

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Christ and us as seen in the Gospel of Mark: Perceptions of Jesus

In our talk today we continue our series entitled 'Christ and us', looking at some events recorded in Mark's Gospel. Last week the series began with 'Changed lives', and the persons considered were, the man of Gadara (called Legion), and the woman with the issue of blood. This week our talk will be focused on the Lord's dealing with the Syrophenician woman and the transfiguration of Christ. The title for our talk today is 'Perceptions of Jesus' and we will consider the 'persistence' of the woman as well as the 'privilege' of the disciples who witnessed the transfiguration. In the next two talks, entitled 'Which way?' and 'Opportunities', the first will focus on the rich young ruler and blind Bartimaeus, whilst the second will look at the woman who anoints Christ's head, the soldier who confesses and Joseph of Arimathea who, after the crucifixion, acts concerning the body of Jesus.

There's a huge amount to be learned from these stories, and remember if you miss any of these talks you can listen to them or download the transcripts on our website which is www.truthfortoday.org.uk (Don't forget the dot UK on the end or you will get a different website!)

Our first event, the story of the Syrophenician woman, is perhaps not such a well-known story. The language which the Lord Jesus uses may be a puzzle to some as on the face of it, He seems to speak very harshly to a woman in great distress and in need of help. We live in such a politically correct society, I'm sure there would be great offence taken if one was called 'a dog' today, but we need to see the context and what Christ was teaching her. She was 'persistent' and by taking the lowest, undeserving place, she received the blessing and was commended for her "great" faith. It is interesting that while Matthew records this event in greater detail (see Matthew 15:21-28), it is not mentioned at all by Luke. Our second event, the transfiguration, is perhaps a much better known story and is recorded by all three of the synoptic Gospel writers (Matthew 17:1-13, Mark 9:1-13 and Luke 9:28-36). (Matthew, Mark and Luke are often called the 'synoptic' Gospels because they generally take the same view of the life of Christ. The Greek for same is 'Syn' and 'optic' is Greek for sight or view. Even a casual reading of John's Gospel shows us that it is very different from the other three). Peter, James and John were truly 'privileged' to witness the Lord's transfiguration; "...eyewitnesses of his majesty" as Peter records it in his second epistle, (2 Peter 1:16) but they needed to learn the lesson that Christ is supreme in His glory, and even great men like Moses and Elijah cannot be compared to Him.

The Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24-30)

We don't usually read the passage of Scripture during our short broadcasts but on this occasion as I feel the story of the Syrophenician woman is perhaps not so well known, I am going to read it to you. The Scripture reference is Mark 7:24-30.

"And from thence he arose, and went into the borders of Tyre and Sidon, and entered into an house, and would have no man know it: but he could not be hid. For a certain woman, whose young daughter had an unclean spirit, heard of him, and came and fell at his feet: the woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by nation; and she besought him that he would cast forth the demon out of her daughter. But Jesus said unto her, Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it unto the dogs. And she answered and said unto him, Yes, Lord: yet the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs. And he said unto her, For this saying go thy way; the demon is gone out of thy daughter. And when she was come to her house, she found the demon gone out, and her daughter laid upon the bed" (Mark 7:24-30).

You will notice that where the Authorised Version has 'devil' I have read 'demon' to avoid any confusion. Whilst there is one 'Devil', Satan himself, there are many 'demons' which are the angels who fell with him in the beginning of creation.

To some it may be obvious but this woman was from Phenice in Syria, that's why she is called a Syrophenician. She was a Greek (as we are told in Mark 7:26), a Gentile and so not a Jew. It is very important that we understand the distinction between Jew and Gentile and the fact that the Jews are God's chosen people, if we are to understand the passage. I know it is right to say that God has cast them (the Jews) aside because they rejected their Messiah, but the Apostle Paul reminds us that God has not cast them away forever (see Romans 11). Because of their unbelief,

God's grace has come to us Gentiles, but doubt not that God in His own time will fulfil all the promises He made to Israel, His ancient people, and they will be blessed.

We believe that Mark in his Gospel sticks the closest to the chronological order of the events (that is as they happened in time order) which is also important as we shall see. The events recorded in the earlier verses in the chapter, where the Pharisees and scribes take issue with Jesus over the ritualistic washing of hands, set the scene for the Lord to bless this Gentile woman, but only after He had tested her as to her persistence. Imagine the spiritual leaders of the Jewish nation having with them the One of whom the Old Testament Scriptures spoke and they were preoccupied with washing hands! It shows just how far religion without God had sunken. And so it is today, with many who profess to be 'Christian', even some who have taken (or been given) a place of authority in the professing Church, being so taken up with their own ideas and ceremonial rituals that they have little time for the Scriptures or for the One of whom they speak!

So as we have read Mark 7:24-30 we need to realise that Christ had been rejected by the nation of Israel and by their 'spiritual' leaders. Yet, they were still viewed as 'the children' who had a right to be at the table. The Lord Jesus Christ had come to bless the *"lost sheep of Israel"* as we read in Mathew's account (see Mathew 15:21-28). Was He now to take the food away from the children and feed it to the dogs?! In Mathew we read that she had approached Jesus saying, *"Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David"* (Matthew 15:22). Perhaps she had heard others speak in this way but she was a Gentile and had no national claim upon the *"son of David."* The Lord was eager to bless her, but He couldn't do it on this basis. The reference He makes to *"the dogs"* was not to belittle or embarrass her but to show her the place she must take if she was to be blessed. I guess it's exactly the same today when the preacher tells people that they are guilty sinners. It's not acceptable to most, but those who recognise the truth of their position and come to God on that basis are blessed by God.

In the Sunday school we used to sing:

*There's a way back to God from the dark paths of sin,
There's a door that is open and you may go in.
At Calvary's cross is where you begin
When you come as a sinner to Jesus.*

E. H. Swinstead (1882-1950), Public Domain

This woman didn't run from the Lord's presence offended by His words. She recognised straight away that she was unworthy, yet pleaded for the Lord's mercy. You will notice that she doesn't plead again to Him as *"son of David"*; she realised she had no rights but she called upon the name of the Lord! *"Yes, Lord: yet the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs"* (Mark 7:28) and for this saying her cry for help was heard and the demon was sent out of her daughter. It is worthy of note that in the epistle of Paul to the Romans, where the doctrine of the Gospel is set forth, we read first of God's righteousness (Romans 1:17) before we read of His love (Romans 5:5, 5:8) and there is no thought of being made right with God until we accept that *"all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:23). Perhaps fewer congregations want to hear these things preached today, but this is the only way God can and will bless us. Paul states clearly in Acts 20:21 the way to blessing when he says, *"Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ."*

So if in Mark 7:1-23 we have the heart of man (especially in connection to formal religion) exposed by the Lord as worthless and defiling, we see in Mark 7:24-37, with this woman (and also with the healing of the deaf and dumb man) a wonderful revelation of the grace and kindness which lies in the heart of God.

The transfiguration (Mark 9:1-13)

Now we come to the transfiguration, the second event for our talk today. The Scripture reference is Mark 9:1-13 (although the story really begins in Mark 9:2). I feel this story is perhaps better known than that of the Syrophenician woman, so we won't read the verses. However, if you can, it's always good to read these passages to refresh your memory and to check that what I say is correct. Remember how the Apostle Paul commended the Bereans because *"...they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so"* (see Acts 17:11).

Peter, James and John were privileged amongst the disciples of Jesus. We don't know why but on at least three occasions, these three disciples were taken apart from the others to be witnesses of great things. We read of these occasions in all three synoptic Gospels, but as we are studying Mark, I will give the references in his Gospel. In Mark 5:21-43, they were special witnesses of Jesus' power when they saw the daughter of Jairus being raised to life. In Mark 9:2-13, with the transfiguration, they were special witnesses of His glory. And in Mark 14:32-42, we read Jesus took these three disciples into the garden of Gethsemane where they were special witnesses of His sorrow.

We begin in Mark 9:2 where we read Jesus took Peter, James and John and led them *“up into a high mountain apart by themselves: and he was transfigured before them.”* I think this is very instructive. These disciples were going to witness something that the world had no interest in or appreciation of, so they were taken (elevated) onto a higher plane. I think we have the same thought in the *“upper room”* where Jesus took His disciples to celebrate the Passover and to institute the Lord’s Supper. If Christians today are immersed in the things of the world, they will miss out on the vision of Christ that God by the Holy Spirit wants to bring before them. Paul instructs the believers at Colosse to set their affection *“on things above, not on things on the earth”* (Colossians 3:2). May we by God’s grace be able to know this higher ground in reality day by day as we are in the world but not of the world (that is not characterised by the world in its behaviour and outlook).

Earlier (in Mark 8:31) Jesus had said, *“The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed...”* The One who Isaiah said was *“despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief...”* (Isaiah 53:3) was also the One who would *“be exalted and extolled, and be very high”* (Isaiah 52:13). This is the scene we have before us in this passage, Christ’s exaltation. If we read the account in all three Gospels (Mathew, Mark and Luke), we will see that His face and His garments shone in a blaze of glory. *“Shining, exceedingly white as snow”* (Mark 9:3), *“as the sun”*, (Matthew 17:2) *“as the light”* (Matthew 17:2) and *“glistening”*, (Luke 9:29) all expressions used to try and convey the outshining of divine excellence. Yes, this is a foretaste of a coming day, the Kingdom, when Christ will be seen in His glory, but by faith we can be in the enjoyment of these things now. The hymn writer says,

*O Lord! Thy glory we behold,
Though not with mortal eyes;*

And goes on to say

*The Spirit brings His glory nigh,
To those who for Him wait.*

John Nelson Darby (1800-1882)

This must have been a truly awesome experience for these disciples, and it’s little wonder they were fearful. They recognised that the two men who talked with Jesus were Moses and Elijah. In Luke’s account, we read that the conversation was about the Lord’s decease (or perhaps that should be better translated ‘departure’) which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. They were talking about the Cross of Calvary! Moses was a great man, one who was raised up by God to deliver His people out of Egypt. He was the lawgiver and the one to whom God gave the pattern of the Tabernacle so the people could approach God. Elijah too was a great man, God’s mouthpiece to a disobedient people in his day - perhaps the greatest of all the Old Testament prophets. (I think the fact that the people said of Jesus that He was Elijah, is testimony to how great a prophet Elijah was, see Mark 8:28). Much more could be said about these two great men, but that would be so out of place, just as the words Peter spoke were out of place. How I wish sometimes that he had stopped speaking after he said, *“Master [or Lord], it is good for us to be here”* (Mark 9:50).

I suppose (like Peter) we can say too much, or speak before we think, but the Lord knows our hearts. In the previous chapter Peter had given that great confession (revealed to him by the Father), that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God (see Mark 8:29 and Matthew 16:6). Had he forgotten this as he suggested it was appropriate to make three tabernacles one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah? Could he not see that whilst these great men had appeared with Jesus, the Son of God was superior to them! Perhaps some would fall into this error today, putting other men (however great) on the same level as the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us guard against this. The Apostle Paul says, *“In all things he might have the preeminence”*, (Colossians 1:18) and this was the lesson Peter and the other two disciples would learn on this occasion. The bright cloud which overshadowed them would speak of God’s presence and glory, and the voice out of that cloud was unmistakably that of the Father. Matthew gives us the full statement, *“This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him”* (Matthew 17:5). Afterwards, Mark says *“Then when they looked round about, they saw no man any more, save Jesus only”* (Mark 9:8)

What a lesson for us today and how vital it is to have a right appreciation of who Jesus is! What a statement the Father made concerning His *“beloved Son”* in whom He was *“well pleased.”* We need to believe that Jesus is the Son of God to receive eternal life. We read in John’s Gospel, *“He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him”* (see John 3:36). The Father’s expressed pleasure was testimony to the Lord’s perfect and sinless life, as a man in this world and also to the way in which He revealed the Father. Every word, deed and action of Jesus, the Son of God, in this world made the Father known to the point where Jesus could say to Philip, *“He that hath seen me hath seen the Father”* (John 14:9) We often sing:

*Father, how precious unto Thee
Is Thy beloved Son,
In whom Thou dost perfection see,
Thy holy, blessed One!*

*Only-begotten, He revealed
Thyself unto Thy praise:
The Father, until then concealed,
Was seen in all His ways.*

*He glorified Thee on the earth:
Thy work by Him was done;
And Thou, who knewest all His worth,
Didst glorify Thy Son.*

Anonymous

Many today will say that Jesus is a prophet, a good man, a great teacher, etc. but no more than that. So let me come back to Peter's great confession, "*Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God*" (see Matthew 16:16). As Christians, we follow and serve One who is infinitely greater than all others. Jesus was asked if He was greater than Jacob and Abraham (see John 4:12 and John 8:53) and His reply showed that He was! We read that He is greater than Jonah (Matthew 12:41), Solomon (Matthew 12:42) and the temple (Matthew 12:6). This was the lesson that Peter (as well as the other two disciples) had to learn, Christ is greater than all! He is matchless, incomparable, peerless and unequalled and the Father's desire is that we should hear Him!

In closing, I just want to comment on Mark 9:9, "*And as they came down from the mountain, he charged them that they should tell no man what things they had seen, till the Son of man were risen from the dead.*" What they were privileged to have witnessed was a foretaste (or preview) of a coming day - a glorious day when Christ would reign supreme in His kingdom. But this could not come to pass before Christ had accomplished the Father's will at Calvary. Although the prophets had spoken of these things, the disciples couldn't understand that the Lord must suffer death before the kingdom would be realised. Remember the words of Jesus in resurrection to the two on the Emmaus road, "*Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?*" (see Luke 24:26). And so, this event is a resurrection scene. The Son of man would rise from among the dead as would those who had died in faith (of which company Moses was a sample). We know Moses had died, and was buried by God in the land of Moab, (See Deuteronomy 34:5) so his appearance with Christ in glory would indicate that as Paul tells the Thessalonians, "*the dead in Christ will rise first.*" In contrast, we know that Elijah was taken to heaven without dying (2 Kings 2:11), and so his appearance with Christ in glory would indicate that there will be a company of believers who will be raptured to heaven without passing through death, "*then we which are alive and remain*" (see 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17). If Moses and Elijah represent the heavenly company, I suggest we see in the three disciples a representation of an earthly company who will share in the kingdom of the Son of man.

Surely we can sing,

"What a day, glorious day, that will be!"

Jim Hill

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May God bless you all.

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