

Chapter 1

The Second Touch

Mark 8:22–26

“Can you see anything?”

Mark 8:23

On the surface, it looks like just another one of Jesus’s many healing miracles. This story, however, is unique in several ways.

The obvious thing that stands out about this healing is that it required a second touch. Some people brought a blind man to Jesus, begging him to heal the man. Jesus anointed the man’s eyes with saliva and then asked, “Can you see anything?” (Mark 8:23). The man was able to see, but he could not see clearly. “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking” (Mark 8:24). A second touch was required before he was able to see clearly. This miracle is the only miracle recorded in any gospel that required a second touch.

A second unique feature is the story is found only in the gospel of Mark. All four gospels have a story of Jesus healing a man who was blind. Mark is the only gospel that records this particular healing that required a second touch. That fact suggests the story plays an important role in the gospel.

Another fact about this story is its location in the gospel. It is placed in the middle of the gospel, dividing the gospel in half. The placement is not random. Rather, it is intentional and significant.

Finally, the required second touch divides the story into three stages. First, the man was blind. After Jesus anointed his eyes with saliva, the man could see, but not clearly. After the second touch, he saw everything clearly. The significance of the miracle story lies in these three stages: blind, seeing but not clearly, seeing clearly.

The blind man represents the disciples. His story is their story. The three stages of the healing miracle correspond to their experience as told in the gospel. Initially, they did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah—i.e., they were blind. In the middle of the gospel, they confessed that Jesus was the Messiah (Mark 8:27–30). At that point, they were able to see, but they struggled to understand what he taught about his impending suffering. They could see but not clearly. Only after his death and resurrection did they see clearly.

In addition, the three stages of the healing miracle reflect the outline of the gospel. The gospel divides into four major sections. It begins with an introductory section that ends with Jesus’s selection of the twelve. The next three sections correspond to the three stages of the miracle story and the three stages of the disciples’ experience: blind, seeing but not clearly, the second touch that enabled them to see clearly. The author used this healing story with its three stages as a literary tool to communicate the structure of the book and the focus of the book—the discipleship journey.

Introduction — Mark 1:1–3:35

The first section of the gospel (Mark 1:1–3:35) serves as an introduction. It records the call of the first disciples (Mark 1:16–20; 2:13–14) and the two factors that led Jesus to choose the twelve to be apostles (Mark 3:13–19). It describes the people’s amazement at Jesus’s teaching and healing ministry, resulting in large crowds thronging around him (Mark 1:21–2:12). The press of the crowds is the first factor that led Jesus to focus on teaching and training his disciples. The press of the crowds is a recurring theme throughout the gospel. The second factor that contributed to Jesus’s focus on his disciples was the opposition he encountered from the religious leaders (Mark 2:13–3:6). Like the crowds, that opposition is a recurring theme throughout the gospel. With the crowds seeking him for his healing powers rather than his teachings about the kingdom and the religious leaders seeking to kill him (Mark 3:6), Jesus chose to invest in a small group of twelve (Mark 3:13–19). From that point on in the gospel, the twelve were the primary focus—of Jesus and of the gospel.

A collection of parables (Mark 4:1–34) serves as an interlude between the introduction and the second section of the gospel. The parable of the sower—or better, the parable of the soils—reflects the various responses Jesus had encountered as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom (Mark 1:14–15).

Blind — Mark 4:35–8:21

The second section of the gospel (Mark 4:35–8:21) introduces the disciples’ blindness. It describes a series of withdrawals in which Jesus sought to escape the press of the crowds and the opposition of the religious leaders so he could invest in the twelve. In this section, the disciples did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Their blindness is reflected in the first story of this section in which Jesus calmed the storm on the sea (Mark 4:35–41). “They were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’” (Mark 4:41). In the first half of the gospel, only those possessed by unclean spirits recognized who Jesus was—at Capernaum (Mark 1:23–34), in Galilee (Mark 3:11), and in the land of the Gerasenes (Mark 5:6–7).

The disciples’ blindness was most evident in their struggle to understand his teachings. Their struggle to understand is the dominant theme in this section. When they struggled to understand Jesus’s parables, he asked, “Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?” (Mark 4:13). When Jesus came to them, walking on the sea in the midst of a storm, the author recorded, “And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened” (Mark 6:51b–52). When they asked him to explain his teachings about what makes one ceremonially unclean, he responded, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see?” (Mark 7:18). This section of the gospel ends on this note of not understanding. “Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes and fail to see? Do you have ears and fail to hear? . . . Do you not yet understand?” (Mark 8:17–18, 21).

In this section of the gospel, the disciples were blind. They did not know who Jesus was. They were unable to understand what he taught.

In the midst of their blindness, they experienced things that contributed to their being able to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus healed the sick and cast out demons (Mark 1:21–34; 5:1–20; 7:24–30). He raised the dead (Mark 5:21–43). He calmed the raging storm (Mark 4:35–41) and walked on the water in the midst of a storm (Mark 6:47–52). He fed over five thousand with five loaves and two fish (Mark 6:30–44). On another occasion, he fed over four thousand with seven loaves and a few fish (Mark 8:1–10). He enabled the deaf to hear (Mark 7:31–37). These experiences led them to the conclusion that Jesus was the Messiah. These miracle stories were the first touch that moved the disciples beyond their blindness into being able to see but not clearly.

The healing of the blind man that required a second touch serves as an interlude between this second section, in which the disciples were blind, and the third section, in which they could see but not clearly.

Seeing but Not Clearly — Mark 8:27–10:52

Mark's story of the healing that required a second touch is placed at the halfway point of the gospel. In the second half of the gospel, the disciples are able to see. They recognize Jesus as the Messiah, but they do not see clearly. They still cannot understand his teachings, particularly his teachings about the suffering he would encounter in Jerusalem.

The first story recorded in this second half of the gospel is of the disciples' recognition of Jesus as the Messiah (Mark 8:27–30). Jesus had led his disciples to the region of Caesarea Philippi, north of the Sea of Galilee. There, he asked them about what people were saying about him. "Who do people say that I am?" (Mark 8:27). After hearing the different responses, he asked them what they were saying about him behind his back. "But who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:29). Peter spoke for the group when he said, "You are the Messiah," (Mark 8:29). They were no longer blind. They were able to see! While they recognized Jesus as the Messiah, they still did not understand the things he taught. They were able to see, but they did not see clearly.

Jesus immediately began to build on their understanding that he was the Messiah. He began to teach them what was involved in being the Messiah. Specifically, he began to teach them about the suffering he would experience in Jerusalem (Mark 8:31). What he taught them went against their understanding of the Messiah's role. They struggled to understand what he was teaching, much less embrace it. Peter pushed back by rebuking him—"And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him" (Mark 8:32).

Their struggle to understand or accept what Jesus taught about his suffering is the repeated theme in this section of the gospel. On three different occasions, he told the disciples what would happen to him in Jerusalem (Mark 8:31; 9:30–32; 10:32–34). Each time, the disciples struggled to grasp what he was saying. Each time, Jesus attempted to move the disciples beyond their partial understanding of who he

was and their misunderstanding of the nature of the kingdom of God. Each time, he taught them the meaning of discipleship. The nature of discipleship is the dominant theme of this section.

The healing of blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46–52) serves as an interlude between this third section of the gospel and the last two sections. When Jesus enabled him to see, Bartimaeus followed him as he journeyed to Jerusalem. The experience of Bartimaeus foreshadows that of the disciples. Once they were able to see clearly, they too would be faithful followers of Jesus, embracing and living the ways of the kingdom he taught. They too would follow Jesus on the way of discipleship.

The Second Touch — Mark 11:1–16:8

The last third of the gospel relates what Jesus experienced in Jerusalem. It offers a clear chronology of the last week of his life.

The week began with his royal entry into Jerusalem on the first day of the week, Sunday (Mark 11:1–11). On Monday, he took charge of the temple, driving out those who were selling, along with the money changers (Mark 11:12–19). His actions led to conflict with the religious authorities who tried different ploys to trap him so they might arrest him. These interactions in the temple took place on Tuesday (Mark 11:20–12:44). The Temple Discourse (Mark 13:1–37) divides the week into two separate sections.

The story of his passion, beginning with the anointing on Wednesday in the home of Simon the leper, is told without interruption. On Wednesday, Jesus dined in the home of Simon the leper. During the meal, an unidentified woman anointed him with ointment (Mark 14:1–9). That same evening, Judas went to the chief priests, offering to betray Jesus into their hands (Mark 14:10–11). On Thursday, his disciples prepared a place for the group to celebrate the Passover (Mark 14:12–16).

On Thursday evening (the first hours of Friday for the Hebrew people and the beginning of the Passover celebration), Jesus observed the Passover with his disciples (Mark 14:17–26) before going to Gethsemane to pray (Mark 14:27–42). There, he was betrayed by Judas and arrested by a crowd authorized by the religious leaders (Mark 14:43–52). He was taken to the high priest, where he was put on trial before the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:53–65). While the trial was taking place, Peter denied knowing him (Mark 14:66–72).

When it was daylight (Friday), the religious leaders took him to the Roman governor Pilate, demanding that he be crucified (Mark 15:1–14). Pilate gave in to their demands, delivering Jesus to a detail of Roman soldiers who crucified him (Mark 15:15–32). Jesus was on the cross from nine in the morning until his death at three in the afternoon (Mark 15:33–41). As the evening approached, bringing the beginning of the Sabbath, his body was taken from the cross by Joseph of Arimathea and buried in a tomb (Mark 15:42–47).

Early on the first day of the week, following the Sabbath, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went to the tomb to anoint the body. There, they met a young man who told them that Jesus had been raised (Mark 16:1–8).

Jesus's passion, followed by his resurrection, became the second touch that enabled the disciples to see clearly. The events of this last week, culminating in Jesus's crucifixion and death, left the disciples disillusioned and defeated. Their expectations were crushed, their hopes shattered. Then came the resurrection! Only through the resurrection were they able to understand what Jesus had been teaching them about the role of the Messiah and, thereby, the nature of discipleship.

The Discipleship Journey

The gospel of Mark tells us the story of the disciples—how they, like the blind man, moved from being blind to seeing but not clearly to seeing clearly. It relates the experiences that led to their recognizing Jesus as the Messiah. It details their struggle to understand what he taught—seeing but not clearly. It describes Jesus's passion which became the second touch that enabled them finally to understand.

The gospel describes the journey that is involved in being a follower (disciple) of Jesus. The three stages in the blind man's healing—blind, seeing but not clearly, seeing clearly—are the pattern of the discipleship journey that is repeated in the life of every disciple. The journey is one of learning the things of God Jesus taught. It involves resistance to and struggle with what he taught, just as the disciples struggled to understand, much less accept, what he taught about his suffering and death. (Who among us has not argued with something Jesus said, rejecting it as unrealistic or impractical or impossible—turn the other cheek, forgive the one who wronged you, love your enemy, don't accumulate and hoard material wealth, don't worry?) The discipleship journey is one of moving beyond old ways of thinking and living. It leads us to embrace the ways of God Jesus taught, allowing them to shape how we think and how we live.

The gospel of Mark tells us the story of the disciples. It tells the story of anyone who is a follower (disciple) of Jesus. Thus, the gospel of Mark tells our story.