Lord
will remember his covenant.

He will not spurn them or destroy them utterly. In their absence the land shall be left

desolate until the point when they have suffered for their sins and can be restored to it. But God will not forget his covenant.

He brought them out of Egypt in the presence of the nations in order to be their God, his very covenant identity as the Lord is bound up with his commitment to his people. And this section is parallel to Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 1 to 10. And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you.

If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. And the Lord your God will put all these curses on your foes and enemies who persecuted you, and you shall again obey the voice of the Lord and keep all his commandments that I command you today. The Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your cattle and in the fruit of your ground.

For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, as he took delight in your fathers. When you obey the voice of the Lord your God to keep his commandments and his statutes that are written in this book of the law, when you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. The land then plays a very important part in the blessings and the judgements.

The land will suffer if they are unfaithful, not receiving rain, and if they persist the land itself will frustrate their efforts in cultivating it. If they persist yet further in unfaithfulness, the land and its creatures will start to devour them and their livestock, and if they still persist the land will vomit them out and they will go into exile, as we see in chapter 18 and 20. And if they are faithful, the land will become a place where they are ever more securely planted, which is deeply responsive to their labours, and ultimately a place where they will enjoy fellowship with the Lord himself.

If and when their unfaithfulness gets them sent into exile, they will have to wait until the land has enjoyed the Sabbaths that are due to it. The land itself is regarded as a sort of servant of the Israelites, which should not be oppressed by harsh and unrelenting service. In the previous chapter we read of the Sabbath year, in Leviticus chapter 25 verses 1-7.

The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, Speak to the people of Israel, and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you, the land shall keep a Sabbath to

the Lord. For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its fruits. But in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the Lord.

You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap what grows of itself in your harvest, or gather the grapes of your undressed vine. It shall be a year of solemn rest for the land.

The Sabbath of the land shall provide food for you, for yourself and for your male and female slaves, and for your hired worker and the sojourner who lives with you, and for your cattle and for the wild animals that are in your land. All its yield shall be for food. Along with the Sabbath year there is also the year of Jubilee, which is also about the people's relationship with the land.

In chapter 25 verses 8-13, You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, note the similarities with the Feast of Weeks, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land.

And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a Jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property, and each of you shall return to his clan. That fiftieth year shall be a Jubilee for you.

In it you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of itself, nor gather the grapes from the undressed vines. For it is a Jubilee. It shall be holy to you.

You may eat the produce of the field. In this year of Jubilee each of you shall return to his property. The land isn't just territory, property and resources.

It's a sort of secondary party within the relationship, a place where the people are to be planted like a tree and to put down roots. It will be a home for them, filled with the life of fellowship with God who dwells with them in it. But it ultimately belongs to God, and his ownership must be honoured.

God has eminent domain, and they can't treat it however they wish as if it were their private property. Land, for instance, must revert the persons to whom God gave it in the fiftieth year. The relationship between the people and the land is not a mere imposition of a dominating logic upon the land.

It requires them to honour the integrity, the otherness and the holiness of the land. They must not oppress the land. They must not devastate the land.

They must not profane the land. And if they do, the land will be released from their tyranny for a time. It will vomit them out into exile, and they will be held out of the land

until the land has been released from their tyranny for the period of its Sabbaths.

The Sabbath principle, connected with their own deliverance from slavery, must inform their treatment of the land and also their enjoyment of possession of it. We should observe the Sabbath and Jubilee themes in their first victory in the land, in the defeat of Jericho in Joshua 6, verses 12-16. Then Joshua rose early in the morning, and the priests took up the ark of the Lord.

And the seven priests, bearing the seven trumpets of ram's horns, before the ark of the Lord, walked on. And they blew the trumpets continually. And the armed men were walking before them, and the rear guard were walking after the ark of the Lord, while the trumpets blew continually.

And the second day they marched round the city once, and returned into the camp. So they did for six days. On the seventh day they rose early at the dawn of day, and marched around the city in the same manner seven times.

It was only on that day that they marched around the city seven times. And at the seventh time, when the priests had blown the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, Shout, for the Lord has given you the city. It's the principle of seven sevens.

It's also the principle of blowing the trumpet, and their gaining of the land. The land is reverting to its proper owner. It's the year of Jubilee.

It's the year of the liberation of the land from the people who have been oppressing it. But they need to remember that they can become like Jericho and the Canaanites too. If they are not careful and if they oppress the land, they will suffer the same fate.

Where they fail to honour the principle of the Sabbath then, the great sign of their liberation, neither living in the liberty of right relationship with the Lord, nor liberating their neighbour on the land, judgment will fall upon them. The entire life of Israel is supposed to be Sabbath shaped, a participation in God's rest in the land, with God dwelling in their midst. It should not surprise us that Sabbath is mentioned nine times in this chapter.

God's judgment moves from a sort of eye for an eye judgment to something much more devastating. Punishment can be inflicted through direct imposition of a punishment or sanction as a positive act, or it can be inflicted through the removal of blessing or protection. Many fail to consider that God is the source of every good gift.

For God to withdraw his blessing and protection is to be exposed to every ill and danger and ultimately to suffer utter destruction itself as we are cut off from life and health and peace. It is to give oneself entirely over to the forces of decreation. Ultimately the health of Israel and the land is to be found as they cling to the Lord and the giver of life.

The story of the Exodus shows what happens when a nation rebels against the Lord. The sorts of forces of decreation that come into play. And also what happens when God provides for a people.

The same hyper-naturalism that is seen in the plagues is also seen in God's provision for his people in the wilderness. And those same principles will follow them into the land. A question to consider.

Although we know that Canaan as the promised land has a unique status, are there any lessons that we can learn about the relationship with the creation that we should have from Israel's relationship to the land? Mark chapter 8 verses 11-38. 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. Our passage in Mark chapter 8 is dominated by themes of perception and lack of perception. The Pharisees begin by asking Jesus for a sign, but he refuses to give them one.

He has already given them more signs than they would know what to do with. In Isaiah chapter 29 verses 13-14 we see something of this prophesied. And the Lord said, Because this people draw near with their mouth and honour me with their lips while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder, and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.

Jesus warns his disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod, which his disciples don't understand. The point of Jesus' teaching is that teaching is like leaven, which when hidden in hearts produces loaves. Jesus is forming a new set of people as loaves, cutting off the old leaven of the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the Herodians and others, and introducing the new leaven of his word and his spirit.

Leaven is like a tradition, it's passed on from loaf to loaf, and the disciples need to make a clean break with the loaves of the religious and political leaders of Israel. That theme of leaven also reminds us of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the leaving of Egypt, leaving behind that principle of life in Egypt, in cutting off the leaven. The disciples have to take the exact same approach to the teaching of the religious leaders of the nation.

Yet the disciples start discussing the fact that they only have one loaf of bread. Is that what Jesus is talking about? Jesus rebukes them for their failure to perceive. They had only just been participants in two great miracles where bread was greatly multiplied.

On both occasions they had gathered up an abundance of extra bread at the end, and yet here they are, worrying that they might not have enough bread. They have eyes but

aren't seeing and ears but aren't hearing. They aren't truly recognising whom they are serving.

While they should resist the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod, they should receive their bread from Jesus, who distributes it to them. The healing of the blind man at Bethsaida that follows closely matches the healing of the deaf man in 7.31-37. If we pay close attention to the details of this passage, it will lead us to ask certain questions. Why does Jesus take him out of the village to heal him? Why does he say don't return to the village at the end? Why does he put spittle upon his eyes? Why is there a two-stage healing? Why does the man see men like trees walking? And a number of people have questioned the efficacy of Jesus' healing power.

Jesus maybe just can't do this miracle enough, so he needs to have a second go at it. Maybe Jesus is using some traditional methods of healing. And maybe, according to some, Jesus is not actually performing a miracle.

He's just manipulating his eyes in a particular way to give him sight. Now if we think this passage is primarily about Jesus demonstrating his power and that that's all that's going on, the question of the two-stage miracle will become a keen one. It will be quite difficult to answer because clearly the miracle does not seem to take the first time round.

It only half works. Is Jesus lacking in miraculous power? Or is there a problem with the man, for instance? Maybe he has a lack of faith that it's an obstacle or something along those lines. I think what helps us here is recognising that the miracles are frequently also signs.

In the Old Testament, human beings are compared to trees. You have empires compared to great trees spreading out their branches for the birds of the air to live in. Psalm 1 says that the righteous man is like a tree, growing by streams of waters.

Elsewhere in Scripture, you have that sort of imagery taken up and the people of God are like a great forest. Perhaps what we're seeing in the two-stage healing is something that's related to the broader context in a parabolic manner. The disciples are people who have just been blamed for a failure to see.

They see, but they do not perceive. There is a two-stage healing that needs to take place in them. Their eyes have been opened to some degree and they see something about who Christ is, but they don't see him clearly yet.

They don't truly perceive his mission and what's going on with him. They don't see the kingdom mission. What they probably see is like a group of trees walking around, a new group of men and women who will be like the forest of God, but they don't truly appreciate what's happening.

Maybe Mark is drawing upon the imagery of Isaiah where you have the images of trees

growing up and being cut down, all this forestry imagery. Jesus is the root that grows up out of dry ground. He's the branch growing out of Jesse.

So maybe that imagery is playing in the background. 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 he does not yet have true perception.

His eyes are opened, but he does not yet truly perceive. He sees some things, but he sees men walking around as if trees. So at this initial stage, he's perceiving to a degree, but there's a second stage of healing that must occur.

In the section that immediately follows this, there's another case of people failing to perceive in a two-stage sort of testing. Jesus goes with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi and he asks his disciples, who do people say that I am? They give him different answers and he presses them for a further revelation. And Jesus is told by Peter that he thinks that he is the Christ, yet even then Peter does not clearly perceive.

As we see from what he says afterwards, he tries to resist Christ going to his death in Jerusalem. Peter is another blind man who needs a two-stage healing. I think then there might also be a clue as to why it's trees and why they're walking.

This is the beginning of the walking segment or the way segment of Mark's Gospel. They're on the way to Jerusalem and this comes at the very outset of the turn in the narrative towards Jerusalem. This two-stage healing of a blind man introduces the section and at the very end of the section at Jericho, just before he arrives at Jerusalem, he sees Bartimaeus and heals him by the roadside, another blind man.

So that movement towards Jerusalem is framed by the healing of two blind people. And as you read through the Gospel more generally, we can see that the image of blindness is used to reflect spiritual blindness. So the healing of the blind man is not just a demonstration of God's power over the elements, the physical body.

It's a picture of the spiritual state of the disciples and others and what needs to still take place in them. Those verses from Isaiah that Jesus alludes to are quite key within Mark and elsewhere in Luke and the other Gospels. He talks about seeing you shall see and not perceive.

It's the judgment upon Israel. And even Jesus' disciples suffer from it to some extent. All these things he's doing in front of them and they still cannot truly perceive who he is and what he's doing.

Now, why are there trees walking around? Maybe a clue is to be found in what Jesus says to his disciples and the crowd after he has rebuked Peter. 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 it's lost much of its weight.

We probably don't think about it enough in terms of its associations and its particularity because it represents everything for us. It stands for all these things that are associated with Christianity. And the weight of associations has led us to forget the particularity of its associations.

Sometimes even its association as an instrument of torture and imperial power. One of the things that we can forget is its association with wood. It's a tree.

And here this might be part of what's going on. These are men expected to take up their cross and follow Jesus. So Jesus is walking around, as it were, with this big log on his back, walking around like a tree, and followed by other people who are walking with symbolic trees on their back, ready to be crucified.

And the disciples' vision and yet failure to perceive is associated with a broader failure to perceive that the cross is not just representing the crucifixion, but what Christ will achieve there. The cross is not just a tree, it's also the victory of Christ. As they leave the village, as they leave their background and follow Christ, their eyes are initially opened and they see themselves as men carrying trees towards Jerusalem, ready to be crucified.

But then there comes a later stage, with the resurrection of Christ and the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, as Jesus lays his hands on the man's eyes, so he will give his Holy Spirit to them and their eyes will be opened to perceive in a new way. And they will see it's not just men walking around as trees, it's not just a wooden cross as an instrument of torture, it's a means of victory, and it's Christ leading his disciples to Jerusalem, to suffering and death, but finally towards victory. After the incident with the healing of the blind man, Jesus asks his disciples who people say that he is.

The masses seem to identify him with John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. Jesus' ministry very naturally follows from that of John the Baptist, and has many resemblances to him and Elijah. Like Elijah and John, Jesus spends much of his time in the wilderness.

The way he teaches, the way he acts, the miracles he performs, are like the actions of the prophets. Peter, however, confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one, the awaited Messiah. The disciples are strictly charged to tell no one.

Once again, the time will come to do so, but it is not yet. And at this point there's a transition in the narrative. Jesus begins to teach his disciples about his coming death, teaching them in considerable detail.

He will not only be raised, but he will be raised on the third day. There doesn't seem to be a mention about the manner of his death though, although you will see later on he talks about taking up the cross. Peter then, showing his lack of perception, rebukes Christ.

He's playing the role of Satan, he's not actually possessed. And Jesus' response to him in many ways could be seen as, get back in line. In 2 Samuel chapter 19 verses 21 to 22 we have a similar statement, and we see another way in which this is expressed in the incident in the Garden of Gethsemane, as Christ rebukes Peter for taking the ear of Malchus, the high priest's servant.

Those verses read, Abishai the son of Zeruiah answered, Shall not Shimei be put to death for this, because he cursed the Lord's anointed? But David said, What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah, that you should this day be as an adversary to me? Shall anyone be put to death in Israel this day? For do I not know that I am this day king over Israel? Peter is the pre-eminent apostle and he still doesn't get it. Suffering is absolutely essential to Christ's identity and his vocation of the Messiah. To follow Christ requires denying yourself.

It requires the crucifixion of the ego, the I that insists upon its own, the I that insists upon what's due to it, the I that insists upon its possessions, its privilege, its status, all these things. Those must be sacrificed. We must be crucified with Christ so that it is no longer we who live but Christ who lives in us.

And the act of taking up our cross is marking ourselves out for death and by death. We are also bearing a mark that associates us with outsiders from the community, from the political order. We're being expelled from it.

We're being treated as rebels and revolutionaries. And this cross is not just something that we submit to passively. It's something that we take up in a committed act and we walk with it.

We walk with it behind Christ. We're following one who has taken up his own cross and his example is the one that we must follow. The one who would save his life will lose it.

The one who wants to gain the whole world but loses his soul, loses that thing that is most precious. In taking up our cross we are disgorging ourselves from the order that holds us in thrall with possessions, with status, with honour, with all these things that so occupy our thoughts and desires. And we are becoming the living dead, those who no longer have the stake that we once had within this existing order.

Those who have given up everything in order that we might gain what is most precious. A question to consider. What are some of the things that you notice as you reflect upon the principles of honour and shame that are explored in verse 38?